

HPG Working Paper

Learning from the past to shape the future

Lessons from the history of humanitarian action in Africa

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and Hanna B. Krebs

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1 Introduction from the editors

For better or worse, humanitarianism is more closely associated with Sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else. In many ways, the continent has been the crucible and proving ground for modern humanitarian action: the site of hideous famines, diseases and conflicts, and the arena in which some of the formative moments of contemporary humanitarian history have been played out. Understanding the history and evolution of humanitarianism globally, as a concept and as a practical profession, is incomplete without an understanding of its place in, and relationship to, conflicts and disasters in Africa.

This collection of papers, based on a joint symposium with Africa Humanitarian Action in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in March 2015, provides a survey of some of the key themes and events in the history of humanitarian action in Africa. Part of HPG's study on the global history of humanitarian action, the symposium is one of a series of regional conferences in Singapore (on the history of humanitarian action in South-East Asia), Amman (on the Middle East) and Bogota (on Latin America). Like these other studies, the papers presented here do not pretend to be a comprehensive account of the extensive and complex history of humanitarian thought and practice on the African continent; rather, they highlight key themes or moments in order to shed light on humanitarian thought and action today.

Several papers explore the legacy of imperialism and its continued influence on modern humanitarian action. In his study on the Biafran war in the late 1960s, Kevin O'Sullivan discusses the impact of the conflict on how the West saw and acted towards post-colonial Africa, with a particular emphasis on the expanding role of non-governmental aid in the newly independent states of the Third World. Biafra, he argues, provided an opportunity for post-imperial powers like the United Kingdom to recast their relationships with independent Africa, while at the same time perpetuating precisely those modes of thought that had underpinned the colonial project: while 'the urgency of "saving" replaced "civilising" as the buzzword for Western intervention in the Third World', the imperialist state of mind that cast

humanitarianism in this role was less easily shed. Like colonialism before it, humanitarian action was something 'done' to Africa, an external intervention into internal crises local governments or affected people were deemed powerless to prevent or alleviate. As O'Sullivan argues, 'the undercurrent of empire ... reflected a very Western imagining of how life in independent Africa *should* operate'.

Building on this theme, Sonya de Laat and Valérie Gorin explore the influence of the colonial legacy on modern humanitarianism in Africa through an examination of the historical relationship between photography, suffering and humanitarian assistance. From missionary photography in the mid-nineteenth century to the more recent phenomenon of 'development porn', de Laat and Gorin trace the visual history of humanitarianism, and the crucial role of photography in framing the discourse of humanitarian assistance. Drawing on extensive archival research, the authors demonstrate the persistence of a distinct set of tropes and stereotypes: the construction of otherness, difference and the exotic; the homogenisation and victimisation of suffering, particularly the suffering of children; and the mediatisation of crises as visual events, rather than social or political processes. Far from neutral documents of record, from their very earliest roots in the hands of missionary humanitarians photographs reveal the 'legacies of thought and subtle hegemonies' that have shaped humanitarian action.

De Laat and Gorin also discuss the use of photography in the self-projection of the humanitarian as hero, 'in most cases either a technology or a person of light skin and of socio-economic privilege. This is clear in the continuum of pictures showing the progress of colonial, tropical and then humanitarian medicine, or in the numerous pictures of delegates, technology and devices (e.g. surgery, ambulances) accumulated by the ICRC'. This theme of assistance-as-technology is explored further in Jennifer J. Palmer and Pete Kingsley's paper on sleeping sickness control efforts in Southern Sudan. As the authors show, epidemic control during the colonial period relied heavily on the coercion colonial power made possible: 'forced resettlement, denuding of land

supporting tsetse, years-long internment of patients in isolation centres, treatment with extremely toxic medicines, punishments for chiefs that did not present their populations for medical inspection and mass prophylactic injections'. Although – unusually for epidemic control in independent Africa – many of these more intrusive practices remained in place after independence, Palmer and Kingsley also describe how measures became increasingly medicalised and technocratic, administered by external actors – in this case first the World Health Organisation (WHO) and then Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – working around and apart from domestic governance and healthcare systems and longer-term questions of planning, livelihoods and sustainability: 'By ignoring a long tradition of vector control-centric and integrated developmental approaches to sleeping sickness, actors reveal a tacit assumption that little significant prior work had been done, and that little relevant local knowledge or capacity existed'.

Alongside the persistence of the colonial echo in independent Africa, humanitarian engagement was also shaped and influenced by the liberation wars of the 1970s and 1980s. In his essay, Christian A. Williams explores the role of Cassinga camp in southern Angola in the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO)'s fight for Namibian independence from apartheid South Africa. In particular, Williams is interested in the various contradictory meanings attached to an attack on the camp by South African forces in May 1978, and the importance of humanitarian imagery and language in determining the legitimacy (or otherwise) of the action. As Williams shows, for SWAPO (and for its international supporters, including humanitarian agencies) Cassinga was a camp of refugees and non-combatants, while for South Africa it was a guerrilla base and hence a legitimate target. Through extensive oral testimony and archival research, Williams demonstrates that Cassinga was both: a refuge for hundreds of refugees from Namibia, who were receiving food, clothing and shelter from SWAPO provided through donations from the UN and Nordic government agencies, and a base for guerrillas who used it to coordinate military operations along the Namibian–Angolan border. In effect, the convenient binary opposition between 'refugee camp' and 'military base' obscured the messier and more complex reality of life there. Even so, within days of the attack 'many governments, human rights organisations and humanitarian agencies had issued statements

condemning the SADF attack and associating the word *Cassinga* with *refugee*'. As Williams explains, this choice of language was instrumental, both politically and intellectually: 'The label "refugee camp" constituted these sites as generic objects intelligible to the international community, and which could be used to leverage responses from it, especially in the aftermath of a "surprise attack" by the widely discredited apartheid regime'.

Part of Williams' aim in his essay is to explore the role of solidarity in shaping humanitarian assistance in Southern Africa's liberation wars, and the explicitly political purpose of that aid, namely freeing black Africans from white minority rule. As such, Williams concludes, 'political solidarity displaced needs-based neutrality as the guiding principle for humanitarianism in the region'. This tension between solidarity and neutral, needs-based humanitarian action is also investigated in Tony Vaux's paper on Oxfam's humanitarian assistance during the secessionist conflict in the Horn and the anti-apartheid struggle in Southern Africa in the 1980s. In Ethiopia, Oxfam provided cross-border aid from Sudan to conflict areas, as well as maintaining links to the government in Addis Ababa and providing assistance in areas under government control. As Vaux recalls, 'Oxfam never adopted a solidarity position in the Ethiopian wars: it avoided any public statement of alignment with one side or the other'. In Southern Africa, by contrast, such discretion proved extremely controversial, both externally and internally within the agency, and by the mid-1980s 'Oxfam had effectively adopted a position of close solidarity with black Africans against apartheid and open support for the African National Congress'. This solidarist position extended to the FRELIMO government in Mozambique, which was engaged in a brutal conflict with the South Africa-supported rebel group RENAMO.

Vaux's comparative analysis of Oxfam's positions in Ethiopia and Southern Africa highlights the contradictions and tensions inherent in the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality in conflicts where a concern for humanity and human rights may well bring into question the morality of not picking a side. While these tensions are still present, and will probably never go away, the historical perspective Vaux provides also highlights how the relative importance and salience of the principles can change over time. In Vaux's analysis, while Oxfam's staff grappled with the contradictions and

compromises embedded in neutrality and impartiality in their responses in Ethiopia and Southern Africa, the principle of independence went largely unchallenged. As Vaux puts it, 'independence had such a low profile during this period that it could be disregarded in most of the debates'. Since then, of course, the issue of aid agencies' independence from the political and strategic ambitions of governments has become one of the defining problems of humanitarianism in contested contexts such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen.

The cross-border operations Oxfam and other agencies mounted in Ethiopia in the 1980s were part of a set of similar initiatives in response to crises during the closing phase of the Cold War. In his essay, *Leben Nelson Moro* discusses one of the most significant, Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS). Established in 1989, OLS was set up in response to famine in Bahr-el Ghazal in Southern Sudan. Managed by the UN, it aimed to ensure aid access in government-held areas and to areas held by the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). As Moro explains, the establishment of OLS served a variety of political objectives in addition to its stated aim of famine relief: for the UN, OLS, 'the first multilateral humanitarian action following the end of the Cold War', was a statement of intent that the organisation now intended to play a larger global role, while access to humanitarian assistance also 'fitted neatly into the political calculations of the rebel movement and the government'. Ultimately, Moro judges OLS a qualified success: while it undoubtedly saved lives, it did not – nor was it intended to – get to the heart of the issues driving the conflict. To that extent, OLS is emblematic of one of the central dilemmas of humanitarian assistance today.

The final two papers in this collection explore the relationship between humanitarianism and broader social processes, particularly religion. In his contribution, Richard M. Benda examines the role of the Church in the Rwandan genocide: both Catholic and Protestant, as well as international and ecumenical bodies and networks. As Benda explains, in the aftermath of the genocide religious organisations came under heavy criticism for their failure to do more to protect people from attack: three-quarters of murdered Tutsis died on church premises, many of the perpetrators were members of the congregation and 'a number of priests, pastors and nuns actively participated in or facilitated the killings of Tutsi'. As Benda puts it: 'Messages of contrition collided with accusations and self-exculpation. From

without, journalists, academics and humanitarian workers came down hard on the church'. However, what Benda regards as a corporate failure was not matched by the actions of individual religious workers, who did act to protect and support victims, often at great personal risk. Benda's concern is primarily with the humanitarian functions of pastoral care: moral, spiritual and psychological assistance and the sustaining power of faith and religious practice, rather than, or at least in addition to, physical protection or material assistance. Benda is also careful to situate criticism of the Church within wider national and international failures: two decades after the genocide, events in Rwanda are still casting a very long shadow.

The collection concludes with a reflection on the relationship between humanitarianism, faith and human rights. Taking as their subject the historical evolution of a human rights-based humanitarianism in Sierra Leone, Melissa Labonte and Ishmeal Alfred Charles trace the interaction between 'traditional cultures of care, maintenance and hospitality' and the country's turbulent religious, social and political history. As the authors explain, the emergence of a rights-based approach to humanitarianism in Sierra Leone was motivated historically 'not only by a search for "true belief" and to gain a broader faith, but also through appeals characterised by the search for better law' against the backdrop of colonialism, dictatorship and violence. In particular, they emphasise the importance of local agency in creating the conditions for rights and justice following the end of the country's brutal civil war in 2002. Alongside international intervention and the formal institution of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, individual Sierra Leoneans have drawn on their religious belief 'as a critical mechanism through which [they] have experienced reconciliation and forgiveness following the war, including keeping a "cool heart", grassroots practices of recovery based on "social forgetting", the forgiveness of perpetrators and renunciation of revenge or retaliation'.

As such, peace is not simply imposed externally, whether through formal national institutions or through international action, but is 'relevant and effective for communities at the local level'. In practical terms, the discourse of rights has found expression in NGO programming focusing on life skills, microenterprise and small business collectives, legislation on children's rights, community forums, legal aid services for vulnerable and underserved groups and work to help local communities exercise

their rights regarding fair and responsive governance and accountability – all in explicit challenge to the exploitative and patrimonial practices that led to violence and war.

Taken together, the papers presented here highlight humanitarian action's long and sometimes difficult relationship with a part of the world that, at least in the Western imagination, has often been synonymous with conflict and disaster. Through an exploration of key themes – the lingering legacies of colonialism and paternalism, the patronising and objectifying iconography of disaster and assistance, the privileging

of external technical solutions over low-tech local ones, the tensions between humanitarian principles and the subversion of assistance in contested political spaces and the complex relationship between humanitarian assistance and wider social processes and phenomena – the papers touch on issues that are both long-standing and perennially relevant to how humanitarian action is conceptualised, thought about and practiced. The collection raises more questions than it provides answers, but we hope that bringing a historical perspective to bear will at least help in understanding some of the challenges facing humanitarian action today.

2 Biafra's legacy: NGO humanitarianism and the Nigerian civil war

Kevin O'Sullivan

The mantra that Biafra was 'the first humanitarian disaster to be seen by millions of people' (Vaux, 2001) is so often repeated it is easy to forget the depth of its impact. In two and a half years, between late 1967 and the beginning of 1970, the relief effort thrust non-state actors to the forefront of public and official thinking about aid. Biafra was the first 'televised famine', the first real test of the West's response to crisis in post-colonial Africa, and one of the largest disaster relief efforts of its kind in history (Barnett, 2011; Heerten and Moses, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2014). Yet Biafra also raised serious questions about the structure and operation of the global humanitarian industry. The crisis acted, as Alex de Waal famously put it, as both 'totem and taboo' for NGOs: 'it was unsurpassed in terms of logistical achievement and sheer physical courage', but 'the ethical issues that it raises have still to be faced' (de Waal, 1997: 73).

This paper focuses on one of those issues: Biafra's impact on how the West viewed and acted towards post-colonial Africa. It examines the crisis not only as a period of massive expansion for the NGO sector, but also as a moment that had an important defining effect on NGOs' role in the independent Third World. The kind of 'people-to-people' action espoused by Oxfam, Africa Concern and others brought with it heightened awareness of, respect for and funding for non-governmental aid. Through their activities and their role in shaping public discourse, NGOs effectively became translators of Biafra for the watching public in the West. That vision was not without its problems: the NGO reaction to Biafra, this essay argues, was refracted through the prism of decolonisation and its impact on both the West and the Third World. The end of empire challenged humanitarians to adapt to the changing demands of an independent Africa. But it also laid bare the proto-imperial images and ideas that the West could

not leave behind. Those concepts had considerable purchase on the public imagination; they generated a role for NGOs based on the primacy of intervention and the immediacy of emergency relief. They brought with them a particular understanding of Africa and humanitarian aid. And they proved remarkably difficult to shake in the decades that followed. Although not born in Biafra, the interventionist, depoliticised reading of humanitarianism that solidified during the crisis remains as problematic now as it has ever been.

To make that argument, this essay draws on the converging experiences of NGOs in two Western European states: Britain (Christian Aid, Oxfam and the Save the Children Fund) and Ireland (Africa Concern, Gorta and Christian missionaries). The response to Biafra in those countries had radically different roots: British attempts to redefine a role for the state in post-colonial Africa contrasted sharply with Irish anti-colonialism and the parallels Irish NGOs drew between their country's experiences of empire and the fortunes of the contemporary Third World. Yet the two stories were, in practice, much closer than their rhetoric suggested. Missionaries, NGOs and the wider publics in both states struggled to articulate new roles in, and new attitudes towards, independent Africa. Exploring the similarities between them allows us to unravel the dominant discourses of European NGOs, and the broadly Western lenses that they used to describe the Third World.

This essay unpacks that narrative over the course of four overlapping themes. It begins by exploring Biafra's role in shaping the rapidly expanding international NGO sector in the late 1960s, before outlining the impact of the myriad practices and discourses of empire on the humanitarian response. Those processes came together under the umbrella of

intervention – the essay’s third theme – and the kinds of hierarchical relationships that humanitarianism created. The West/Third World divide was, in many ways, to be expected; it was difficult for any individual to conceive of a humanitarian compassion that extended to the *entire* world, after all. Yet the nature of those connections, and the pillars on which they were built, had a huge impact on how the West viewed and encountered Biafra and, by extension, independent Africa. The final part of this essay examines the kind of humanitarian solidarity that Biafra created. It argues that the primacy accorded to emergency relief led NGOs to depoliticise both the crisis itself and the people they intended to help, as well as striking a vital blow for those who argued in favour of the immediacy of charity over political and economic reform.

Biafra and the rise and rise of non-governmental aid

The Biafran crisis began in earnest in May 1967, when Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu announced the Eastern Region’s intention to secede from the Nigerian state. Within two months the Federal Military Government and Biafran forces were at war. By the end of the year, the conflict’s outcome was clear: this was a war that the Biafrans had little hope of winning. Military losses on the ground were matched by a lack of progress in the diplomatic field – only Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania and Zambia recognised the nascent ‘state’, while the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) stood resolutely behind the ‘territorial integrity’ of Nigeria. Peace talks that opened in Addis Ababa in August 1968 were followed by successive (failed) attempts to bring both sides to a settlement. The conflict settled into a war of attrition, marked by Federal military superiority, stubborn Biafran opposition and international (US, British, Chinese, Egyptian, French, Portuguese, Soviet and South African) interference. Biafra’s clever propaganda campaign – run by Swiss-based public relations company Markpress – won it sympathy but too little in the way of territory, and throughout 1969 it struggled to make any gains on the ground. The end, when it came, was quick. On 11 January 1970 Federal forces charged across Biafran territory. Resistance crumbled; Ojukwu fled and the Biafran regime collapsed (Falola, 2008; Heerten and Moses, 2014).

By then, however, the world’s attention was focused on a much bigger question: how to feed and treat

the millions of ‘ordinary’ civilians suffering from the human consequences of the war. Those concerns first gained currency in late 1967 when a lack of protein made cases of kwashiorkor and marasmus increasingly common in war-affected areas. That November the first International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) supplies arrived in Biafra. By the following spring the ICRC had taken the leading role in an international response that included aid from Caritas Internationalis (the official aid agency of the Catholic Church) and the Protestant World Council of Churches (WCC). While the Federal and Biafran authorities wrangled over the possibility of a land corridor for humanitarian relief – a solution that never materialised – aid agencies took to the air. The ICRC led the effort until its activities were cut short following the shooting down of one of its planes in 1969. Caritas and the WCC combined their operations under the umbrella of Joint Church Aid (JCA, or ‘Jesus Christ Airlines’ to its pilots). JCA’s activities became emblematic of the relief effort, with great attention paid to its ‘heroic’ flights from the Portuguese island of São Tomé to Uli airstrip in Biafra, carried out under cover of darkness to avoid the attentions of the Federal Air Force. In the last months of the war more than 250 metric tons of aid arrived at Uli *every night*, to be distributed by missionaries and aid workers spread across Biafran territory (de Waal, 1997; Finucane, 1999: 180).

Yet it took the involvement of the world’s media to spark the widespread public outpouring of compassion for which Biafra is now remembered in the West. 1968 proved a pivotal year. In June a film broadcast on British television and a press campaign by the *Sun* newspaper sparked the humanitarian response into life. Britain’s sense of responsibility towards its former colonial territory combined with the birth of a new form of global humanitarian concern. By the end of July Oxfam and Save the Children Fund (SCF) relief teams had transferred to Nigeria to work with the ICRC, while Christian Aid provided assistance to the WCC relief effort. Over the following 18 months the public reaction to the crisis resulted in a massive increase in visibility and income across the British NGO sector – so much visibility, in fact, that aid fatigue became increasingly prevalent. In 1969, for example, the *Guardian* newspaper referred on more than one occasion to creeping ‘charity weariness’ among the British public: ‘You see starving children on television, very nice photographs. You give something and after three weeks you give something more to get rid of it. You don’t want to see it any more’ (Banks-Smith, 1969).

The story in Ireland was similar. An explosion of media interest in the crisis in June 1968 was followed by increased NGO activity and growing donations to the Irish Red Cross. Africa Concern (created in March 1968 in direct response to the crisis, and now known as Concern Worldwide) collected over IR£1 million in the course of the relief effort, and drew the Irish public into new territory in its engagement with the Third World (Farrar, 2002; O’Sullivan, 2012). Yet the impetus for that response came from a very different place to Britain’s. Ireland’s strong Catholicism fostered a culture of charity similar to that generated by Christian Aid, Oxfam and Save the Children, but the worldwide reach of Irish missionaries also generated networks that connected the Irish public directly to the decolonised world. It was not unusual for Irish men, women and children to have an aunt, uncle, sister, brother or neighbour ‘on the missions’.

Nigeria had long been at the heart of that ‘spiritual empire’ (Bateman, 2008). When Ojukwu announced the East’s intention to secede in May 1967, there were 1,449 Irish Catholic missionaries in Nigeria, just under half of them based in Biafra (O’Sullivan, 2012). They were joined by a number of Irish missionaries who took up prominent positions in the humanitarian relief effort. Fr Tony Byrne, head of the Caritas Internationalis airlift, was an Irish Holy Ghost missionary. Fr Raymond Kennedy, one of Africa Concern’s founding members, belonged to the same order. On the ground local networks of nuns, priests and brothers lent a distinctly Irish accent to the distribution of relief. They offered an important source of action, information and connection, and became key players in the Irish NGO sector that emerged in Biafra’s aftermath.

The experience of the Biafran crisis in Britain and Ireland was replicated across much of the Western world, in the process radically altering the public profile of non-governmental aid. NGOs had long been present in the field of disaster relief: from the actions of charitable organisations in empire, for example, to the international response to famine in Russia in the aftermath of the First World War (Baughan, 2013; Paulmann, 2013; Cabanes, 2014; Little, 2014). Their role expanded in the 1940s, when non-governmental aid featured prominently in efforts to alleviate the massive refugee crisis that affected post-war Europe (Barnett, 2011; Davey, 2014). Biafra, however, was different. Measured in simple monetary terms, the explosion of activity was accompanied by a massive spike in income for humanitarian NGOs (for the

British case, see Hilton et al., 2012: 301). With that increased funding came increased responsibility, but also heightened interest from the apparatuses of the official aid system. The gains won in the late 1960s spawned an increasingly integrated global humanitarian system, in which NGOs played a minor (in monetary terms) but very visible role in the provision of aid. Britain (1975), the European Economic Community (1976) and Ireland (1977) created new structures for co-financing NGO activities in the fields of development and disaster relief, while the UN agencies, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also became actively engaged in ‘tapping’ non-governmental aid.

Yet the story of Biafra and its aftermath is not simply one of the inexorable forward march of NGOs. The crisis also coincided with a much broader discussion about the function of international humanitarianism. Some looked to advocacy as a solution. The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed deep soul-searching across the Western humanitarian sector as aid workers imbued their actions with something more than charity and relief (Leebaw, 2014; O’Sullivan, 2015). Others transferred their energies to the world of development, or, at the very least, a combination of long-term assistance and emergency aid. Still others searched for ‘better’ models of disaster relief. Chief among them was Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which emerged in 1971 as a response by a group of French doctors who had served with the ICRC in Nigeria and East Pakistan to the perceived shortcomings of the Red Cross system (Vallaëys, 2004; Davey, 2011; Desgrandchamps, 2011).

Biafra, decolonisation and the implications of post-colonial aid

What did all this mean for the humanitarian sector? As we have seen, the enhanced profile enjoyed by NGOs in the late 1960s transformed them into key interlocutors between the West and the newly independent Third World. Sometimes that link was direct: NGOs used their role as aid providers to shape news agendas in the West (Africa Concern, for example, installed a telex machine that allowed the agency to relay information directly from West Africa to the Irish media); missionaries became mouthpieces (representative or not) for local communities from West Africa; and the visibility afforded to Oxfam and

others gave them a disproportionate influence on the language of public debate. Most of the time, however, the NGO sector's influence was less easy to discern.

The prism of decolonisation played a crucial role in defining their impact. In Britain, humanitarian NGOs were at the heart of popular efforts to negotiate the transition from benevolent imperialist to international do-gooder (Bocking-Welch, 2012). Biafra reminded them of the post-imperial power's obligations towards the independent Third World. But the response to Biafra also provided evidence that the break from empire was nowhere near as clear-cut as contemporary observers liked to presume. The legacy of imperialism was visible in the language of volunteering. SCF, for example, advertised for doctors and nurses 'interested in doing a humanitarian service of the highest order and who are prepared to rough it in a hot tropical climate for a period of four to six months' (SCF press release, 25 June 1968). It was also evident in the ways that British organisations conceived of their service to Africa. Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), a volunteer-sending agency whose workers operated across Nigeria, provided the most striking evidence of that mentality in practice. Founded in 1958 by Alec Dickson, a former colonial official in Nigeria, VSO's young educational, agricultural and medical graduates transferred the popular image of the British colonial serviceman or woman to the humanitarian volunteer, 'the lonely pioneer in his mud hut' (Adams, 1968: 199). Empire also played a role in shaping the humanitarian response in a very direct sense: in the personnel employed to deliver assistance on the ground. Colonel I. R. Y. Irvine Neave, for example, moved from a position within the colonial service in Nigeria in the 1950s to a role within SCF's operations in the newly independent country. He was not alone in bridging those two worlds. Christian Aid and Oxfam were also dependent – to varying degrees – on officials with experience of imperial service for the running of their operations on the ground.

In Ireland humanitarianism played an equally important role in shaping national identity. Irish compassion towards those suffering in West Africa was expressed outwardly as anti-imperial, internationalist and built on the tenets of Christian responsibility towards the less well-off (O'Sullivan, 2013). The Irish were 'kin to the Biafrans', the story went, their relationship forged by a common historical experience. Accusations of gun-running against Irish missionaries, and the actions of the hundreds of nuns, priests and brothers who worked to provide food and medical relief, did little to hinder that

vision of a small, Catholic nation helping another small, Catholic nation in need. The Igbo – the Irish claimed – were an industrious people, who had used education to raise themselves out of poverty (as the Irish had done in the nineteenth century), and now faced oppression from a larger neighbour. They also shared what Dr Joseph Whelan, the Irish-born Catholic Bishop of Owerri, described as 'one final and terrible likeness': famine. 'Biafra is in the grip of a great hunger', Whelan told a press conference in Dublin in June 1968 (Whelan, 26 June 1968), echoing the title of Cecil Woodham-Smith's widely-read history of the catastrophic events of mid-nineteenth century Ireland (Woodham-Smith, 1962).

At first glance, that evocation of a shared experience of colonialism made for a very different reading of the crisis in Ireland. In practice, however, Irish and British responses to Biafra shared one significant factor: the importance of empire and its legacies in shaping their actions. African independence in the early 1960s had challenged Irish missionaries to adjust to the demands of post-colonial governance. Nuns, priests and brothers increasingly undertook training in social work and development techniques, while the Catholic role in areas like education and health provision shifted to match the needs of independent states. Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and the creation of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace in the same year underlined this reorientation of the Church's role to fit the needs of a 'development' world. Yet the continuities from empire remained openly in evidence. Africa Concern's campaigning and the role of Irish missionaries in distributing relief in Biafra was instantly recognisable to generations of Irish men and women brought up on 'penny for a black baby' fund-raising campaigns in churches, schools and local communities. That organisation's close links with the Holy Ghost missionary order merely reinforced that connection. With it came an (almost) seamless transition in the minds of the watching Irish public: from contributing to the needs of the 'spiritual empire' to a desire to 'save Ireland's spiritual children from extermination' (Whelan, 26 June 1968).

NGOs and intervention in a post-colonial world

The confluence of empire, humanitarianism and the rise of NGOs had a profound impact on how the British and Irish publics understood the crisis in Biafra and, by extension, how they imagined the Third World.

Much has been written about the patchy record of NGOs in meeting the needs of local communities in Africa, including in Biafra (Rieff, 2002; de Waal, 1997; Vaux, 2001; Terry, 2002; Polman, 2010), and that critique has been easily extended to the world of development. Writing in 2002, for example, Firoze Manji and Carl O’Coill condemned the mechanics of the contemporary NGO sector in Africa as ‘a return to the colonial paradigm in which social services are delivered on the basis of favour or charity and their power to placate’ (Manji and O’Coill, 2002: 581). Their account did little to flatter the activities of non-state actors: ‘Today their work contributes marginally to the relief of poverty, but significantly to undermining the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression’ (Manji and O’Coill, 2002: 568).

Yet the reality of how NGOs acted in the field – in Biafra and elsewhere – was also deeply entwined with the vision of humanitarianism that they developed and promoted at home. It was a complex story. On the one hand, the drive and compassion that fuelled the actions of volunteers and aid workers was genuinely felt. On the other hand, however, that commitment disguised a number of underlying – and often unspoken – attitudes that shaped that response and what it meant for NGO activities in the Third World.

One way of unpacking that narrative is to think in terms of the ideal of ‘common humanity’ that underpinned Oxfam, Africa Concern and others’ commitment to ‘people-to-people’ aid. What did it mean to feel compassion for those suffering thousands of miles away, and what were the consequences for how we think of aid? Solidarity with distant others involved ‘ordinary’ individuals in the West in relationships with people they were never likely to meet. The idea of humanitarian solidarity that emerged in Biafra, by extension, implied a connection, if not with *everyone*, then at least with some universalistic aims. Historians and theorists of global social movements have sought out the languages and spaces in which those forms of transnational solidarity were articulated (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Politics, class and shared social concerns, they teach us, mattered greatly in the creation of transnational solidarity. Individual connections were also a powerful force, assisting in the development of shared languages and belief in ‘the cause’ (Alston and Laqua, 2014). Non-state actors played a particularly important role in that process: making sense of events in the Third World for ‘ordinary’ populaces in the West (Thörn, 2006).

In applying those lessons to cases like Biafra, however, we are still left with the problem of scale. Since universal solidarity was almost impossible for any individual to conceive, the NGO solution was to describe the humanitarian connection with West Africa as something more than local but less than global. In this way NGOs attempted to render tangible the ‘common humanity’ ideal. Stories of missionary endeavour in the distribution for aid, for example, were rendered all the more ‘real’ through the stories of individual priests, brothers and nuns transmitted in print and on radio and television. In taking that route, however, non-governmental actors simultaneously reinforced the sense of difference between the West and the Third World. The message put forward by British and Irish NGOs tended to reduce the complexity of the crisis to simple, easily consumable ideas. In Biafra, as later in East Pakistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Sudan and a litany of other distant locations, the urgency of ‘saving’ replaced ‘civilising’ as the buzzword for Western intervention in the Third World. The nature of this ‘crusade’ – as one commentator labelled Africa Concern’s activities (*Missionary Annals*, 1970) – generated a sense of adventure among its participants and, most importantly, its supporters. Stories of missionary relief work and Africa Concern’s campaign to ‘Send One Ship’ (SOS) met with widespread enthusiasm among the Irish public. In Britain the popular belief that ‘some really desperate action is needed, completely regardless of politics and danger’ was reinforced by the actions of NGOs (Ruddall to Black, 2 August 1968). But it was the relief airlift that generated the most headlines and popular support. How better to portray the selfless heroism of NGOs than through the dangerous – and sometimes deadly – act of landing at Uli airstrip in darkness and under the attentions of Federal fighter planes?

The response that those images generated was equally simplistic. To the watching public, the humanitarians – NGOs and missionaries – became the key to ‘saving’ Biafra. It was they who provided the protein and the medicines necessary for life; if only their supporters would give that extra money, they suggested (intentionally or not), everything would be fine. The process of administering those remedies further reinforced the primacy of the NGOs. Powerful television images of white aid workers handing out food to Biafran refugees made clear the hierarchy of relief. ‘Experts’ recruited in the West administered medical and other assistance to local populations, and in Western terms. And however closely expatriate

missionaries and volunteers identified in their own minds with those they assisted, their actions nonetheless contributed to a donor-recipient chain that was defined by the ‘radically unequal order that is the mark of the humanitarian relationship’ (Fassin, 2012: 253). Three months after Biafra’s collapse in January 1970, Oxfam reminded its supporters of the difficulties associated with rapid social and economic change in a context like that unfolding in Nigeria: ‘The very world itself confounds them as they are sucked by the slipstream of modern technology from their ancient ways. They need both steadying influence and a helpful bridge to cross this chasm successfully’ (*Oxfam News*, April 1970).

Biafra and the politics of aid

Therein lay the great contradiction of humanitarian relief. Biafra transformed benevolence into an act of unity with independent Africa: we have compassion because we are all part of the same human race. But the ways in which that empathy was expressed ensured that humanitarianism remained something done unto others (Dogra, 2012; Fassin, 2012). In that sense, British and Irish NGOs operating in Biafra also helped to reinforce what Mark Duffield termed the principle of ‘permanent emergency’: the reproduction of the humanitarian movement through consistent crisis, simultaneously emphasising NGO neutrality and stripping away any complexity from the recipients of disaster relief (Duffield, 2007). Biafra became a site for intervention, a space to be occupied by NGOs, and one to be saved by their transnational agency.

It was also a depoliticised space. From the beginning of the crisis British and Irish NGOs attempted to elevate their actions above and outside of the politics of the conflict. Christian Aid, for example, was adamant in its intention to be ‘impartial in regard to the military and political issues of the war – and [to] try to relieve suffering on both sides, as equally as possible’ (Brash to Christian Aid staff, 9 December 1969). Oxfam, too, made clear to its supporters that it was ‘in no way concerned with the politics of the situation ... In pleading for a cease-fire our only concern is for humanity’ (*Oxfam News*, December 1968). The broadly pro-Biafran sympathies prevalent in Ireland – the Nigerian Federal government was so suspicious of Africa Concern and the Holy Ghost Order’s activities that it expelled them from the country immediately after the end of the war – were

tempered by a similarly apolitical approach to relief. Humanitarianism belonged to the realm of Christian charity, a broadly shared pride in missionary and NGO endeavours – so the broad consensus went – and stood apart from debates about genocide and civil war.

There was nothing new, of course, in NGOs asserting the neutrality of aid. That notion has long been cherished by the humanitarian sector. Yet neither was there anything new about that outward expression of independence disguising a much more complex story of the politics of relief. The humanitarian campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engaged British NGOs in debates about the merits of neutral versus active humanitarianism (Gill, 2013). Since then, however, the political motives of aid have been less explicit. Subconsciously, humanitarianism has always been connected to Western attempts to ‘organise’ the outside world: from Save the Children’s internationalist agenda in the inter-war period (Baughan, 2012; Hilton, 2015) to the relationship between NGOs and the international community in the Balkans in the 1990s (Rieff, 2002). Biafra was no different. The undercurrent of empire described earlier in this essay reflected a very Western imagining of how life in independent Africa *should* operate.

The insistence on the neutrality narrative also had implications for the discursive environment in which the response to Biafra took shape. It did so in two ways. First, it largely ignored the geopolitical context in which the humanitarian crisis evolved. One of the greatest fears expressed by political observers in Britain and Ireland was that a Biafran victory would open a ‘Pandora’s box’ of territorial claims and counter-claims, along with a broader questioning of the appropriateness of imperial-drawn state boundaries elsewhere in Africa. With it – so the sub-current of those debates went – would come fragmentation, disintegration and, ultimately, opportunities for the spread of communism and Soviet influence (Simpson, 2014). Yet that debate was kept almost completely separate from the discussion of aid, despite its obvious implications for how external powers related to, negotiated with and applied pressure on the Federal government when it came to the question of relief.

Second, the depoliticisation of relief also reduced the agency of independent African governments in the eyes of the watching publics in the West. British and Irish NGOs knew and understood the role of the Federal and Biafran authorities in manipulating the

provision of relief and in perpetuating the conditions that made it necessary in the first place. However, they failed to adequately address that question with their supporters – or, indeed, among themselves – preferring to bury it in the hope that it would go away (de Waal, 1997). It didn't. The divisive intra-sectoral debates that surrounded MSF's departure from Ethiopia in late 1985 – precipitated by the Ethiopian government's resettlement policies and their impact on famine relief – showed that little had changed (Davey, 2011), while more recently the Syrian refugee crisis has thrown up equally contentious discussions around the politics of humanitarian aid (Weiss, 2014).

Implicit in those discussions was a much deeper question about the role of charity and relief. The late 1960s witnessed the 'discovery' of development and the search for 'justice' for the global South (Leebaw, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2015). Organisations like the Haslemere Group (formed in 1968), World Development Movement (1969) and Third World First (1969) in Britain issued strong critiques of a global economic and political system 'devised by the rich to suit their needs' (Haslemere Group, 1968: 4). In their words, overseas aid was 'largely a myth; at best, a wholly inadequate payment for goods received, at worst another name for the continued exploitation of the poor countries by the rich' (Haslemere Group, 1968: 4). The conversation in Ireland was described in appropriately local terms: the formation of a national Commission for Justice and Peace (1969) brought with it a discussion of the Catholic Church's role in issues of justice, rights and global economic reform. Yet those issues remained on the margins of popular debate. The crisis in Biafra offered many individuals their first glimpse of post-colonial Africa, and the image it created – of suffering, devastation and the need for immediate relief – eclipsed the debate about justice or the politics of aid. It was telling that NGO efforts to move into the worlds of justice and rights in the 1970s took shape largely in Latin America, not Africa. In Africa, so the popular understanding went, everything came second to the primacy of emergency aid – even development. The complete eclipse of Irish development organisation Gorta's model of long-term agricultural projects by the immediacy of Africa Concern's activities in Ireland provided the most striking evidence of this hierarchy in practice (O'Sullivan, 2012: 117).

It was not all Biafra's fault, of course. The struggle between charity and advocacy had much deeper roots, and precipitated a more broadly emotional response

than one crisis could generate. The debate about economic reform in the Third World in the late 1970s, for example, carried little weight with the majority of NGO supporters. Veronica Booth (Oxfam trustee, and former manager of one of its shops) pleaded at the organisation's 1981 annual staff conference not to 'get too sophisticated and forget that many supporters join us because of an emotional response to poverty – to the sight of a pitiful baby dying – and not because they know anything about land reform or the politics of aid' (Booth, 1981). A year earlier, Concern's Overseas Director Hugh Byrne had made a similar remark to his organisation's supporters: Concern could 'not stand by and watch people die in misery', he wrote, 'while the benefits of a major economic restructuring "trickle down" to the poor' (Byrne, 1980).

But Biafra could take at least some credit/blame for the shape of the humanitarian sector at the beginning of the 1980s. The image of NGOs running to the aid of the starving people of the Third World was merely underlined in a succession of crises that followed. The flight of refugees from civil war in East Pakistan in 1971 inspired not an interrogation of its causes but a Concern-run 'Pakistan Famine Appeal'. In Cambodia eight years later, NGOs focused attention away from the politics of Vietnamese intervention and the residual influence of the Khmer Rouge regime towards a situation that Oxfam technical officer Jim Howard described as 'worse than Biafra. But you can't make comparisons like that when there are so many people dying of starvation' (Davies, 1979). In Ethiopia (1984–85) the situation was much the same. British and Irish NGOs preferred to emphasise the distribution of aid, rather than publicly criticise the policies of displacement and resettlement followed by the Derg regime. The equation was simple: the Third World = disaster, famine and war = the need for NGO-led, apolitical humanitarian relief.

Conclusion: Biafra's legacy

Biafra marked a series of beginnings for humanitarianism. It was the first televised famine, the West's first major response to disaster in independent Africa and the first time that the international non-governmental sector had significantly shaped the agenda of disaster relief. Yet Biafra was also deeply rooted in a much longer history of humanitarian aid. The continuities (from empire to post-imperial aid) and inequalities (aid as something done unto others) that

the crisis brought to the fore underlined the enduring potency of a Western ideal of ‘civilisation’ in organising humanitarian relief. Concepts like ‘saving’, ‘expertise’ and the superiority of scientific knowledge were expressed in new but familiar ways. The ‘othering’ of empire was transformed into an imagining of Biafra – and, by extension, Africa – as a place of disaster, famine and war. In both Britain and Ireland the popular representation of the crisis reinforced a tendency to view the peoples of the Third World as inferior or, at the very least, as near-perpetual victims.

What makes Biafra important, however, is the context in which those narratives took shape. The NGO response to the crisis came at a crossroads for humanitarian aid: the meeting of a rapidly expanding international NGO sector with popular attempts to come to terms with a decolonised world. That confluence of narratives helped to crystallise a particular humanitarian vision of, and relationship with, the Third World that the sector has spent decades trying to change. To understand what it means, we

must begin by rejecting any easy dichotomy between ‘good’ or ‘bad’ aid. The NGO-inspired narrative of Biafra made some aid workers – and some NGOs – very uncomfortable indeed. Instead, we must unravel the key tension that shapes disaster relief: between humanitarianism’s aspiration to universality and its grounding in a set of Western ideals. The Biafran story reminds us that the kinds of compassionate pleas that rendered the crisis in simplistic, depoliticised and interventionist terms held a considerable attraction to those watching in the West. The budgets of emergency-focused NGOs did not suffer from the images they employed in the late 1960s – quite the opposite, in fact. Nor did their profiles, as those organisations emerged to take centre stage in the provision of aid. The West, the Biafran experience suggests, *needed* a translator to make sense of the outside world. And the crisis brought NGOs to the forefront in providing that mediation. But Biafra also provides us with one final but critical lesson: that with that role comes great responsibility, and the need for a very careful appreciation of how and for what purposes humanitarianism is portrayed.

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3 Iconographies of humanitarian aid in Africa

Sonya de Laat and Valérie Gorin

Humanitarianism has been predicated on and constituted by visual images. Operations in the field have had to be recorded, both as a documentary and an anthropological scene, to support themselves ideologically and financially, and to legitimise an event or action as humanitarian. Originally conveyed through illustrations, paintings and ‘visual’ and ‘floral’ language (Mitchell, 1987), photography quickly became the medium of choice after its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century. Photography helped shape and define international humanitarianism as a system of action and of representation to the point that, today, the humanitarian image is less concerned with the events causing suffering than with the *image* of the humanitarian organisation, its self-representation and branding.¹

There is growing interest in looking at photography as a source of critical reflection on humanitarianism, human rights and humanitarian governance.² This paper looks at the visual history of humanitarianism across roughly a century, with a particular interest in photography of Western international organisations and actors operating in Africa. Its goals are threefold: to describe some of the photographs contained in various archives, particularly related to Western humanitarianism in Africa from the 1880s to the 1980s; to provide a brief overview of theoretical ways of considering photographic information; and to explore the value of visual archives in adding to historical perspectives on humanitarianism and to contemporary policy-making. Looking at photographs of Western humanitarianism in Africa over the past century helps to ‘thicken’ (Geertz, 1973) current understandings of international humanitarianism by

reinforcing, challenging, enriching, filling gaps and opening new lines of enquiry.

Background

State of the art

Delineating a humanitarian visual history is a daunting task: visual records exist from a variety of actors, actions and periods, representing different sensitivities, ideologies and politics. Although critical commentary on the visual representation of suffering stretches back centuries, it has only been since the last decades of the twentieth century that this attention has been substantial and sustained. At the same time, the ubiquitous photographs of suffering victims, or alternatively smiling beneficiaries, that have featured prominently in humanitarian campaigns since the latter half of the twentieth century have faced justifiable criticism from within and outside the humanitarian movement. To a large extent, this criticism has focused on photojournalism and humanitarian campaigns since the end of the Second World War, and specifically the role of photography in creating and representing institutional identity and reflecting humanitarian values and principles.³ Controversy has swirled around the return of ‘poverty porn’ as abusing and perpetuating stereotypes deployed in an effort to further organisational ends, triggering emotional responses, aestheticising suffering, objectifying, essentialising, infantilising and exploiting victims and reinforcing stereotypes of Africa as a continent of dependence and violence (Franks, 2013; Kennedy, 2009). Photographs of the ‘poor starving Black child [have become] so central to the idiom of charity appeals that aid campaigns depart from this convention only at the risk of prejudicing their income’ (Burman, 1994: 29).

1 See Raymond Williams’ exploration of ‘image’ in *Keywords* (1985) for a discussion of the ways ‘image’ has come to be understood in recent decades.

2 See for example Fehrenbach and Rodogno (2015); Grant (2001); Godby (2013); Gorin (2012, 2014); Sliwinski (2011); Smith (2008); Taithe (2010); and Twomey (2012a, 2012b).

3 See Benthall (1993); Golob (2013); Hayes (1993); Johnson (2011); Kleinman and Kleinman (1996); Nolan and Mikami (2013); Paschalidis (2003); Schultheis Moore (2013); and da Silva Gama et al. (2013).

Academics are divided between those underlining the commodification of suffering through new strategies of humanitarian branding that use post-pity, ironic and participative appeals to engage the public (Chouliaraki, 2013; Vestergaard 2013), and those that emphasise the lack of alternative representations of misery (Campbell, 2012).

The repetition of imagery developed during large-scale humanitarian crises, particularly since the mid-twentieth century, has strongly influenced the way the West understands 'Africa' (Franks, 2013: 12). Overall, Africa is represented as a homogenous whole, while continents such as Asia have been seen through a more nuanced lens (albeit arguably still homogenised at the country level). Africa also stands out in humanitarian representations because it is where Western organisations have been concentrated since the 1960s. The paradox of the iconography of suffering is that the attempt at doing good ends up demoralising and dehumanising the very subjects humanitarians and their organisations have pledged to help. The universal icon has effaced the political circumstances surrounding their state of suffering. Even the 'positive' representations that appeared following the rise of development policies in postcolonial settings, which introduced fresh messages of solidarity and cosmopolitanism, reproduce the same ideologies (Burman, 1993; Manzo, 2008).

These critical reflections have led to concerted attempts to change humanitarian practice around visual representation. Numerous guidelines have been produced. Beginning with *Images and Messages Relating to the Third World* of 1989, adopted by the General Assembly of the Liaison Committee of Development NGOs to the European Communities, numerous agencies, organisations and groups have created codes of conduct around the use of pictures (General Assembly, 1989). However, as much as the creation of these documents may have reoriented (or introduced) sensitivity to ethical concerns around the use of visuals, criticism of humanitarian photography has persisted (Calain, 2013; McHarg, 2011; Hilary, 2015).

Definition and approach

According to Ferenbach and Rodogno (2015), the term 'humanitarian photography' has only been in use since the 1990s. It is defined as the 'mobilisation of photography in the service of humanitarian initiatives across state boundaries'. Humanitarian visual culture was also shaped through the collective experience of

tourist photography (postcards, stereoscopes) and has interconnections with atrocity, social and documentary photography. Generally, humanitarian photographs are used to document action, to generate humanitarian sentiment around recognisable humanitarian crises or to raise awareness of abuses or atrocities, with some pictures even supporting juridical evidence. While many were intended initially for private use as a personal memory or institutional record, or to illustrate the human condition from a more objective or anthropological perspective (Geary, 1991), here we look at archives, collections and cases comprising photographs that have been, currently are, or may be considered as being in the 'service of humanitarian initiatives' by Western (European/North American) humanitarian organisations operating in Africa.⁴

Photographic sources were identified through several means. Recent histories, critiques and ethnographies of the humanitarian system and of particular institutions provided information on historiographies and activities of humanitarians in Africa (Barnett, 2011; Forsythe and Rieffer-Flanagan, 2007; Fox, 2014; Paulmann, 2013; Redfield, 2013; Rieff, 2002). This scholarship offered contextually relevant knowledge about the concept and practice of humanitarianism, while also providing information on particular uses and impacts of visual materials relating to or used by humanitarians. The bulk of the visual material presented here has been gleaned from the archives and photographic libraries of humanitarian organisations and academic institutions, as well as peer-reviewed publications.⁵ The authors concede that there is likely to be a great wealth of further photographic and visual material stored in any number of existing collections that are either unrecognised or underexplored. For instance, the country offices and national branches of some of the larger global humanitarian organisations house their own archives. There is little consistency in terms of the physical or

4 Although not considered here, professional photographers in the modern era, such as British photographer Don McCullin and French photojournalist Gilles Caron, have also been important in raising awareness of suffering in humanitarian crises. A collection of McCullin's work is held at the National Media Museum in Bradford in the UK. Caron's visual archive is housed at the Fondation Gilles Caron in Geneva.

5 A simple structure was devised to capture basic information on the photographic collections: a description of the organisation or individual, their mandates or intentions, a history of their development and actions, and the role that photography played in their humanitarian activities. The collections are further described in terms of the location, additional content, accessibility and current state of the archives or institutions in which they are stored.

virtual state of the archives, and each office has its own system for accessing and sharing these materials, making reporting on them more complicated.

An overview of the archives

Numerous archives in state museums and national libraries provide ready information on the context of the collections and the historical uses of visual materials. Others are contained in institutional settings that do not have this supporting material so readily to hand. Furthermore, it was not common practice until the middle of the twentieth century to record the name of the photographer, the location or the date of exposure. Based on the information that is known about photographs with even limited genealogies, photographs were used for institutional accountability, (false) scientific analysis (e.g. eugenics, anthropology, nutritional science), propaganda, proselytising, awareness (consciousness-raising) campaigns, donor/

volunteer solicitation, juridical proof, forensic evidence and commercial advertising. Some images have been reused and repurposed for multiple ends. Photographs were published in or accompanied reports, books, pamphlets, journals, newspapers, personal correspondence and travelling lantern lectures.

Reformers, political activists and missionaries from European and American Protestant and Catholic societies used photography to record the missionary experience in Africa from as early as the 1840s (Figure 1). The University of Southern California's International Mission Photography Archive (IMPA)⁶ brings together nine private and public collections from Protestant and Catholic missions in Europe and North America, many with a background in Africa. The Religious Society of Friends, more commonly known as the Quakers, used photography to record its missionary activities in Africa, with portraits of Quaker groups and meeting houses abroad, as well as photographing medical services, such as nurseries and ambulances.⁷

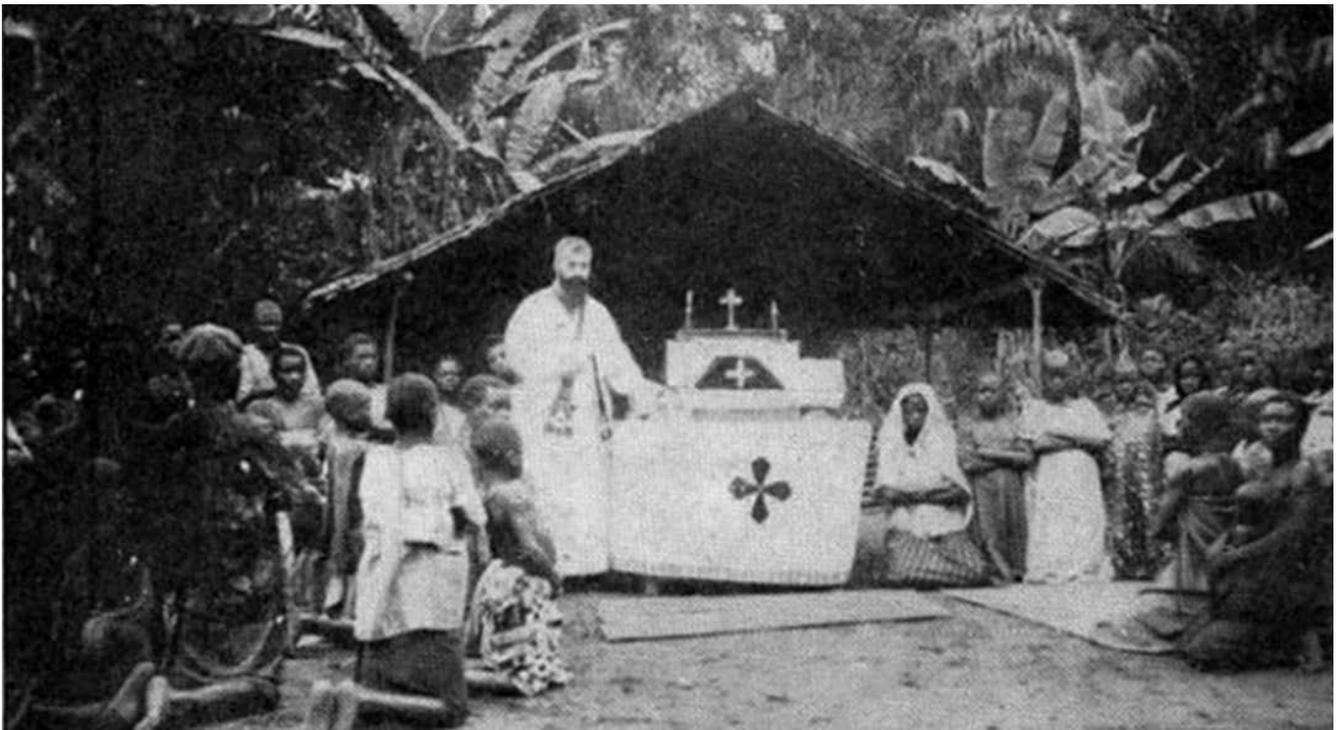


Figure 1: A missionary priest conducting mass amid kneeling villagers in Angola, ca.1920–40. Photograph courtesy of the International Mission Photography Archive, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT. IMP-YDS-RG101-011-0000-0091.

6 See <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/about/collection/p15799coll123>. IMPA brings together photographs from the Moravian Church, the Leipzig Mission, the Basel Mission, the Mission Archives at the School of Mission and Theology and the collections of the School of Oriental and African Studies, the Yale University Divinity School Day Missions, the Service protestant de mission and the Church of Scotland World Mission Council.

7 The archives of Quakers from North America are held at the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania (<http://www.swarthmore.edu/friends-historical-library>). The archives of English Quakers are held at The Library in Friends House in London (<http://www.quaker.org.uk/library>). Both have very early photographic material, including lanternslides.



Figure 2: Ethiopia: the Abyssinian War, 1935–36. A British Red Cross ambulance unit destroyed by the Italian air force. Photograph courtesy of the ICRC. V-P-HIST-E-01508.

Early missionary and reformer photographs were circulated widely through missionary and political networks in Europe and the United States. Many religious societies and political reformers had their own periodicals, such as the American Presbyterians' *The Missionary* or E. D. Morel's monthly journal *West African Mail*, and individual missionaries, including Morel, William Ellis, Alice and John Harris, Dr. David Livingstone and Dr. Albert Schweitzer, published their memoirs in books with reprinted pictures used for illustration or to depict forms of suffering and mutilation (Livingstone, 1857; Ellis, 1859; Morel, 1904, 1906; Harris, 1912; Schweitzer, 1933). Campaigner Emily Hobhouse, though not a photographer herself, knew the political power of photography and became adept at using photographs to raise awareness of conditions in the concentration camps the British established during the Second South African War of 1899–1902.⁸ Photographs were also used as evidence of atrocities in the Belgian

8 The War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein, South Africa, contains the largest collection of British concentration camp photographs. The Free State Archives, the Horwick Museum, the National Archives and the National Cultural History Museum each contain additional collections (Godby, 2013, fn. 1).

Congo under King Leopold, both before the British parliament and the general public.⁹

Early photographs record the presence of International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegates in the Second South African War (1899–1902), as well as during the Third Anglo-Ashanti War (1873–74). However, the ICRC's work in Africa only began in earnest with the Italian–Abyssinian War of 1935–36. The ICRC archive includes photographs of the physical effects of the mustard gas used by Italian forces, as well as photographs of a destroyed Red Cross ambulance and tents, apparently bombed by Italian planes (Figure 2). This may well be the first photographs of international humanitarian healthcare facilities being

9 An African-American Presbyterian missionary to the Congo, William Henry Sheppard, is credited with having taken the first 'atrocities' photographs in the Congo Free State. On a visit to an outpost, Sheppard reports having counted 81 severed hands. While he brought his camera with him to record what he witnessed, only one photograph is known to have survived: a photo of a young woman entitled 'Rescued by Sheppard from the cannibals'. It is housed in the archives of the Presbyterian Historical Society, Montreat, North Carolina (Thompson, 2007). Anti-Slavery International holds a collection of Alice Harris photographs taken during her involvement in the Congo Reform Association.



Figure 3: Senegal: Rufisque, social hygiene dispensary. Photograph courtesy of the ICRC: V-P-HIST-E-04677.

targeted in war. Today, the ICRC archives consist of roughly 780,000 items, including glass plates, negatives and prints, with a photograph library of over 120,000 pictures accessible to the public. The photographic collection is maintained separately from the ICRC document archives. While this facilitates the indexing and location of photographs, it makes it harder to trace the history of their creation and the ways in which the pictures were used. The archives contain a large range of images from National Red Cross societies in Africa, mainly staged photographs of delegates performing Red Cross and ICRC activities: public health work, International Humanitarian Law education and detention visits (Figure 3). Also included are photographs from ICRC delegates or commissioned photographers and photographs donated to the organisation or specifically purchased by the ICRC to contribute to a larger project of memory preservation.

Within the UN, each agency has its own archive of visual material. While the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and other agencies have employed photography extensively, only recently has attention been paid to one UN agency's

photographic history in particular: the World Health Organisation (WHO). After becoming operational in 1948, WHO initially faced competition for resources and legitimacy from UNICEF, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation. The visual politics of the organisation reflect its struggle against these entities and its own 'promise of development' (Rodogno and David, 2015: 224). The archives of the WHO newsletter, *World Health*, from the 1950s and 1960s feature a wealth of photographs that depict the important health and development promise of technology, albeit mainly within small-scale, targeted projects.

Several of the major NGOs also maintain visual archives.¹⁰ One of the earliest NGOs, the Save the Children Fund (SCF), recorded its activities in Africa beginning with its first mission in Ethiopia in 1936 through pictures shown in public lectures

10 At the time of writing, responses were pending from MSF, Plan and other international organisations, including CARE, World Vision and Médecins du Monde (MDM), for information on the content and accessibility of their archives. The Salvation Army's archive, held at the International Heritage Centre in London, contains photographs documenting its activities from the 1880s.

and exhibitions, and printed in SCF periodicals *The World's Children* (1920–80), *Today's Children* (1962–73) and *The Save the Children Pictorial* (1926–46). SCF's archives are now held at the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham.¹¹ Working closely with SCF in the international children's movement, the International Union for Child Welfare (IUCW) started work in Africa in 1920. Its archives, based in Geneva, hold a special collection of pictures in Africa from 1929 to 1986, documenting its monitoring activities with local humanitarian groups.¹² Oxfam's documentary and visual archive is housed in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. While the entire collection will only be made available in 2017, the currently available 'communications' section includes original and photocopied pamphlets, press releases and posters. The pamphlets and press releases are directed more towards information about the nature of the organisation, while the posters are dominated by visual messaging tracing changes in the organisation's activities and philosophy over the course of five decades. Campaigns such as 'Keep OXFAM in action' and 'Why bother' extensively reference its humanitarian work in Africa.¹³ The child refugee-focused *Terre des Hommes*, which started its activities in Africa during the Biafra famine, holds many picture albums in its files at the cantonal archives of Lausanne (they have to be manually accessed). Finally, the various offices of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have their own library services, and an interactive historical timeline online suggests that a wealth of visual information is available.

Two other archives are also worthy of note. The National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian in Washington DC contains a vast archive of photographs from African and non-African photographers dating from the early days of the medium, with over 200 photographic collections containing over 280,000 transparencies, prints,

lantern slides, stereographs and postcards. Contained in the postcard collection is an array of coloured prints of photographs taken during Leopold's reign of terror in the Congo Free State, including group portraits of soldiers in the Force Publique gendarmerie, chain gangs and quarry labourers, alongside remarkably peaceful images of rubber harvesters (Geary, 2002). The Pitt Rivers Museum of anthropology and archaeology in Oxford has an extensive collection of nineteenth and early twentieth-century photography, including fieldwork archives of anthropologists and travel writers who worked in Africa.¹⁴ One collection to note for humanitarians interested in incarceration and detention are the photographs by William Lawrence and David McKenzie Selkirk of San prisoners in Cape Town (1870–71), and photographs from the Benin Expedition of 1897.

Main themes

Photographs, especially when considered in terms of their role in particular events, can be rich sources of information on social history. Particularly instructive in developing a picture of the social function of humanitarian photography is the well-developed scholarship on changing attitudes towards pain, the impact of technology on distant spectatorship and the rise of humanitarian and human rights sentiment.¹⁵ Reaching back to the eighteenth century, this scholarship describes the role of technological and socio-political changes during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in distancing people from what was previously considered unavoidable suffering, while at the same time rendering the suffering of distant others more proximate. Machines and anaesthetics removed or reduced pain at the same time that new technologies of war were increasing the number and severity of casualties. Meanwhile, mass circulation press, the telegraph and then photography brought far-away suffering close to home. A moral posture developed in which pain and suffering were deemed distasteful, and so by extension the people

11 For a full listing of the material available, see *Preliminary Listing of the Save the Children Fund Archive (SCF)*.

Requests to access material before 1972 have to be made to Save the Children, but all archival material up to 1980 has been duplicated on 101 microfilms (see Slim and Sellick, 2004) available at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester. Many files contain photographic material reflecting Save the Children's feeding, medical and educational activities in Africa.

12 See the online catalogue at: <https://ge.ch/arvaegconsult/ws/consaeg/public/fiche/AEGSearcg>.

13 The catalogue can be accessed at: <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/modern/oxfam/oxfam-com.html#d2e585>.

14 The museum's collections of photographs from Africa include prints by Richard Buchta from Sudan and Uganda (1878–79), French ethnographer Robert Hottot in Congo (1906–1908), Charles W. Hobley in Kenya (1902), anthropologists Robert S. Rattray in Ghana (1920s), Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard in Sudan (1926–36) and Godfrey Lienhardt in Sudan (1947–51), and the explorer Wilfred Thesiger in Sudan, Ethiopia, Morocco, Kenya and Tanzania (1937–1980s).

15 See Azoulay (2012); Boltanski (2000); Hunt (2007); Sliwinski (2011).

who were suffering, thus causing victims more harm. The distaste for pain also inadvertently contributed to a predilection for seeing the pain of others – the rise of the pornography of pain – and to the development of a moral righteousness on the part of spectators through their ‘proper’ responses to the suffering of others (Haltunnen, 1995). When attention turned to the suffering slave, these black bodies represented a mixed sign of human cruelty and exotic sexuality (Solomon-Godeau, 1991).

Emerging from these changing attitudes and structures of response towards pain, humanitarian sentiments reflected and were cultivated through a particular genre of literary, political and scientific writing. According to Laqueur (1989), the body and the details of its physical characteristics (or of afflictions and inflictions to it) were always necessarily graphically described in these humanitarian narratives. These bodily details represented the ‘truth’ of suffering and added moral weight to the imperative to act. Despite their truth claims, these stories are rather political rhetoric and idealised or dramatised versions of humanitarian action and emotion. Their emergence and existence as historical artefacts are evidence of transformations in modern sensitivities to suffering and of the way feelings were mobilised to maintain certain social hierarchies or attain particular political goals. Humanitarian photography developed patterns with uncanny resemblances to these earlier humanitarian narratives. Focusing on the body in pain or foreign actors in the role of benefactor, humanitarian photography has, in many ways, reproduced, reinforced and reinvented longstanding humanitarian narratives, several of which we describe here.

From the colonial to the postcolonial gaze: ‘Otherness’ and ‘Oneness’

There are continuities between humanitarian photography and visual narratives created and sustained by religious charity organisations since the nineteenth century. Clearly influenced by the rise of anthropological and ethnological observations and encounters with tribal systems, cultural customs and social hierarchies around the world and the progress of tropical medicine, early missionary photography participated in the scientific construction of the ‘racial gaze’ (Eves, 2006).¹⁶ The photographic gaze in the colonialist system reflected perceptions of Western, Christian influences on African culture, and ideological

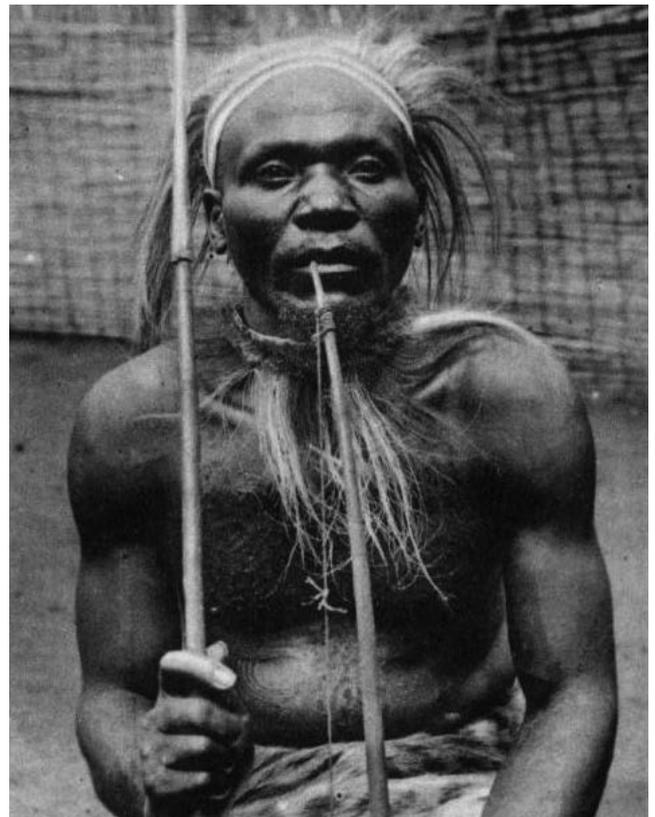


Figure 4: Pygmy man, Africa, ca. 1920–40. ‘Missions d’Afrique – Soeurs Blanches du Cardinal Lavigerie. Type mutwa (pygmée)’. A pygmy man poses for the camera in traditional attire. He is sitting on a chair. He has a necklace with hair on it and he is holding a stick and a bow. This postcard was printed in Lille, Belgium. Photograph courtesy of International Mission Courtesy of Archive, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT. impa-yds-rg101-051-0000-0048

discourses on civilization and savagery (Figure 4). In fact, missionary photography helped build the representational basis of the ‘other’ that has had lasting influence on humanitarian and development organisations’ communication strategies (Dogra, 2012; Franks, 2013; Hesford, 2011). At the scientific level, many visual medical recordings participated in Western improvements in public health, though not even these could be said to be innocent in terms of rhetoric or propaganda. In looking at photographic collections, the ‘constitution of institutions, knowledge and technics of humanitarianism’ that developed under the colonial empires becomes apparent (Lachenal and Taithe, 2009: 47; our translation).

Photography developed at a time when positivist ideologies prevailed in the human sciences. The indexical quality of photography made it a prized tool, for anthropologists especially (Edwards, 1992). Since the end of the nineteenth century (and at times still today) the medium has been perceived as

¹⁶ There is a rich scholarship on this sort of ‘scientific’ typecasting photography (Bal, 1996; Edwards, 1992; Geary, 2002).

‘mechanical’, ‘reliable’ and ‘unbiased’. The facts, however, always required interpretation and validation to render them useful, a process subject to deliberate, but more often than not unquestioned, ideological influence. As a result, visual recordings served different political and social purposes by humanising or dehumanising African subjects, often through the creation, perpetuation or exaggeration of stereotypes (Thompson, 2007). Photographs were, among other ends, used for fear-mongering and downplaying, ignoring or outright inverting historical events in order to render the subjects more exotic, uncivilised, dependent, barbaric and violent, while at the same time appealing for action based on shared common humanity (Dogra, 2012; Twomey, 2012).

The aesthetic character of missionary photographs – and the immersive spaces of the lantern lectures in which they were shown – accentuated and reinforced otherness through a focus on and exaggeration of human differences. These lectures – often presented by missionaries to educate audiences about the lives of people from around the world (Grant, 2001), using performative elements such as hymn singing, prayers, and ‘melodramatic evangelical appeals’ meant to elicit strong emotional responses (Sliwinski, 2011: 79) – also constructed and fortified a sense of Christian duty and responsibility for the saving of one’s own soul through the saving of others’. The ‘phantasmagorical’ feel of the shows carried with them a sense of being able to change the lives of distant (abstracted and iconised) others, a sentiment that has been carried into today. Pictures of local African kings taken by Livingstone, of vaccination campaigns in remote villages shown by Schweitzer or of atrocities distributed by campaigners for reform in King Leopold’s Congo Free State show two extreme interpretations and standpoints of so-called ‘humanitarian’ action in Africa: a violent ‘enslaving experience’ through the imposition of Western civilisation and Christianity, or ‘a liberating experience’ through the denunciation of colonial atrocities, and also – in a lesser recognised aspect – by the later use of photography by Africans as a form of cultural capital and identity (Thompson, 2007: 3, 21).

Third World imagery emerging decades later in the 1960s (Figure 5) showed a continuum with these earlier forms of ‘othering’, while also offering resistance towards the visual colonial imagination (Thomas and Green, 2014). With the rise of development aid and post-colonial politics, representations accentuating ‘oneness’ or universal humanity became more prevalent.



Figure 5: ‘Little for you, little for others’, ca. 1960–90. A Danish Red Cross Society poster to emphasise the need for food assistance in Africa. Courtesy of the Danish Red Cross Society. C-2782.

Although apparently in opposition to representations accentuating difference, these ‘positive’ forms ‘nested’ difference by continuing to represent appearances as essentialised, depoliticised and ahistorical (Dogra, 2012). More recently, the pattern of reducing complex human engagements to ‘one world’ and ‘global village’ ideals has been folded into global capitalist market systems that have equated consumerism with democratic action, resulting in contemporary humanitarian sentiment being guided by hyper-individualistic personal preferences: the ‘irony’ of today’s solidarity campaigns is that they are built on fundamentally unchallenged constructions of difference (Chouliaraki, 2013).

Humanitarianism in action: heroes and victims

Generally, the humanitarian narrative is structured along a predictable arc with three main tropes or protagonists: there is the victim, invariably described as ‘innocent’, who struggles with a villain (e.g. disease, disaster or an individual or group causing suffering),



Figure 6: *The visual trope of the lonely child. Liboi camp for Somali refugees, Kenya. Photograph by J. Stjerneklar, March 1992. Courtesy of UNHCR. RF156881.*

only to be saved by a hero, in most cases either a technology or a person of light skin and of socio-economic privilege. This is clear in the continuum of pictures showing the progress of colonial, tropical and then humanitarian medicine (Rodogno and David, 2015), or in the numerous pictures of delegates, technology and devices (e.g. surgery, ambulances) accumulated by the ICRC. These visual tropes were accentuated through the growing skill of the documentary and war photographers hired by the ICRC and the UN (Figure 6), including personal portraits, intimate visual storytelling and captions adopting battlefield language (Gorin, 2012; Rodogno and David, 2015).

These typical *mise-en-scènes* show the victimisation through which children in particular – first in groups, then individually – would become icons. The pictures used by Emily Hobhouse to condemn the concentration camps the British set up during the Second Boer War helped establish this convention. Using the private photographs of concentration camp inhabitants, Hobhouse – a member of a British family with a

long history of social reform and welfare advocacy – transformed them into public denunciations by publishing them alongside scathing polemics in mass circulated press in the UK. One photograph in particular became an iconic marker of the inhumanity of the camps, though at the time detractors of the reform movement contested the veracity of the image, thus casting doubt on some of the claims made against the camps. The photograph of a severely emaciated Lizzie van Zyl, a girl Hobhouse met in the camps, was used by her supporters in London ‘to appeal to the conscience of the country’ (Hobhouse, in van Reenen 1984: 52), while Hobhouses’ critics claimed the photograph was an image of a child whose mother neglected her (*ibid.*: 163–64). Despite or perhaps because the photograph generated much public debate, Hobhouse’s publishers were overcome by a sense of propriety and blocked her from including Zyl’s picture in her book *The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell* (*ibid.*: 164). This photograph exemplifies the ways in which pictures can become iconic, polemical tools, and what will remain a constant concern for humanitarians: the ethical representation of suffering.

Famine as a media event

Famine has been a recurrent theme and focus for humanitarian activities in Africa and a scene for archetypal iconography. Humanitarian organisations have used photography to raise awareness about human suffering resulting from food shortages since the early days of the medium. The famine of 1866–68 in Algeria is likely the first in Africa in which photography was used to raise concern for dying children (Taithe, 2010). Monseigneur Charles Lavigerie, the archbishop of Algiers, developed an international media campaign against the French government, drawing attention to the mistreatment of Algerians (while also deliberately confusing what was essentially a food distribution problem with a natural disaster). Early photographs were reproduced as engravings for mass circulation. The point of translation between photograph and wood block print offered an opportunity for editorialising (see Figures 7 and 8). Upon transformation into print, certain features of the malnourished child were accentuated for added effect (Figure 9). The selection of which characteristics to accentuate also revealed a lack of knowledge at the time of the signs of severe malnutrition associated with what today would be recognised as kwashiorkor. The exaggeration of physical stress is the visual parallel of the written descriptions of suffering explored by Laqueur (1989). Many of the media practices and visual tropes generated during the famine (and more especially the 1876–78 Madras famine and, later, the 1921–22 Russian famine) were repeated, reinforced and intensified in the following decades. All of us recall the hyper-mediated famine in Ethiopia in 1984, or perhaps further back to the 1967–70 Biafra famine, with the thousands of images of starving African children embodying the perfect synecdoche effect of photography: a whole group embodies an entire continent.

This ‘iconographication’ is the result of the repetition of visual tropes by humanitarian actors and also by photographers and other media creators. Photographers may exhibit strong moral convictions, but they operate within an industry and economy that makes it difficult to avoid ‘easily recognisable’ stereotypical photographs. This iconography of famine is paradoxical, because in the claimed act of raising awareness of the suffering malnutrition causes, the causes of famine – those things that ought to be addressed in order to prevent, alleviate or end famine – are overlooked or ignored. Theories such as that put forward by Amartya Sen (1981)



Figure 7: Lizzie van Zyl, who died in Bloemfontein concentration camp. Photograph attributed to Mr. De Klerk. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LizzieVanZyl.jpg>.



Figure 8: Photograph of starving people during the famine in Algeria in 1869. Don V. Largeau. L'illustration, *Journal Universel* states 'after the photographs of M. A. Sarrault'. Courtesy of the French National Library. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b77020325/f1>.

positing that dominant political and economic forces strongly influence the causation and perpetuation of famines are widely accepted today. But until the last half of the twentieth century, the political dimensions of this phenomenon were not apparent or well understood, and thus not the focus of humanitarian campaigns.



Figure 9: The famine in Algeria, L'illustration, Journal Universel, 1868. Vol. 51, p. 412. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015012314996;view=1up;seq=432>.

For missionary humanitarians in particular, the legitimacy of their work depended on the development of worthy recipients of care, rather than action against the causes of suffering. Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of SCF, famously wrote about the need to depoliticise famine through the figure of the innocent child in order to engage an anti-Bolshevik English audience during the Russian famine (Gorin, 2014). Narratives such as these dominated media campaigns and their visual accompaniments throughout the twentieth century, amplifying the dependency of victims, their innocence, their ignorance, their latent (or, if pushed, actual) barbarism, and their general exotic ‘otherness’, to the point that these representations – along with the alternative ‘positive’ image of the grateful recipient – have become the dominant way in which humanitarian action has been understood. By the end of the twentieth century, photographic representations of famine were magnifying the limits of the medium: as articles on famines explored their political, social and environmental complexities, so the camera continued

to be trained on emaciated figures (Campbell, 2012). Such critical awareness has translated into a creative challenge for image producers.

Considerations and conclusions

Photographs are inimitable and immediately affective sources of raw information for distant spectators to make sense of humanitarian action as a concept and as a set of practices. That photographs appear straightforward in conveying meaning is part of the medium’s appeal, but it also opens it up to easy manipulation. Photographs present a wealth of information, but ‘they are weak in intentionality’ (Berger, 2013: 66). Photographs obtain meaning and force only once they are incorporated into narratives, usually through captions and other textual contexts. In looking at humanitarian photography with the perspective of history, it becomes apparent that photography provides different information than written documents: they contain information that is out of the author’s control, including traces of past thoughts and knowledge. While photographs contain a wealth of information on material facts, they also contain links to otherwise unrepresentable ideas and deep-seated beliefs that reflect and have shaped humanitarianism. Photographs are at once affective, evidentiary and illusory. Photographs from the visual archives and practices represented here become a prism through which are refracted humanitarianism’s sense of self, its publics and its subjects.

Humanitarianism has always been predicated on visuals; it is hard to think of it without bringing to mind a collection of pictures. To a great extent, however, the mental catalogues from which such pictures are pulled tend to be interpreted on a rather shallow historical level. Recent controversies over a ‘re-emergence of development porn’ and a focus on the commercial capitalist practices around humanitarian appeals can often be traced to historical roots or at least to historical counterparts or precedents that can be highly informative for the present context (Hilary, 2015). As traditional recipients of aid take more leadership roles in humanitarian action, and as humanitarian discourse shifts to a more participatory tone, a broader and deeper perspective on the forces and legacies inherent in photography is indispensable.

To locate this deeper level of knowledge requires an understanding of the shifting meaning of photographs

and photography over time. As the historical cases show, humanitarians and their organisations recognised early on the political and economic power of photography. The medium continued the work that had been done until that point by illustrations, paintings and ‘graphic’ language. For roughly 150 years, humanitarians have been resituating photographs into new contexts for a variety of ends by captioning and including them in various narratives to alter their evidentiary and rhetorical force. Humanitarians used – and continue to use – photography as a form of communication to raise awareness of events and conditions, to generate sentiment and stimulate responses and to build recognition of crises, victims and heroes.

An analysis of humanitarian photography that combines history, anthropology, critical theory and media analysis can draw out nuances in the trajectory of humanitarianism. Understanding that ‘humanitarian imagery is *moral rhetoric* masquerading as visual evidence’ (Fehrenbach and Rodogno, 2015: 6; emphasis in the original) is important for humanitarian historians and policy developers. To comprehend this type of photography as ‘politically and morally charged terrain’ renders them objects of critical reflection rather than only objective evidence or sentimental appeals (*ibid.*). In tracing the contexts and exploring the meanings of photographs, patterns of thought become apparent, and uncomfortable truths emerge. A careful unpacking of humanitarian photography can reveal legacies of thought and subtle hegemonies that shaped humanitarian action and contributed to the development of (limited) options for public responses, ones that have become increasingly commercialised and privatised. In today’s ‘globalised’ world, there is hope that an alternate humanitarian photography might emerge that includes, or follows, perspectives from traditionally subaltern groups. But it is not just a matter of handing over cameras to

people in the global South, as the chances are that their images will ultimately have to conform to the scopical regime of the mass media industry (Campbell, 2009; Jay, 1988). Rather, adding variation to the visual landscape and increasing critical engagement with what is circulating within it might hold more promise. Recently, much hope has been placed on social media’s ability to democratise the field of vision, but such expectations overlook the realities of the ongoing digital divide that excludes many social and cultural groups from ‘new media’ participation (da Silva Gama, 2013).

A critical, historical approach to considering photography is vital for developing an understanding of humanitarian photography, and contributes to more nuanced understandings of humanitarianism. Humanitarian action has indeed bettered the lives of many, but it has also been articulated to imperialist notions of progress and civilization, has perpetuated social hierarchies and has capitalised on relationships with donors at the expense of subjects. While humanitarian organisations have participated in the development of policies and guidelines on the use of photography, violations persist, raising doubts that codes or guidelines are sufficient to ensure respect for victims. Rather than trying to guide the aesthetics or content of photographs, the historical material presented here might best be used in discussions and debates on the ethics of humanitarian photography. At the very least, the historicisation of humanitarian photography can place those discussions within their larger social and political context, thus rendering humanitarian photographs a platform for engaging in critical debate on the future of humanitarianism. The importance lies beyond making and sharing pictures: it lies in talking about what they mean. The importance is in putting into focus those biases, histories, cultural systems and social structures that shape ways of seeing (Berger, 1972).

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4 Controlling sleeping sickness amidst conflict and calm: remembering, forgetting and the politics of humanitarian knowledge in Southern Sudan, 1956–2005

Jennifer J. Palmer and Pete Kingsley

Introduction

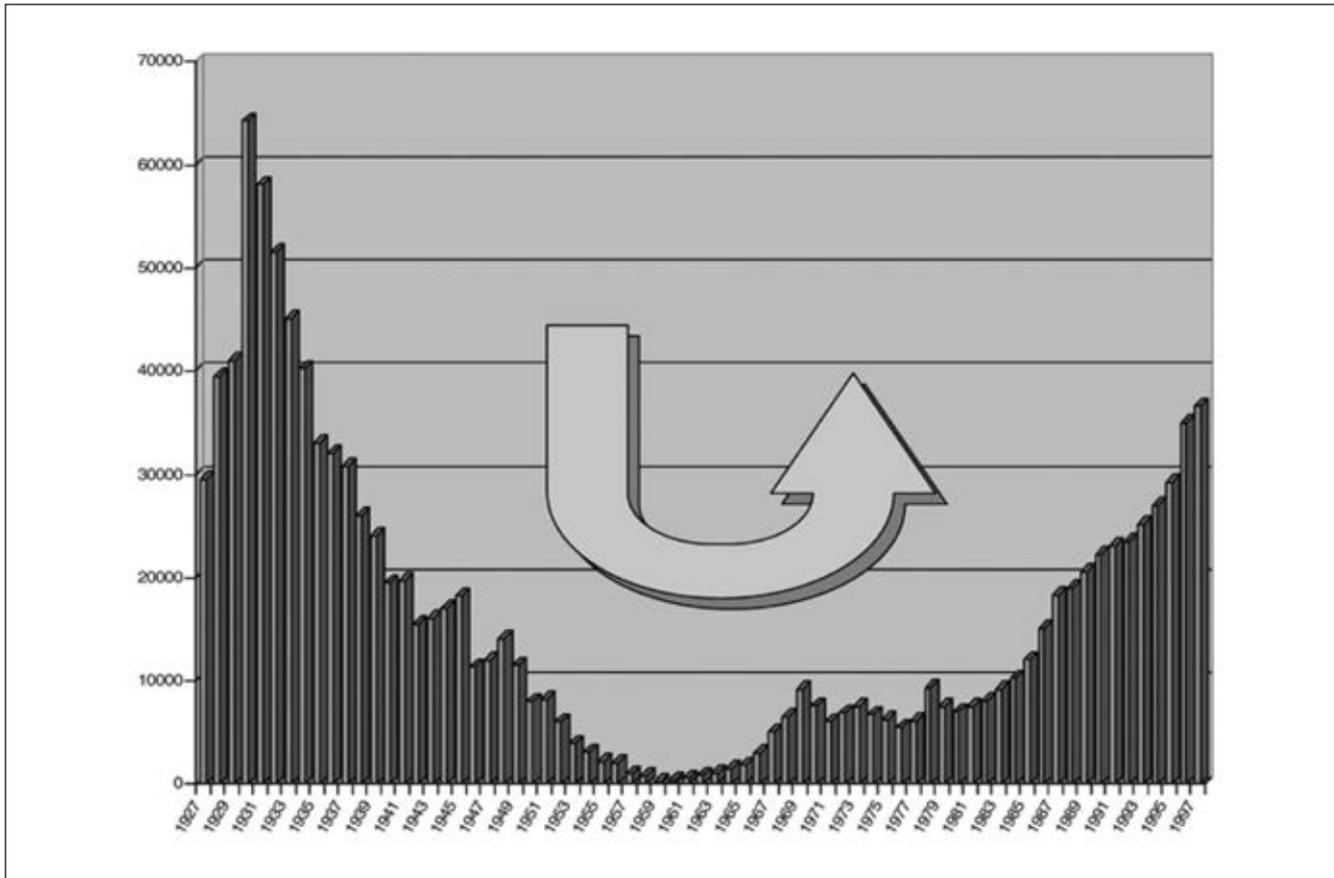
Sleeping sickness (human African trypanosomiasis) is a parasitic disease spread by the tsetse fly across a large belt of Sub-Saharan Africa. It is one of the great stories of success – and failure – of public health in the twentieth century. Nearly all conventional histories, such as those found in project proposals written by international organisations or in World Health Organisation (WHO) documents, begin by recounting the story of the disease’s ‘U-shaped’ curve on graphs depicting reported cases on the continent over time (see, for example, Simarro et al., 2008; WHO, 2013; Ruiz et al., 2008; Figure 1, page 28). Although the curve takes different forms in individual endemic countries, this emblematic continental graph conveys a particular message about the history of this disease, which has had far-reaching consequences on how disease control is understood today.

Sleeping sickness is often seen as a quintessential colonial disease (Lyons, 1992): with a continental peak of 60,000 cases in 1930, controlling the disease and its tsetse fly vector were core imperial priorities. Control of the most prevalent form of sleeping sickness, *gambiense*, was achieved through a succession of strategies involving coercive measures that reflected broader patterns of political domination: forced resettlement, denuding of land supporting tsetse, years-long internment of patients in isolation centres,

treatment with extremely toxic medicines, punishments for chiefs that did not present their populations for medical inspection and mass prophylactic injections.¹ Today, the most well-known method from this period is medical inspection (now referred to as mass or active screening) by mobile teams operating in Central Africa. Designed by military physicians to achieve near 100% population coverage, this strategy worked so well, so the story goes, that Africa came close to eliminating the disease by the 1960s and found itself at the bottom of the ‘U’. The near-success of elimination coincided with independence for many African states, however, and these new governments had other priorities, but also wanted to distance themselves from the coercive practices associated with colonial methods (De Raadt, 2005). Control programmes thus collapsed. When sleeping sickness resurged to its second peak of over 30,000 annual cases during the civil wars in Central Africa in the late 1990s, contemporary histories recount how medical humanitarian organisations, particularly Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), were the only actors with sufficient interest and means to re-engage with the disease (Corty, 2011). This second continental epidemic was successfully controlled, again via mass

¹ Sleeping sickness control by colonial authorities in Southern Sudan has been reviewed by scientists involved in these colonial programmes (Maurice, 1930; Bloss, 1960) and by historians since then (Bayoumi, 1979; Bell, 1999; Leonardi, 2005).

Figure 1: 'U'-shaped epidemiological curve of sleeping sickness cases in Africa, 1927–97



Source: Simarro, P. P., J. Jannin and P. Cattand (2008) 'Eliminating Human African Trypanosomiasis: Where Do We Stand and What Comes Next?', *PLoS Med* 5(2): e55.

screening. Revitalising this strategy involved creating a global logistical supply chain to bring diagnostic tools and medicines which had been improved in the meantime from Europe to rebel strongholds in Angola, Sudan, Uganda, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the Central African Republic. Whereas colonial public health programmes had struggled to secure compliance from recalcitrant African populations, for humanitarians the main struggle was with the pharmaceutical companies that produced the medicines needed to control this deadly but commercially unviable disease. But the lessons for history became clear: active screening is the best – indeed, the sole – strategy to control HAT in Africa.

Whilst this general narrative makes a strong case to focus minds and resources for control, it also conceals various important heterogeneities and inconsistent logics in the sleeping sickness story from place to place and over time. This is a problem germane to disease control in Africa. Lessons from past disease control initiatives on the continent, despite their long history and large scale, have remained largely unarticulated

or misconstrued and therefore unable to inform contemporary efforts (Webb and Giles-Vernick, 2013). Programme planners generally 'have not sensed a first imperative to understand the worlds in which their projects would operate', tending rather to assume that there was no need to do so because the disease was well understood biomedically (*ibid.*: 1). This failure to take socio-cultural and geographic contexts into account still plays a critical role in global health today. Given the essential role of humanitarians in controlling sleeping sickness in the most recent continental epidemic it is important that we clarify, with the benefit of hindsight and the space to do so outside of an outbreak and conflict situation, exactly how they selected disease control priorities from the range of different options available, and the assumptions on which that choice was based. Further, we ask how the era of humanitarian intervention marked a break from the colonial past, and what the continuities were. And, most importantly for the purposes of this collection of papers, what does the history of sleeping sickness reveal about the nature of humanitarian actors and

their ability to carry out complex, long-term projects such as continental disease control?

To explore these issues, we track the development of this story in a single place, Southern Sudan, over the period 1956–2005. This case is chosen in part because it represents a ‘ground zero’ in terms of the dominance of humanitarian actors – Southern Sudan’s two civil wars (1955–72 and 1983–2005) meant that state capacity for health care and disease control was extremely limited throughout this period, leaving international agencies free to act with an unusually broad mandate. In theory, with the civil war beginning a year before independence in 1956, continuities between the colonial and humanitarian systems should be easier to identify in Southern Sudan. As well as being of historical interest, we believe that this case is significant for modern priorities. Since the end of the civil war in 2005, most humanitarian organisations have ceased their involvement in sleeping sickness control, leaving the task to a network of other types of global health actors.

Although this paper does discuss the perspectives of those witnessing or receiving humanitarian assistance, it is not primarily an attempt to reconstruct a view of humanitarian actors ‘from below’. Such histories are valuable, particular as they offer a counterpoint to dominant humanitarian narratives. We believe however that the specificities of Southern Sudan require a different approach, not least as the fractured, multi-actor nature of intervention in this country (formerly a region of Sudan) has meant that there may be less of a clear, dominant narrative to overturn. Instead, we identify which actors carried out what activities, and the reasons and assumptions that led them to pursue those strategies in an institutional and intellectual history of sleeping sickness in Southern Sudan. Understanding the decision-making of dominant actors is central to a critical history of this period, and allows reflection on those ideas and histories which may have fallen out of favour, or been silenced or overlooked.

We begin with an outline of the events of the colonial period, which prefigure in important ways the period under discussion. Whilst this period involved widespread use of coercive methods, there were also other more holistic strategies, in which medical and environmental approaches were combined, along with broader attempts to encourage agricultural development. The remainder of this paper traces trends in disease control through the three dominant

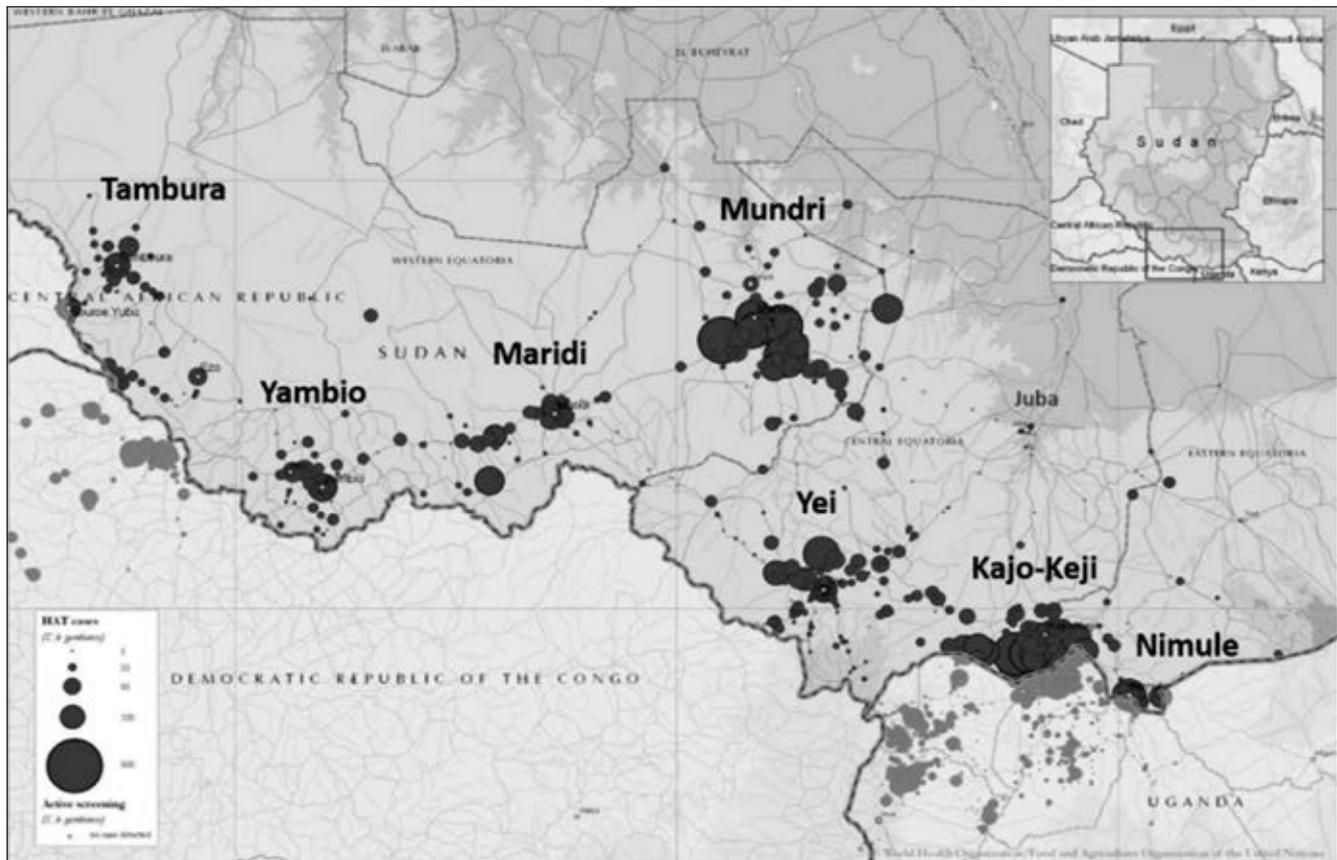
organisations active in sleeping sickness here. The World Health Organisation (WHO) was the dominant actor in the 1950s – where it pursued a medical strategy that continued some colonial measures, but tended to ignore vector control. The suspension of conflict in the 1970s provided WHO with a second opportunity to intervene, but its ambitious plans were thwarted by logistical difficulties. The Belgian Development Cooperation (1978–90) and MSF (1995–2005) then became active, particularly in experimenting with new forms of diagnostic tests and treatments. Significant successes were achieved with new medical tools and strategies, but again vector control remained largely neglected.

To tell this story, we use substantial archival material alongside interviews with key individuals to reconstruct the history of sleeping sickness control in Southern Sudan. Specifically, we consulted the WHO archives on Sudan (for material covering the period 1926–95), the South Sudan national archives in Juba (1931–78), the Rift Valley Institute’s Sudan Open Archive (1860–2009), Durham University’s Sudan Archive (1950–70), Tvedt’s 2004 annotated bibliography of Southern Sudan (1850–2004), the Belgian Development Cooperation’s archive (1978–91) and one NGO archive (Merlin 1996–2010), as well as relevant academic literature. We supplemented this material with 18 interviews with experts familiar with the subject, mostly active or retired NGO workers and civil servants.

Colonial sleeping sickness administration and resistance (1910–54)

Sleeping sickness was most likely introduced to Southern Sudan in colonial times. Soldiers, labourers and traders are thought to have carried *gambiense* sleeping sickness from ancient endemic foci in West Africa into the Belgian Congo and then into the Lado Enclave and Uganda from the late 1880s (Lyons, 1992; Bell, 1999; Morris, 1960). Based on extensive epidemics in neighbouring Uganda and Congo, sleeping sickness was feared by Anglo-Egyptian administrators and preventive control measures were implemented before any cases were detected. Border tours by British scientists in 1904–1905 identified no human cases (Bayoumi, 1979; Bell, 1999), but medical inspection posts were nevertheless established at road and river borders in 1909 to turn away or quarantine

Figure 2: Map showing major sleeping sickness foci in Southern Sudan



Source: Simarro, P. P. et al. (2010) 'The Atlas of Human African Trypanosomiasis: A Contribution to Global Mapping of Neglected Tropical Diseases', *Int J Health Geogr*, 9.

Figure legend: Location of sleeping sickness cases from Southern Sudan (Western, Central and Eastern Equatoria States, which made up the greater Equatoria Province, as it was formerly known, in dark red) and neighbouring countries (in pale red). Spot diameters correspond to the approximate number of cases reported to WHO from individual villages between 2000 and 2009. While the relative numbers of cases from each sleeping sickness focus has changed with time, all foci established in the colonial period continue to yield cases today. Important minor foci include Source Yubu and Ezo within the larger Tambura area, Li Rangu and Nzara within Yambio, Ibba within Maridi, Lui within Mundri and Kiri within Kajo-Keji.

travellers. That year, cases of sleeping sickness were imported with soldiers through the Congolese border in Raga near Darfur, but without a tsetse vector capable of carrying this type of sleeping sickness in the area local transmission was never established (Bloss, 1960). It was only in 1910, after the Anglo-Egyptian government took control of part of the Lado Enclave containing the present-day sleeping sickness foci of Yei and Kajo-Keji, where cases were thought to have occurred since 1885 (Bell, 1999), that Southern Sudan inherited an epidemic of sleeping sickness (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Another sleeping sickness focus at Nimule was brought into the country in 1914 when colonial authorities adjusted the border east of the Nile for the express purpose of simplifying international medical governance of this riverine disease (Leonardi, 2005; Merckx, 2000). Sleeping sickness eventually spread with *G.f. fuscipes* tsetse

to the margins of its existing habitat, incorporating Tambura, Yambio and Maridi to the north-west in 1918, 1923 and 1941, respectively, and to Mundri, Torit and the outskirts of Juba in the 1970s as fuscipes habitat expanded north-eastwards during the first civil war^{2, 3}. All of these foci continue to yield cases today.

2 See WHO reports: Hutchinson, M. (1975) 'Assignment report: trypanosomiasis in Southern Sudan'; Snow, W. (1983) 'Assignment report: Tsetse distribution and ecology in relation to sleeping sickness in Southern Sudan, May–June 1982', WHO archives SUD-MPD-005.

3 *Rhodesiense* sleeping sickness, which mainly infects cattle, has been clinically suspected in several areas of Southern Sudan at different points in history (Tambura during the colonial period, Akobo during the 1970s, Torit in the 1970s and 1980s and suburban Juba in 2010) (Abdel Gadir et al., 2003; Adamson, 1978; Archibald and Riding, 1926; Baker, 1974; Bell, 1999; Hutchinson, 1975; Leak, 1999; Mohammed et al., 2010; Picozzi et al., 2005; Ruiz et al., 2008; Snow, 1983). Apart from Akobo at the Ethiopian border, however, human cases have never been confirmed.

Figure 3: Annual numbers of sleeping sickness cases detected in Southern Sudan, 1911–2010

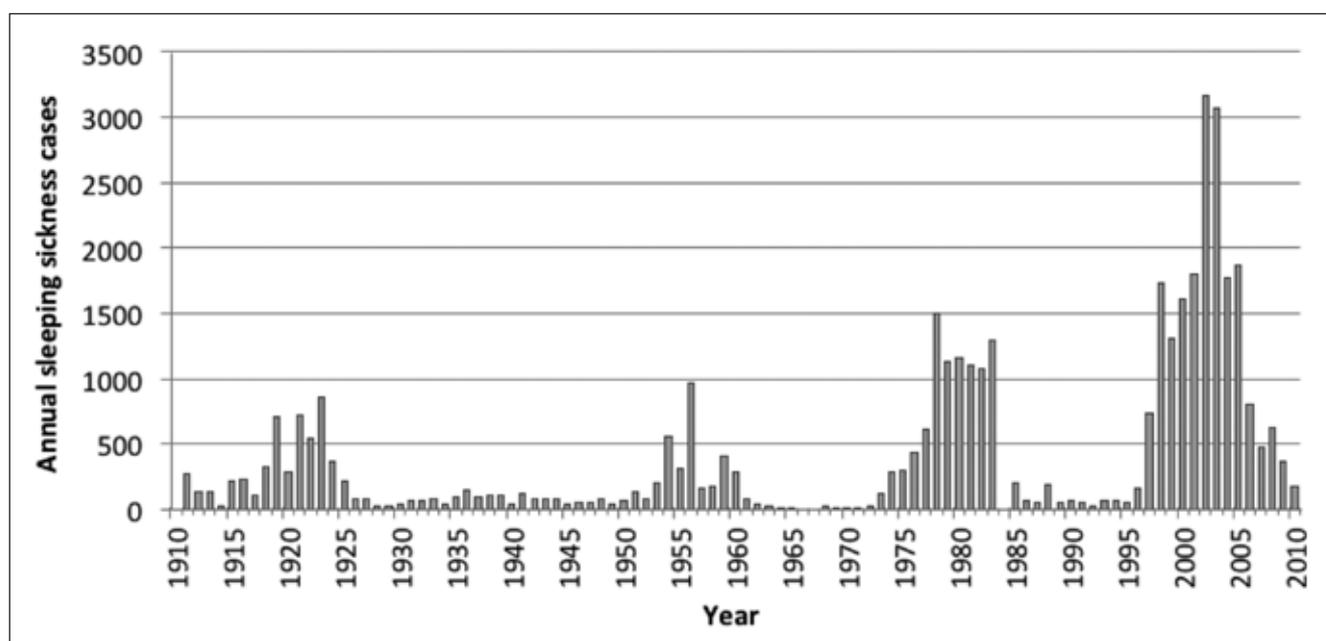


Figure legend: The four major outbreaks of sleeping sickness in Southern Sudan over the last century correspond with four main events: the spread of sleeping sickness throughout the continent in the early part of the twentieth century, an outbreak associated with a cotton scheme in Yambio in the 1950s, and then two more outbreaks which began ‘silently’ while civil wars curtailed control activities. The figure depicts only reported cases, with case detection limited by surveillance capacity, which differed over time. National case data from 1911–97 was taken from WHO (2000), 1998–2005 from WHO (2007) and 2006–2010 from WHO communication, presented with permission of the Ministry of Health of South Sudan. No cases were reported during 1984, but data on hospital admissions to Li Rangu hospital in the Tambura focus suggest that around 700 cases were identified there alone (El Rayah, 2003).

As Southern Sudan represented the northern limit of *gambiense*-transmitting tsetse habitat in the continent, this region was typically viewed by British administrators as a place where concerted environmental and medical intervention could beat back the disease entirely, out of Sudanese territory (Bell, 1999; Morris, 1961). Such intervention, however, would require much greater engagement with the south, beyond the existing reaches of the Anglo-Egyptian administration. Previously seen as economically insignificant and politically unstable, the threat of sleeping sickness is arguably what made the remote south of Sudan matter in Khartoum, drawing administrators ‘out of colonial enclaves and into the lives of local people’ (Bell, 1999: 29).

During the first two decades of colonial control, measures were typically implemented as if they were military campaigns, reflecting the choices commonly implemented in countries where the epidemic was more advanced. Borders were closed, tsetse areas were mapped and whole populations were moved away from the most infested areas, typically onto roads cut for the purpose of sleeping sickness inspections. Historians have highlighted the

coercive nature of these interventions, which involved forced inspections and the lengthy confinement of suspected patients (Bell, 1999; Leonardi, 2005). Later, however, more consensual methods emerged. As the epidemic moved into the remoter, forested areas of Tambura and Yambio, where state resources were particularly stretched, treatment camps were transformed into self-sustaining communities. Here, sleeping sickness patients were encouraged to move with their families, who could provide labour that was otherwise unavailable to the state to grow food for the increasing numbers of patients and to cut back tsetse habitat along the 10km stretch of river in the isolation area (Bell, 1999). Perhaps most importantly for colonial administrators, these isolation centres provided an unprecedented opportunity for development of the South. Dubbed ‘model villages’, sleeping sickness control here allowed administrators to live alongside affected people, both to ‘know’ them, as anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard sought to do (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Gilles, 1976), and to introduce modern systems of social organisation. Here, wage labour was introduced alongside large-scale agriculture, market trading, medicine and education – the kind of development previously only attempted

in places like the Gezira cotton scheme in the north. With their strong harvests and access to salt via colonial supply lines, these settlements were tolerated, and even attracted Zande people from across the Congolese border (Bell, 1999).

By 1937, a decade after the country's first major epidemic, a relaxation in population control for sleeping sickness was justified in epidemiological, economic and environmental terms. The 1940 Sleeping Sickness Regulations introduced a system of medical passports so that border traffic was no longer prohibited altogether.⁴ Inspections were less frequent. Preparations began for a Southern cotton scheme around Yambio, which would necessitate opening up tsetse habitat for farming, overriding the sleeping sickness concerns of the previous three decades. For medical personnel who had any lingering fears, a new more efficient method of vector control had emerged in Kenya which promised to avoid the 'irksome restrictions' on people's lives that resettlement and inspections entailed (Bloss, 1960; Hunt and Bloss, 1945: 57). This new 'block clearance' method involved clearing only small (800 x 200-yard) sections of tsetse habitat along rivers to confine flies' flight to blocks which could be surveilled by boys paid to catch flies.⁵ Trials of the new method showed rapid and large-scale fly suppression. They were even combined with a system of prophylactic suramin injections in an attempt at sleeping sickness elimination in Tambura and Kajo-Keji in 1937–41, but the drug was expensive and medical personnel argued that tsetse suppression would have a more sustainable effect on transmission.⁶

This preference for environmental over medical methods of control was at odds with medical opinion in other *gambiense*-affected areas of Africa. By the 1950s, globally, sleeping sickness control was increasingly being discussed in terms of elimination because of the success of mass screening and treatment activities in neighbouring French Equatoria and West Africa (Buxton, 1949; Morris, 1961). Pentamidine was also being used prophylactically to protect people from transmission between screening rounds in French

Equatoria and the Belgian Congo (Muraz, 1954).⁷ As early as 1948, Southern Sudan was considered a promising site for future research on this strategy because of the robust hospital infrastructure that had been built up in endemic areas (Buxton, 1949). Thus, when a large-scale resurgence seemed inevitable in the new and economically important Yambio cotton scheme in 1954, even though the cause of the outbreak was framed in terms of increased contact with tsetse, medical inspections with pentamidisation emerged as the favoured intervention choice over tackling the vector (Bloss, 1960; Bayoumi, 1979).⁸ The governments in Juba and Khartoum therefore asked the newly-formed WHO for an expert with pentamidisation experience.⁹

WHO elimination 'success' and reconstruction failure (1955–78)

As independence neared, mutinies erupted across Equatoria in 1955, igniting the first civil war (Gilles, 1976). For sleeping sickness control, the external partnership brokered with WHO the year before to support pentamidisation was fortuitous. For one thing, it allowed the external financing of pentamidine administration on top of the medical inspections and treatment activities which the Anglo-Egyptian government had always financed, and guaranteed continued Sudanese government commitments via this international agreement. Second, through consultancies and formal positions in the WHO regional office, it allowed some of the departing British colonial administrators an avenue to return to Southern Sudan to see through the sleeping sickness control plans they had helped put in place. There were further examples, for better or worse, of the continuity of colonial arrangements from an earlier period. At WHO's insistence, sleeping sickness programmes regained remarkable administrative authority in the name of disease control: Equatoria Province decreed that prophylactic injections were compulsory; chiefs

4 See WHO reports: Hutchinson, M. (1975) 'Assignment report: trypanosomiasis in Southern Sudan'; Snow, W. (1983) 'Assignment report: Tsetse distribution and ecology in relation to sleeping sickness in Southern Sudan, May–June 1982', WHO archives SUD-MPD-005.

5 Anonymous, 'Annual report 1939: special report on sleeping sickness', national archives EP 96.A.1.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Farrell (1954) 'Sources Yubu annual report 1953/54', Durham University Sudan Archive H. B. M Farrell collection, SAD.627/5/11-22..

8 This was also partly on the grounds that vector control would be more difficult to apply in Yambio than in Tambura or Kajo-Keji, because of the diffuse habitat.

9 E. Haddad, 'Trypanosomiasis control project Sudan: report on visit to Sudan 9 April–28 June 1955', report to WHO, WHO archives Trypano1-EMRO-Sudan.

were instructed to prosecute in court those who did not attend inspections and conscript them into hospital labour; all government soldiers in the southern region, even those in non-endemic areas, received two rounds of pentamidine; and international borders were policed for anyone not yet been given pentamidine.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the vector control measures that had previously gone hand in hand with drug administration ceased. While those within Sudan had maintained to the end of the colonial period the idea that elimination would necessitate tsetse control, under international WHO leadership pentamidisation was selected as the sole strategy needed for both control of acute outbreaks and ‘permanent’ control in areas with residual transmission (Haddad, 1955).

By 1962, scientists at WHO’s first meeting of the Expert Committee on Trypanosomiasis declared pentamidisation a success, writing: ‘It can now be said with certainty that *T. gambiense* in the Sudan will be eradicated within a year’.^{11, 12} But while reported cases had indeed declined substantially, sleeping sickness was almost certainly not gone in 1963.¹³ WHO’s withdrawal of support that year was more likely related to the intensification of the Southern conflict and the dysfunctional post-independence politics in Khartoum (Cockett, 2010). With the consolidation of rebel movements in 1963, conflict in Equatoria became entrenched and expanded to the other Southern provinces. Simultaneously, large numbers of expatriates were expelled from the country, including many missionaries who had been providing the majority of non-governmental support to healthcare in the South (Cockett, 2010). After WHO’s withdrawal, Sudanese hospital staff continued sleeping sickness control as best they could with remaining stocks of medicine, but the ability to screen patients systematically largely collapsed.¹⁴

When Sudanese President Jafaar Nimeiri switched allegiances to Western, and particularly US, actors in 1971, a peace agreement with the South swiftly followed, ushering in the country’s first full-scale, Western-led humanitarian response. Most scholars consider this moment as marking the emergence of welfare privatisation in Southern Sudan as Khartoum sought to contract-out social services to international agencies (Large, 2012; Johnson, 2011). UN plans for rehabilitating the South after 17 years of war entailed funnelling \$20 million in the first year alone to 180,000 refugees and 500,000 people displaced internally by the war. Faith-based organisations were influential in drawing global attention to a suspected resurgence of sleeping sickness at the end of the war.¹⁵ This resurgence was in the same south-western area that WHO pentamidisation campaigns had focused on at the beginning of the war, but advocacy at this time did not frame the problem in terms of a failure of strategy. Rather, humanitarians focused on the urgent need to address the epidemic of ‘madness’ reported from ‘areas hard hit by the disturbances’.¹⁶ They pointed to the apathy of neighbouring governments in tackling the problem in refugees and criticised British pharmaceutical companies for stopping production of sleeping sickness drugs for use in the UK’s former colonies (L’Etang, 1975). At the request of the Sudanese government, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) therefore granted sleeping sickness control its own \$81,000 budget line, with WHO expected to fund the difference and work out the details.¹⁷

The WHO regional office supporting Sudan (the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (EMRO)) responded quickly, drafting a comprehensive proposal incorporating state of the art serological and parasitological diagnostic technologies forecast to cost \$193,000 over three years (see Table 1 outlining other elements of WHO plans).¹⁸ Although ambitious, the plan stopped short of proposing elimination, which was no longer considered feasible.

10 ‘Agreement between the World Health Organisation and the Government of Sudan for a trypanosomiasis control project’, 1955, national archives Zande District SS file 1953-78, ZD 96.B.1.

11 K. R. S Morris (1962) “Addendum” to “The relation of trypanosomiasis to agricultural, forestry, veterinary and other activities in the Sudan”, report to WHO Expert Committee on Trypanosomiasis, WHO archives, Trypano1-EMRO-Sudan.

12 Pentamidisation was later discredited as having little protective effect against new infections and even inhibiting case-detection efforts by masking parasitemia (Pepin and Labbe, 2008; Stanghellini, 1999).

13 Forty-three and 20 cases were reported in the last two years of the programme from Yei and Tambura, respectively (Hutchinson, 1975, report to WHO).

14 Hutchinson, 1975 report to WHO.

15 Letter from M. Louise Pirouet to Roelsgaard (1972) and P. L. Giacometti (1973) ‘Assignment report: Public health advisory services in the Southern Sudan, communicable diseases, 20 January–12 May 1973’, WHO archives, Trypano1-EMRO-Sudan.

16 *Ibid.*

17 R. Moltu to S. A. Abier (7 September 1972) ‘Unicef assistance to South Sudan’, national archives, High Executive Council, HEC.90.A.1.

18 Regional Director EMRO to L. Bernard (1973) ‘Proposal for trypanosomiasis control project in Southern Sudan under FT arrangements financed by UNHCR’ and associated correspondence, WHO archives, SUD-MPD-005, 13/04/1973.

Table 1: Key elements of WHO's post-war sleeping sickness reconstruction plans (1970s)

1. Lab personnel training in: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Serological diagnostic methods (capillary haemagglutination, latex agglutination, immunofluorescence)• Parasitological diagnostic methods (identification of parasites in body fluids using simple microscopy and in buffy coat isolated through centrifugation)• Animal inoculation and blood culture diagnostic methods
2. Treatment at hospitals and field stations
3. Establishment of mobile screening teams
4. Pentamidine chemoprophylaxis campaigns
5. Census of population at risk
6. Entomological, socio-economic, epidemiological and cost-benefit studies
7. Coordination with neighbouring country sleeping sickness programmes, liaison with WHO reference labs
8. Design of long-term control programme

Table legend: Information comes from plans and correspondence in the WHO Southern Sudan sleeping sickness file 1973–83. Not all control programme elements appeared in all WHO plans and individuals debated the appropriateness of particular elements (such as chemoprophylaxis) throughout the decade.

The plan, however, never really materialised, despite visits by WHO personnel in 1973, 1974 and 1978, and the director of sleeping sickness at WHO headquarters personally redrafting it in 1976.¹⁹ Individuals within WHO were some of the most vocal critics of this failure; two European staff assigned to work on the programme in Maridi and Yambio eventually resigned in exasperation at ‘administrative delays’.²⁰ One of the main problems appeared to be the year-long wait at Port Sudan customs for lab equipment and supplies, which crippled screening and capacity-building activities.²¹ By 1978, sleeping sickness in Yambio had become so acute that one WHO staffer argued they could no longer wait for external assistance, highly trained personnel or a ‘magic screening formula’.²² In this case, the staffer recommended relying on only the simplest and swiftest techniques (mainly cervical lymph node puncture) which had already been proven during colonial and WHO pentamidisation campaigns. This recommendation furthermore fitted in with a new framing for sleeping sickness which WHO promoted through the 1980s

around integration of control activities into primary healthcare structures,²³ part of a wider institutional focus on rural primary healthcare (WHO, 1987).

Others in Yambio were also critical of WHO’s seeming inability to mount a response. An international NGO working in Yambio, Caritas, for example, had been reporting cases to WHO since 1973. In the absence of the promised UN intervention, Caritas had resorted to borrowing sleeping sickness equipment and drugs from the Belgian Development Cooperation (BDC)’s bilateral programme in neighbouring Zaire (Akol, 1981). Belgian scientists brought in from Zaire were scathing of the WHO response, estimating that the delay had cost 3,000 new infections at a price of \$1.2 million, which the Belgian government now had to fund (Akol, 1981).

The Southern Regional Government, at least in the most affected areas, also found ways of making do without the technologies of the UN programme by returning to interventions known from the colonial period. Between 1975 and 1977, at the request of Yambio area chiefs, the Commissioner of Western Equatoria initiated a series of radical environmental and population control measures, framed as a national duty in the ‘War against Sleeping Sickness’.²⁴

19 Regional Director EMRO to P. de Raadt (19 February 1976) ‘Revised plan of operation for a trypanosomiasis control project, Southern Sudan’, WHO archives, SUD-MPD-005.

20 See Hutchinson’s 1974 and 1975 reports and various correspondence in 1975–76 in WHO archives, SUD-MPD-005; see also Binz’s 1975 and Lapeysonnie’s 1978 reports in WHO archives, Trypano1-EMRO-Sudan.

21 L. Lapeysonnie (1974) ‘Report on a visit to Sudan: 3–30 June 1974’ report to WHO-EMRO, WHO archives, SUD-MPD-005.

22 L. Lapeysonnie (1978) ‘Assignment report on human trypanosomiasis control in Southern Sudan: December 1977–March 1978’, report to WHO, WHO archives, Trypano1-EMRO-Sudan.

23 *Ibid.*; see also WHO correspondence from 1983 with German primary health care programme in Equatoria, WHO archives, CTD/TRY T7/360/6.SUD.

24 D. Tek to Inspector Local Government’s Office Zande District Yambio (30 November 1977), national archives, Zande District SS file, ZD 96.B.1.

Strategies included financial penalties for people who did not attend inspections or absconded from treatment (when it was available), making it illegal for Zairean traders who could be infected to sell in Sudanese markets and compelling chiefs to clear tsetse habitat from streams and citizens to clear bushes from around their compounds. A sleeping sickness tax was levied to fund these efforts.²⁵

Reimagining and relegating fly control

From this point on in Southern Sudan, WHO appears to have given up pursuing the idea of direct provision or financing of sleeping sickness services, as planned in the immediate post-war reconstruction period. Instead, the main activities it engaged in over the next decade were epidemiological and entomological assessments of sleeping sickness risk associated with development and humanitarian interventions. Investigations at Ture forest station near Kajo-Keji, a plantation in Maridi, a proposed cattle ranch at Loa and camps for Ugandan refugees near Nimule, for example, all paid considerable attention to how changes in the natural environment could influence transmission.²⁶ A WHO entomologist deployed to the Belgian programme in the 1980s furthermore sought to revisit and reimagine colonial tsetse control methods that could be applied there.²⁷ In Tambura, the ‘blocks’ along rivers where tsetse habitat had been cleared in the late 1930s near the town were identified and recleared. Rather than recruiting boys to catch flies by hand, the entomologist designed a trial of insecticide-impregnated cloth targets to attract and kill flies – the first for control of *G fuscipes* in Africa.²⁸ In Yambio, where resettlement or pentamidisation were previously the only control

options considered, detailed entomological and human screening surveys suggested that most transmission occurred at particular wells dug in the forest. Medical screening therefore incorporated a team of people on bicycles to erect and maintain fly targets around these specific hotspots.

This disease control contribution by WHO was important given the Belgian programme’s restricted geographic focus to areas bordering Zaire (mainly Yambio and Tambura) and, particularly, their prioritisation of medical responses. Unlike in some West African settings, however, where tsetse trapping gained popularity because the French Office of Scientific and Technical Research Overseas (ORSTOM) promoted vector control as an alternative to coercive screening methods in the 1970s, trapping was not taken up in a major way here (Laveissiere and Penchenier, 2005). By and large, these WHO assessments and plans gave rise to little substantive non-medical activity (see Table 2), with vector control typically consigned to a supporting role. Entomological surveys, for example, were characterised in WHO reports as only useful to delimit an area needed for medical intervention or to increase its efficiency by decreasing the number of repeated population screenings needed to control disease.

As the humanitarian crisis grew over the next decade, vector control fell even further out of favour. Although Merlin later led a trapping project in Tambura in 1997 (Joya and Okoli, 2001, Moore and Richer, 2001), subsequent proposals to expand the programme to Yambio and Maridi went unfunded (interview with NGO staff, 2006), reflecting uncertainty about the economics of vector control in humanitarian interventions across the continent (Trowbridge et al., 2001; Shaw, 2005). A similar pattern seems to have prevailed in the 1980s, when UNHCR officials declined to fund a vector control programme requested by Ugandan refugees in Yei (Harrell-Bond, 1986: 58, 333). Moreover, environmental considerations and vector control recommendations are noticeably absent from any of the WHO sleeping sickness assessments that have taken place in the last three decades.²⁹

25 By the time of another WHO visit in 1978, SDG 300 had been raised for this fund by leaders WHO staff characterised as ‘enthusiastic but inexperienced’ in sleeping sickness control (Lapeysonnie, 1978 report to WHO). WHO staff evidently felt responsible for offering guidance so that these funds would be spent efficiently, but further information on either the guidance offered or how these funds were eventually spent is unavailable.

26 See reports by Hutchinson (1975), Lapeysonnie (1978) and Snow (1983 and 1984) in WHO archives, SUD-MPD-005 and Trypano1-EMRO-Sudan.

27 Snow, 1984 report to WHO.

28 Unfortunately, because records stop, it is unclear whether this planned trial took place. Merlin records, however, suggest that the fly-boys from the colonial period were rehired for a short period to teach hand-catching techniques.

29 See, for example, reports by Ranque and Cattand (1995) to WHO in WHO archives, Trypano1-EMRO-Sudan; reports by Ruiz (2005) to Merlin and Postigo (2009) to WHO in the Merlin archive, as well as published assessments by Ruiz-Postigo et al. (2012) and WHO (2004).

Table 2: Inter-war medical survey and vector control work recommended by WHO and implemented, by focus

Sleeping sickness focus	Type of medical screening recommended	Type of vector control recommended	Activities successfully implemented (by 1990)
Tambura	As precautionary measure (1975)	Exploratory survey (1975), depletion trapping (1983), habitat clearance around streams in towns and trial of screens (1984)	Partial medical screening with CATT, some depletion trapping by fly boys
Yambio	As emergency control measure (1975)	Exploratory survey (1975), aerial spraying by helicopter (1978), depletion trapping (1983)	Full medical screening with CATT, entomological surveys, study of water source-related infection risk, elaboration of new Yambio-specific vector control method focused on wells, sticky screens pilot
Maridi	Exploratory (1975)	Depletion trapping (1983)	Partial medical screening via lymph node palpation
Yei	As precautionary measure (1975)	Exploratory survey (1975)	
Kajo-Keji		Exploratory survey (1983)	Partial medical screening via lymph node palpation
Juba area (incl Rokon, Loka, Sindiru)	Exploratory (1983)	Exploratory survey (1983), aerial survey of tsetse habitat	Partial medical screening via lymph node palpation.
Nimule	Spot surveys (1975) and as precautionary measure (1984)	Exploratory survey (1975, 1984)	
Torit	Exploratory (1983)	Exploratory survey (1975, 1983)	Partial medical screening via lymph node palpation.
Akobo	Spot surveys (1975)		

Table legend: Information comes from correspondence found in the WHO archive, particularly reports written by Hutchinson (1975), Lapeyssonie (1975 and 1978) and Snow (1983 and 1984), as well as correspondence in the Belgian and Merlin project archives.

Belgian medical tools in a humanitarian space (1978–90)

Throughout the 1980s, serodiagnosis and treatment was the mainstay of the BDC's control strategy in Southern Sudan. Modern serodiagnostics, a category of simple agglutination assays which screen for antibodies associated with infection, rather than the parasite itself, and thus require no laborious microscopy, were introduced into routine practice in Southern Sudan in the early 1980s – before anywhere else in Africa. Ironically, although serodiagnosis was primarily developed by

Belgian scientists in the 1970s (Magnus et al., 1978; Wery et al., 1970), it could not be used in formerly 'Belgian' areas of Africa, namely Zaire/Congo, where the BDC had a large programme, until the mid-1990s because of ideological opposition (interview with former BDC staff, 2015). Since Zaire was the most endemic country in Africa, it also possessed the largest number of experts (both Congolese and Belgian), who were convinced through long experience that sleeping sickness could be most efficiently controlled through traditional microscopy. Deployment in the cross-border satellite Belgian programme in Sudan, however, allowed less experienced Belgian doctors, some of whom had recent

training at the tropical medicine institute in Antwerp, to take up new innovations such as the serodiagnostic card agglutination test for trypanosomiasis (CATT test). The Sudan programme became a kind of haven for Belgians who did not fit into their own country's programmatic culture in Zaire. Similarly, doctors from this programme reported some of the first field observations of today's late stage sleeping sickness drugs, nifurtimox and eflornithine (Van Nieuwenhove et al., 1985; Van Nieuwenhove and Declercq, 1981).

WHO global technical reports from this period suggest a reluctance to endorse these technologies for use in country programmes without wider validation (particularly of the medicines (WHO, 1979, WHO, 1986)). By 1983, however, the BDC's demonstration of CATT test feasibility contributed to a change in global thinking. To WHO, the CATT test promised an even better entry-point than simple microscopy to attract a wider network of actors into sleeping sickness control under a framework of integrated healthcare, and Southern Sudan was viewed as politically stable enough to host such a pilot project. The re-emergence of conflict shortly afterwards, however, appears to have moderated some of this enthusiasm (for example, a proposed large-scale bilateral German investment went unfunded). Rather, under BDC leadership and the support of a new national control programme office in Juba, staff in existing NGO-supported hospital-based programmes across the rest of Equatoria were trained and equipped to do passive detection and treatment, but only using simple microscopy. Even with BDC help, the logistics of using the CATT test in this new conflict setting were deemed too difficult.

For individuals in the Sudanese government, the BDC's use of unconventional technologies appears to have justified rare moments of programmatic regulation or interference in a collaboration which otherwise functioned effectively to win international support. In 1985, for example, the Ministry of International Health in Khartoum threatened to close the BDC programme upon discovering they were using unapproved medicines (which the Southern government condoned for compassionate reasons).³⁰ In contrast, a perceived unfairness in access to the BDC technologies was behind an investigation by the Southern government.³¹ In 1986, the Provincial

Governor of Western Equatoria, reportedly tired of international organisations taking unilateral decisions, colluded with an ex-employee of the Belgian programme to embellish reports of a sleeping sickness outbreak in Maridi neighbouring the BDC programme to embarrass the Belgians and demand more attention from the government. A key finding of this investigation was popular demand for tsetse control.

An emphasis on vector control, as well as expanded screening coverage of foci across the Equatoria region, was therefore among the objectives in the Southern-supported BDC's proposal for a five-year extension of its programme in 1988.³² Development officials in Brussels, however, declined to renew the programme in a bid to consolidate the BDC's sleeping sickness work in Zaire and Rwanda. For reasons never known to project leaders on the ground, the programme continued to receive unofficial support, and the centres in Yambio and Juba were able to keep basic medical screening activities going for another two and a half years until fighting reached project areas in December 1990 and the team evacuated to Zaire (interview with former BDC staff, 2015).

Humanitarians and the new best practice (1990–2005)

From 1986, MSF began to lead its own sleeping sickness interventions for displaced Southern Sudanese in Uganda. Individuals encountering sleeping sickness during this period felt themselves to be operating in a vacuum, without good tools or guidance on best practice (Corty, 2011; d'Alessandro, 2009). In one hospital, MSF staff systematically conducted lumbar punctures on patients to prove to themselves that the Belgian CATT test could be trusted (a practice known from, but not followed since, the colonial period and contrary to longstanding WHO advice) (Interview with researcher associated with MSF programme, 2015). Eventually MSF engaged in a large global research and advocacy programme around medical innovations for sleeping sickness. Many of these (the CATT, eflornithine and nifurtimox) were being used in Southern Sudan, but on a small scale or informally. MSF emphasised transforming systems to support their use: validating tools in formal clinical trials

30 J. Vermer to Forman (13 November 1985), WHO archives, T7-370-6SUD [translation].

31 C. Lado to Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (1987) 'Trip report to Western Equatoria, 17–27 Jan 1987', Belgian Development Cooperation (BDC) archives.

32 Anonymous (1988), '[Project fact sheet: sleeping sickness control project in Sudan]', BDC archives.

so that they could be endorsed by WHO and more easily accepted into national programmes, pressing manufacturers to commit to producing medicines and diagnostics at scale and establishing a strong, sustainable global logistics supply chain (Corty, 2011).

Unlike during the war of the 1960s and 1970s, humanitarian organisations including MSF were eventually able to mount a robust response which far exceeded WHO's 1995 proposal for a renewed network of basic integrated care providers.³³ As we discuss elsewhere (Palmer et al., 2014), the need for complex tools and expertise to control sleeping sickness was one of the factors that attracted MSF to the disease. Through a programme of clinical and operational research, much of it carried out in Sudan itself (Chappuis, 2002, 2004; Balasagaram, 2006, 2009; Maina, 2006, 2007; Priotto, 2008, 2012; Checchi, 2012), MSF developed a system of good practice adapted to the Sudanese context and others like it. Over time, MSF became the global thought-leader on what was considered most ethical in a humanitarian sleeping sickness response. By demonstrating this practice and sharing its tools, MSF drew in other actors to multiply and sustain the response, including international organisations such as Malteser (in Yei since 2002) and Merlin (in Tambura in 1997 and Nimule since 2005), which are still present in endemic areas today. From the early 2000s, the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), the humanitarian arm of the Southern rebels, became involved in coordination. After the end of the war in 2005, the Neglected Tropical Diseases Directorate within the Ministry of Health was formed partially because of the need to coordinate such large-scale responses to sleeping sickness (interview with Ministry of Health, 2014). In contrast, the substantial expertise in tsetse control developed by Khartoum-based academics (e.g. Mohammed et al., 2010), was taken up by neither humanitarian actors during the civil war period nor the Southern government afterwards.

As a medical organisation, it should not be surprising that MSF preferred a primarily medical approach to control, based on population screening and treatment. MSF has never strongly advocated a vector control approach to sleeping sickness (Corty, 2011), and many of the colonial-era approaches, such as

forcible resettlement or the taxing of endemic areas to fund control, as advocated by Yambio chiefs in the 1970s, would be antithetical to its humanitarian principles. That said, when MSF first engaged in sleeping sickness control among refugees from Sudan in 1986, its response was strongly influenced by the work of a colonial French military doctor and Nobel Prize nominee, Eugene Jamot (ASNOM, 2001; Louis et al., 2002; Milleliri, 2004). Jamot's systematic population screening strategy was a good fit with the organisational culture guiding MSF's emergency medical interventions at this time, which sought to adapt innovations from emergency and military services (Vidal and Pinel, 2011). MSF's understanding or assessment of local and continental sleeping sickness history was thus specific to its preferred way of working: Jamot had shown that sleeping sickness control was best done via mass screening and the epidemic MSF was seeing could be explained by war interrupting Belgian activities. More mass screening was thus the answer. This is important given that many of MSF's norms related to sleeping sickness control have been adopted by others and persist beyond the acute conflict phase today (Palmer et al., 2014).

Conclusion

The tumultuous political history of Southern Sudan has meant that efforts to control sleeping sickness there have been both unique and uneven. Be it prophylactic injections, insecticide-treated targets, serodiagnostics or new medicines, we have discussed many examples of how, in periods of both conflict and calm, Southern Sudan was seen as an ideal place to test new strategies because of the right combination of endemicity, infrastructure and willing actors. It is also a history that complicates in important ways the general story of sleeping sickness in Africa. For instance, a common narrative is that the post-colonial period saw disengagement with sleeping sickness control on the part of post-independence African governments, largely because they disliked the coercive practices of colonial administrations (ASNOM, 2001; De Raadt, 2005; Pepin and Labbe, 2008; Laveissiere and Penchenier, 2005). Yet in the Southern Sudanese case, many of the more intrusive practices had been relaxed by the colonial authorities by the late 1930s: it was WHO-led ideas on how elimination should be pursued that led to the reintroduction of large-scale population restrictions. The contingencies of the first civil war meant that these measures could not be pursued at scale, but local

33 P. Ranque and P. Cattand travel report to WHO (1995). Several contemporary reviews of these interventions exist (Moore, 1999; Moore and Richer, 2001; Trowbridge et al., 2001; Pagey, 2003; Ruiz-Postigo et al., 2012; Ruiz et al., 2008).

government authorities nonetheless did what they could to continue these practices, particularly when neither the national government nor international organisations were present to respond to local sleeping sickness control needs. Punishment (of various kinds) for people who did not attend screenings (and their chiefs) continued until at least 1978. Even today, Zande chiefs in the Tambura area have the authority to impose fines on people who do not keep paths to their homes clean (Allen, 2007).

As well as contributing to a more nuanced narrative of sleeping sickness in the twentieth century, the Southern Sudan case has implications for the ways in which we think about the capacities, blind spots and limitations of international humanitarian actors. If the main story, as we have argued, is the progressive medicalisation of the response to the epidemic, and the neglect of vector control, what are the assumptions that have underpinned that perspective? And what does this reveal about the nature of humanitarian intervention in Southern Sudan and elsewhere? We propose that there are three more general issues that demand further reflection: the pattern of successive actors taking control, an increasing exclusion of indigenous perspectives and knowledge and a preference for portable technologies.

Firstly, the fact that the above narrative can be divided relatively straightforwardly into periods delineated by different dominant actors – the colonial era, the WHO era and so on – is itself revealing. The outbreak and cessation of war led to the involvement of different actors at different times, mostly notably with WHO most comfortable and capable of acting in times of calm, whilst MSF gained momentum – and spurred major innovations – in periods of conflict and crisis. As different actors came and went, interest was lost not only in vector control, but also in schemes which integrated disease control and agricultural development. If it is a truism that development and humanitarian actors often fail to adequately learn from historical examples (Davey et al., 2013; Porter et al., 1991), this is especially so when institutional turnover is so marked. It is, after all, harder to learn from the mistakes of others.

This difficulty in securing long-term continuity of knowledge and planning is, ironically, at odds with discussions of the role of NGOs in Southern Sudan in other histories. Tvedt, for instance, argues that the long-term presence of international actors had

a ‘crowding out’ effect as ‘NGOs unintentionally contributed to the erosion of the authority of a very weak state’ (Tvedt, 1998: 189). Others have expressed concern that the size and longstanding presence of aid would have a distorting effect, perhaps even contributing to a political economy of conflict (Duffield, 1993; Duffield, 2002; Macrae et al., 1997). Thus, whilst humanitarian actors tackling emergencies have sometimes been accused of causing problems by staying too long, the very different timescales involved in long-term disease control mean that even decade-long interventions end up being too short. Ultimately, this may be a limitation of any humanitarian aid: perhaps only nation states are fully capable of the multigenerational learning and planning necessary to comprehensively tackle complex diseases.

A second revealing feature of this era is the extent to which methods of sleeping sickness control were determined predominantly according to external priorities, rather than sustained consideration of what had worked (or not) in the past. What is so striking about the progressive medicalisation of sleeping sickness control in Southern Sudan, is that, with all of the country’s attractiveness to test new innovations, the shift took place seemingly with very little circling back to examine strategy, or reconsideration of the benefits of alternative methods. The clearest example of this is WHO’s decision to use pentamidisation as a solution to the second Sudanese outbreak defined by actors on the ground as a problem of increased contact with tsetse because of cotton scheme resettlements. Then, when WHO re-entered a decade later, their approach to the third epidemic focused on laboratory capacity-building with seemingly little reflection on whether and why pentamidisation had failed, or whether tsetse control might be appropriate (see Table 3). In rare cases where actors did attempt to rethink their approach (for instance, at various points with WHO in the 1970s and 1980s, the Belgian Development Corporation in 1988 and the unfunded Merlin proposal in 1997), such dissenting perspectives conspicuously failed to find purchase. This seems all the more striking in comparison with, say, the vigorous and wide-ranging debates regarding HIV and Ebola control strategies.

How can this seemingly single-minded pursuit of a narrow strategy be accounted for? We argue that it is related to the weakness of Southern Sudanese institutions. Whilst there have long been powerful actors in global health, social scientists have regularly highlighted the ability of African nations, professionals

Table 3: Sequence of theories about sleeping sickness outbreaks and the predominant control strategies

Outbreak	Theories about cause	Control measures taken
1920s	British: Spill-over from neighbouring countries	British: Border control, isolation of communities and patients, tsetse habitat destruction, mass screening
1950s	British: Population resettlement to support agricultural scheme	British: Mass screening with pentamidisation
1970/80s	NGOs and WHO: Chaos of war and apathy of international actors	Local government: Tsetse habitat destruction WHO: Capacity-building for lab systems Belgians: Mass screening with new diagnostic
1990/2000s	NGOs and WHO: Interruption of Belgian mass screening programme	MSF: Mass screening with improved global support

and publics to deflect and modify global agendas (for a theoretical framework see Ong and Collier (2005), and for recent examples see the essays in Geissler (2015)). However, Southern Sudan represents an extreme case given the prolonged and serious weaknesses of organised capacity to modify and resist programmes ‘from above’. In this sense, the chains of decision-making by international actors that we have described offer a glimpse of global health and humanitarian processes in their purest, least attenuated forms.

This relatively unchecked globalism is assisted, we argue, by a set of rhetorical moves that emphasise Southern Sudan as an ahistorical, unknowable space, one easily conceived of as a blank slate. For instance, in modern policy discussions it is often suggested that, whilst the limited institutions of the new South Sudan state are obviously a developmental weakness, this situation nonetheless provides an opportunity for addressing problems unencumbered by the inertia of pre-existing bureaucracies and priorities.³⁴ This trope (almost a cliché, such is the frequency with which it is repeated) may be true in certain circumstances, but was paradoxically also a view that was seemingly shared by past actors. By ignoring a long tradition of vector control-centric and integrated developmental approaches to sleeping sickness, actors reveal a tacit assumption that little significant prior work had been done, and that little relevant local knowledge or capacity existed.

This reluctance to engage with (or simply ignorance of) the prior histories of disease control goes hand in hand with a third key trend – a marked preference for portable technologies that avoid political

entanglements. By portable, we mean ‘humanitarian goods’ in the sense of both tangible products that provide relief or care of some kind (of which a serodiagnostic tool is a key example) or programmatic strategies (such as mobile teams with prophylactic pentamidine) that avoid the need to build systems and infrastructures. Like other humanitarian goods, such as nutritional food additives (Scott-Smith, 2013), diagnostic tools and mobile teams offer the prospect of a technical humanitarianism which need not engage with longer-term questions of planning, livelihoods and sustainability. As Peter Redfield has argued, MSF’s preference for standardised methods, kits and mobile teams ‘represents a mobile, transitional variety of limited intervention, modifying and *partially* reconstructing a local environment around specific artefacts and a set script’ (Redfield, 2011: 281; emphasis added). Again, the shift from earlier broad approaches to screening and treatment represents both confidence in the power of improved diagnostics and drugs to tackle a problem, but also the reluctance of humanitarian actors to engage more broadly.

In conclusion, we have argued that Southern Sudan has seen an unusual pattern of humanitarian activity in response to sleeping sickness. The progressive medicalisation we have described was not simply an inevitable outcome as technologies evolved – other major African disease control projects such as malaria, and indeed sleeping sickness elsewhere on the continent, have continued to emphasise environmental methods. Rather, the European-driven, medical and technocratic methodology we identify became progressively more entrenched in response to a particular set of circumstances and assumptions. The perception, accurate or otherwise, that Southern Sudan lacks a tradition of disease control and the presence of (or even medium-term possibility for) health infrastructure

³⁴ In the context of neglected disease, see for example (Rumunu et al., 2009; Ruiz et al., 2008;), and in the context of land tenure, see Badiey (2013).

has encouraged actors to focus on global tools over domestic systems.

Much has been achieved in controlling sleeping sickness in Southern Sudan, despite the very unpromising circumstances. We certainly hope this history does not read as a chastisement of successive generations of humanitarians who have acted with great courage and integrity. Instead, we argue that the unique circumstances of this case have rendered

certain widespread trends in humanitarianism particularly legible, specifically the emergence of innovative tools and portable technologies which have the power to heal and care, but also a tendency to displace other approaches and perspectives. Future projects and research, we believe, must engage with history to explore more integrated approaches, in which transnational flows of expertise and resources can be more precisely calibrated towards the complex contingencies of local need.

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5 Humanitarian discourse and the politics of national liberation: remember Cassinga?

Christian A. Williams

Since 4 May 1978, the day it was attacked by the South African Defence Force (SADF), Cassinga has been a contested site in histories of Namibia's liberation struggle.¹ Within a few days of the attack, news had spread around the world about the raid on 'the refugee camp' of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) in southern Angola, which left over 600 people dead and hundreds more wounded, many of them women and children. Meanwhile, the apartheid South African government argued that Cassinga had been a 'military camp', and hence a legitimate target. Namibian independence and the fall of apartheid have had little obvious impact on these competing narratives. The 'massacre' of refugees at Cassinga figures prominently in SWAPO's official history of Namibia's liberation struggle even as some former South African soldiers quietly celebrate 'the Battle of Cassinga'. Historical scholarship has complicated these seemingly irreconcilable views, drawing attention to some of the common ground shared between them (see the Bibliography for a selection of this work). But it has yet to extract itself from a powerful humanitarian discourse which presents Cassinga and other camps administered by nationalist movements as 'refugee camps', 'military camps' or some combination of these two labels.

This essay examines the disjuncture between the community of people who lived with SWAPO at Cassinga and dominant representations of this community, drawing from former camp inhabitants' oral histories and related archival sources to develop its point of view. As I argue, by 4 May 1978 Cassinga

was filled with hundreds of people who had fled political violence in Namibia and who were receiving food, clothing and shelter from SWAPO through donations from United Nations bodies and Nordic government agencies. Nevertheless, in presenting Cassinga as a 'refugee camp', international supporters drew it into a binary opposition which distorted the community of people who lived there and obscured the camp's significance for guerrillas who used it to coordinate military operations along the Namibian–Angolan border. The essay highlights this distortion first by describing how Namibians lived at Cassinga, and then by narrating how Cassinga and other camps were represented through humanitarian images and language in the aftermath of the attack. Finally, the essay places Cassinga within a broader discussion of humanitarianism during Southern Africa's liberation wars, highlighting how, and at what consequence, humanitarian and nationalist discourse became conflated in defining liberation movement camps.

Life at Cassinga

To understand how Namibians lived at Cassinga, and why labelling the site a 'refugee camp' or a 'military camp' is misleading, one might begin by viewing the Cassinga parade. Every morning at a set time, Cassinga's inhabitants gathered near a cleared area or 'parade ground' just to the west of the main dirt road running through the centre of the camp. There, they began a ritual which resembled parades at other SWAPO camps. First, camp inhabitants congregated in their respective 'platoons' and 'sections' – groups modelled on units of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), to which they were assigned on entering the camp. These groups then arranged themselves in lines, and after taking attendance

¹ This chapter draws from my book *National Liberation in Post-Colonial Southern Africa: A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially the second chapter, which focuses on Cassinga.



Cassinga parade (NAN/IDAF 12788).

marched onto the parade ground and assembled in designated areas. The camp commanders, individuals assigned by SWAPO to reside at the camp and manage its day-to-day administration, waited on either side of the path leading to the parade together with any senior PLAN officials in the camp at that time. Once the last section had entered, the commanders and other officials proceeded to the front of the parade and faced the people. There, everyone would stand, with some dressed in civilian clothes and others in military uniforms, the latter of which were often worn by youth who were not trained as soldiers but liked to imitate soldiers' dress. Then, after all had performed songs and chants, declaring their allegiance to 'One Namibia, One Nation', commanders would address the assembled.²

Much of the content of commanders' addresses focused on the assignment of work tasks necessary for meeting camp inhabitants' basic needs. For example, camp commanders would announce that,

2 This paragraph draws from informal conversations with many individuals who lived at Cassinga, as well as interviews with Darius 'Mbolondondo' Shikongo (26 March 2007, 11 June 2007, 20 August 2007, 3 September 2007).

on a given day, certain sections were to collect water in buckets from the Cuilonga River, located a kilometre to the west of the camp. Others were sent for wood, available in the moderately forested savanna surrounding Cassinga, for cooking and heating. Still others might be sent to collect grass which, together with wood cuttings, was used to construct housing – especially after the camp's numbers expanded beyond what Cassinga's colonial-era buildings could accommodate.³ Groups were also tasked to work in agricultural fields located between the camp and the river, where maize and other vegetables were grown. Other groups were responsible for cooking, which was done in empty drums in the open air, and for serving meals, which consisted primarily of maize-meal, garnished with available items.⁴ In addition, groups were assigned to create, and later maintain,

3 These buildings had been used to house administrators and workers for nearby iron mines located at or near Techamutete. Cassinga was abandoned with the outbreak of the Angolan civil war in 1975–76. See Heywood (1994); Alexander (2003); Pagano (1979).

4 National Archives of Namibia (NAN), File A.614; UNICEF Area Office Brazzaville, 'Report on a Mission to Swapo Centres for Namibian Refugees in Angola from 10 to 14 April 1978'; Canner Kalimba, Interview, 13 June 2007.

a workplace for a tailor, a garage and a system of latrines.⁵

Parade announcements also involved the administration of two basic services offered to Namibians at Cassinga: health and education. In the camp there was a clinic, where several trained nurses worked and patients were treated. The clinic held supplies of basic medicines, vaccines and first aid equipment, administered to Namibians fleeing into exile and to combatants returning from the frontline of PLAN operations along the Namibia–Angola border. Facilities, however, were rudimentary and serious cases were transferred as quickly as possible to Jamba (50km to the north) or Lubango (more than 250km west), where, by 1977, SWAPO had established camps with better medical facilities.⁶ Classes were also offered aimed at improving camp inhabitants' basic literacy and numeracy skills. As early as 1976, Canner Kalimba established a primary school for children at Cassinga.⁷ Although Kalimba and her pupils were transferred to Jamba in 1977, where resources for a more permanent and better-supplied school were available, SWAPO continued to offer classes to Namibians passing through Cassinga.⁸

The parade was also essential for establishing discipline at Cassinga. The process of disciplining exiles began as soon as Namibians entered Angola, with the assistance of PLAN guerrillas deployed along the border. By the time exiles arrived at Cassinga, they would have spent weeks passing through the network of camps which PLAN guerrillas maintained in southern Angola, and been initiated into camp practices at those sites. Nevertheless, every camp had its own rules and routines, and the parade offered a space in which commanders could articulate them. For example, the commanders informed new arrivals about how time was managed at Cassinga, including when they were expected to wake and sleep, when to eat and when to perform various tasks. Inhabitants were told how and when they might be granted permission to leave the camp and informed that they

were not to leave at night – above all due to the presence of União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA), which, following its defeat at Angola's independence, had withdrawn into the southern Angolan bush, where it continued to pose a threat to the Angolan government and its allies. The commanders publicly denounced those who had broken camp rules, narrating occasions in which Namibians were caught drinking and/or fighting with Angolans in the neighboring village located just across the Cuilonga River.⁹ They also introduced new arrivals to the camp's 'military police', which assembled at the parade as a distinct, identifiable unit, and which was responsible for enforcing rules and meting out punishments, including beatings and detention in a rectangular dugout several metres deep located near the camp kitchen.¹⁰

In all of these activities, Cassinga's commanders utilised aid given to SWAPO by external donors. From the camp's earliest days in 1976, its commanders liaised with Cuban soldiers at Techamutete, the Cuban base located 15km south of Cassinga, who assisted the Namibians with logistical support on an ad hoc basis.¹¹ In September 1976 the Swedish government agreed to supply food and a small cash allowance for 'the Namibian refugees in Angola' (Sellström, 2002). In early 1977 the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) pledged aid for these same refugees, followed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP) and Nordic aid agencies.¹² None of these organisations was directly involved in administering aid at Cassinga; rather, they (with the exception of the Cubans at Techamutete) supplied SWAPO through offices in Luanda and granted the liberation movement the authority to distribute items to Namibians in camps located hundreds of kilometres away in southern Angola. With the exception of a widely cited trip by

5 Jesaya Nyamu, Interview, 3 April 2008; Canner Kalimba, Interview, 13 June 2007; Per Sanden, Interview, 5 February 2008; UNICEF Area Office Brazzaville Mission Report.

6 UNICEF Area Office Brazzaville Mission Report; Ellen Namhila, Interview, 25 July 2008. Iyambo Indongo, a trained Namibian doctor, ran a medical centre at Jamba.

7 Canner Kalimba, Interview, 2 April 2007, 13 June 2007; William Amagulu, Interview, 29 May 2008.

8 Canner Kalimba, Interview, 13 June 2007; Theophilus Kalimba, Interview, 2 September 2007.

9 Mbolondondo, Interview, 26 March 2007, 20 August 2007.

10 Mbolondondo, Interview, 20 August 2007. According to Mbolondondo, the most common punishment at Cassinga was to detain offenders in the dugout for a day or two. Beating, he maintains, was used primarily as a threat to keep people in line.

11 Mbolondondo, Interview, 11 June 2007; Mupopiwa, Interview, 26 July 2008. Cuban military forces entered Angola following the SADF's invasion and shortly before Angola's formal independence on 11 November 1975. See Gleijeses (2013: 65–97).

12 Sellström (2002: 350); Canner Kalimba, Interview, 13 June 2007; ya Nangolo and Sellström (1995: 23–24). Ya Nangolo and Sellström note that other Nordic aid agencies were among the early humanitarian donors to Cassinga.

UNICEF in April 1978, external aid agencies rarely if ever visited Cassinga.¹³ Moreover, they appear to have had limited and inaccurate information about the demographics in the camp and the activities occurring there. For example, UNICEF maintains that it counted between 11,000 and 12,000 inhabitants at the camp in mid-April 1978, a figure which contrasts with figures for the camp cited by SWAPO and South African sources at the time of the attack (4 May 1978), which placed its numbers between 3,000 and 5,000. The report also maintains that Jamba (which the authors misspell 'Djamba') 'is the oldest centre' and Cassinga 'a much more recent centre', despite considerable evidence indicating that Cassinga predated Jamba (Heywood, 1994: 19; Williams, 2010: 228, 249).

Cassinga was also embedded in histories of which most Namibians standing at the camp parade ground were largely unaware. In the middle of 1976, as SWAPO shifted its base of operations from Zambia to Angola following Angolan independence, PLAN's senior commander, Dimo Hamaambo, established an office at Cassinga. By then, hundreds of PLAN combatants had already passed through the abandoned Portuguese settlement at Cassinga, en route from Huambo, where many were stationed in late 1975 and 1976,¹⁴ and the front which PLAN was then establishing to the west and east of Ondjiva. Together with two assistants, Charles 'Ho Chi Minh' Namoloh and Mwetufa 'Cabral' Mupopiwa, Hamaambo began to record information about PLAN operations along the Angolan–Namibian border, including the location, who was involved and who died in combat. The information was filed away in a Portuguese colonial building west of the main road. Logistical matters for soldiers on the border and the accommodation of soldiers passing through Cassinga en route to the border were also arranged from this office. When, shortly after the formation of 'the PLAN office', new exiles from Namibia began to enter Cassinga, Hamaambo established a separate 'camp office' for the camp commanders assigned to administer them. By late 1976 hundreds of Namibians were living at Cassinga, most of them people with no military training who had fled escalating violence in the Ovamboland region of northern Namibia and were reliant on SWAPO for their sustenance

13 UNICEF Area Office Brazzaville Mission Report.

14 Mwetufa 'Cabral' Mupopiwa, Interview, 26 July 2008; Charles 'Ho Chi Minh' Namoloh, Interview, 19 June 2008; Ben Ulenga, Interview, 12 June 2008.

and protection.¹⁵ From this point onwards, most Namibians who lived at Cassinga interacted little with the PLAN office and those administering it – except occasionally at the parade, when Hamaambo and other senior PLAN commanders would join the camp commanders in observing and addressing the inhabitants of the camp.

Creating an image of the camp

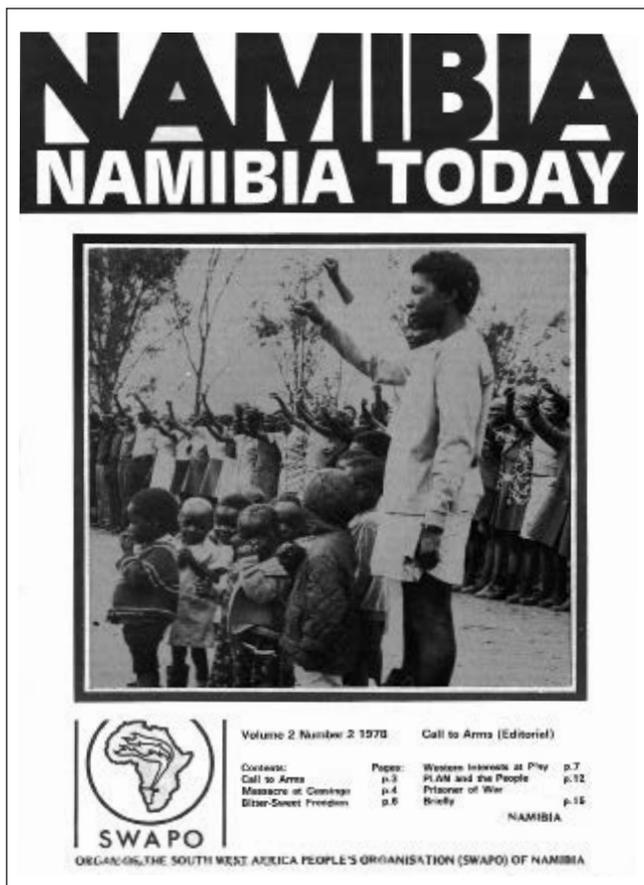
On the morning of 4 May 1978, as Namibians assembled at the Cassinga parade, the SADF launched its attack. From this moment (and, in South Africa's case, even before), SWAPO and the South African government began to marshal evidence about the camp to justify their competing claims about the attack's meaning. Claims revolved around humanitarian language and imagery, with SWAPO and South Africa presenting Cassinga to the world as a refugee camp and a military camp, respectively.

One valuable source of evidence in this unfolding drama was the Cassinga parade. From January to May 1978¹⁶ two Swedish photographers, Per Sanden and Tommy Bergh, travelled with PLAN members through southern Angola and northern Namibia, collecting material for a documentary film commissioned by SWAPO. On 29 April, Sanden and Bergh arrived at Cassinga, filming and photographing activities they observed in the camp, including a parade meeting just before their departure on 3 May.¹⁷ On 4 May, as the SADF began its attack, Sanden and Bergh were about 50km north of Cassinga, approaching Jamba in a PLAN escort. There they remained until the following morning, when PLAN dispatched a detachment of guerrillas to collect Sanden and Bergh's film, transporting it first to Lubango and then to London, where on 6 May the BBC developed some of the film for broadcasting. After returning to Sweden in June, Sanden began to edit the film himself for a

15 Canner Kalimba, Interview, 13 June 2007; Theophilus Kalimba, Interview, 2 September 2007; Namoloh, Interview, 19 June 2008; Mupopiwa, Interview, 26 July 2008; Nyamu, Interview, 3 April 2008, 12, 17.

16 The timing of the visit of the 'Swedish journalists' is recorded in documents housed at the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) Documentation Centre in Pretoria. See HSOPS/310/4 Bruilof, 'The 8th Minutes of the Military Council', 4 January 1978. The meeting appears to have taken place at Mongolia camp and the minutes appear to have been captured by the SADF during its 4 May attack on Cassinga.

17 Sanden, 5 February 2008.



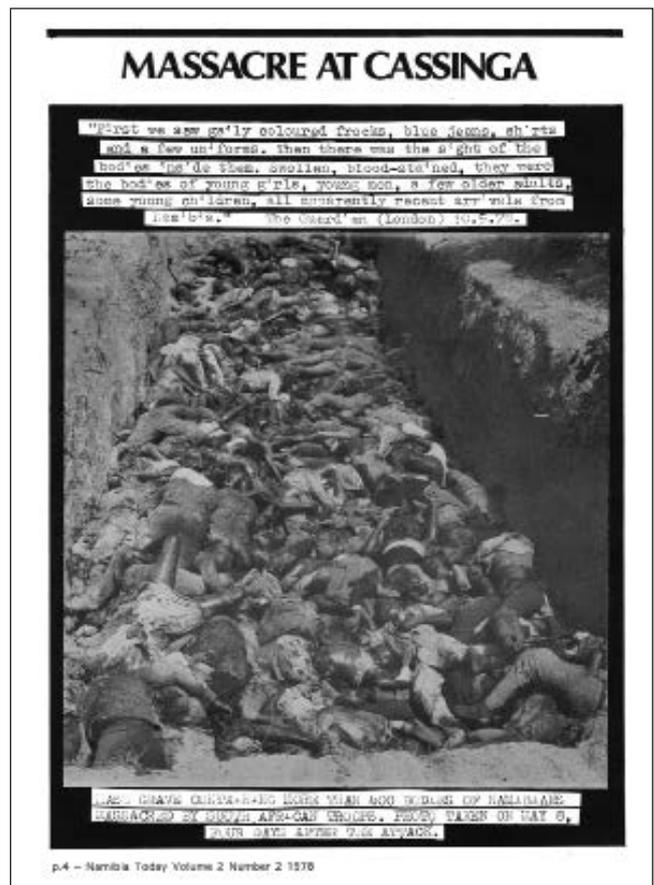
Cassinga parade (Namibia Today; Sanden).

documentary which was eventually released under the title 'Here Is Namibia: Inside the Liberated Areas and Beyond'.¹⁸ The film was screened first in Sweden and then all over the world, winning prizes at documentary film festivals in Leipzig, Amsterdam and Ottawa.¹⁹ It was also cited in solidarity literature as proof that 'Cassinga was a refugee settlement' and that 'there were no military installations and no more soldiers than a small unit designated to protect the settlement' (Alexander, 2003).

At the same time, other photographs came to be associated with claims about 'the refugee camp'. Of these, none overdetermined meaning like images of Cassinga's open mass grave. Consider, for example, the issue of SWAPO's international newsletter, *Namibia Today*, published after the Cassinga attack. The front cover displays a cropped version of one of Sanden's parade photos; page four displays Cassinga's open mass grave. Taken from one of the grave's

18 Sanden, 5 February 2008; Nyamu, 3 April 2008. Sanden also prepared a publication of the same title which was jointly edited by Jesaya Nyamu.

19 Sanden, 5 February 2008.



Cassinga grave (Namibia Today).

rectangular ends, the photo is close enough to the corpses that individual bodies, wounds, articles of clothing and flies are discernible. A quote appearing above the photo, attributed to a foreign eyewitness, directs viewers' reactions by imputing meaning to the bodies in the grave:

*First we saw gaily coloured frocks, blue jeans, shirts and a few uniforms. Then there was the sight of the bodies inside them. Swollen, blood-stained, they were the bodies of young girls, young men, a few older adults, some young children, all apparently recent arrivals from Namibia.*²⁰

This text, together with the grave photo, does more than merely record violence perpetrated by the SADF on Namibians at Cassinga: it also identifies the bodies in the grave as refugees, emphasising the 'civilian' clothes worn by 'young girls' and others, 'all apparently recent arrivals from Namibia'. By making these associations in the context of SWAPO

20 *Namibia Today*, 2, no. 2, 1978. The author of the quoted text was The Guardian's Jane Bergerol.

and the South African government's battle to speak for Cassinga, the caption directs the manner in which this and all other images of Cassinga should be viewed by those opposed to the apartheid regime. In turn, Sanden's parade photograph is reduced to one more piece of evidence demonstrating the violence perpetrated on innocent 'refugees' at Cassinga.

For its part, the South African government went to great pains to produce evidence that might appear to confirm its reading of the camp. Although this evidence presented Cassinga as a military camp – the antithesis of a refugee camp – its arguments revolved around the same humanitarian distinction. Consider, for example, the statement which the South African government issued on 5 May 1978 to the governments of the United States, Canada, Britain, France and West Germany, the so-called 'Western Five' then in the midst of intensive negotiations with South Africa and SWAPO over the timing and terms of Namibian independence. After introducing the brief with an account of 'border violations by terrorists' that were supposedly undermining efforts to achieve 'an internationally recognized solution in South West Africa', the document describes Cassinga thus:

As expected the SWAPO base headquarters, Cassinga ... was an extensive SWAPO military instillation [sic], it contained formidable defence works such as trenches, bunkers and underground shelters. It was established beyond doubt that this base constituted SWAPO's main operational centre, responsible for over-all planning, logistics, communications and strategy ... The SWAPO personnel included women, in uniform, fully armed and actually fighting in the trenches. The dead included some of these ... There were also a number of camp followers, including women, who apparently lived in the confines of the base. Some of them might have become casualties. A number of the children who were hijacked across the border on 23 April were found and, at their request, these were going to be taken back. Unfortunately, just as the final evacuation was in progress, an armed attack from the direction of Techamutete occurred ... In these circumstances it was not possible to evacuate the children.²¹

21 NAN, File A.614; UNICEF Area Office Brazzaville Mission Report, Annex I.

As this description highlights, the apartheid government acknowledged that women and children were living at Cassinga, and were among those killed in the attack. However, if these women were 'in uniform, fully armed and actually fighting in the trenches', they could not possibly be categorised as 'refugees', given associations with victimhood and innocence that accompany this label. By contrast, it is the South African military which presents itself to Western allies as humanitarian for, allegedly, attempting to free 'children who were hijacked across the border' – one of the SADF's frequently repeated claims when accounting for the large numbers of youth then fleeing political violence in Ovamboland into southern Angola. It was only the Cuban counter-attack which had prevented the SADF from achieving this humanitarian aim.²²

The South African government and media also employed visual imagery that contrasted with classic images of refugees to promote its representation of Cassinga. For example, when the first news reports about the attack were shown on South African television, photos and film taken by SADF paratroopers during the raid were interspersed with those of SWAPO camps neighbouring Chatequera, including a camp codenamed 'Vietnam'.²³ Vietnam was also attacked by the SADF on 4 May as part of the same military operation, which the SADF dubbed 'Operation Reindeer'. But Vietnam was located more than 200km to the south-west of Cassinga. The Vietnam footage appears to have been useful for the SADF because Vietnam was better armed than Cassinga, and film of the fighting there included armoured cars, personnel carriers and artillery (Heywood, 1994: 8). Moreover, although the SADF did not capture any prisoners at Cassinga, it did capture about 200 at Vietnam. These prisoners, most of whom were young men and wearing military uniforms at the time of their capture, were photographed by South African journalists flown to Chatequera. These photos

22 Other documents produced by the South African government also make claims about the SADF's humanitarian work during its 4 May attacks. See, for example, the June 1978 issue of the SADF's magazine *Paratus*, which features a photograph of medics attached to the SADF 'treating wounded terrorists'. According to the author, 'after the attack, the doctors and other medical personnel rendered aid to sick people in the "hospital" in the base'.

23 Cassinga also was known by a codename, 'Moscow'.



Prisoners at Vietnam (Mayibuye LA 343-3-2).

appeared widely in South African newspapers' coverage of the 4 May attacks.²⁴

For some viewers, especially white South Africans who expressed their support for the attacks in the press (Alexander, 2003: 162, 165–67), such images may have appeared to offer evidence that Cassinga was indeed a 'military camp', and therefore a legitimate target. It is as SWAPO's 'refugee camp', however, that Cassinga was most widely accepted abroad. Support came quickly from African governments and Soviet-aligned countries supporting SWAPO's armed struggle.²⁵ More significantly, on 6 May, the governments of the United States, Canada, Britain, France and West Germany endorsed UN General Assembly Resolution 428 condemning the attack on Cassinga and threatening punitive measures should

the SADF carry out another operation in Angola (Alexander, 2003: 164). Although the endorsement of the UN Resolution and subsequent statements issued by UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim did not address the 'refugee' quality of Cassinga directly, they did undermine South Africa's efforts to define Cassinga as a legitimate military target among potential allies. Within days of the attack, many governments, human rights organisations and humanitarian agencies had issued statements condemning the SADF attack and associating the word *Cassinga* with *refugee*.

Once South Africa's account had been dismissed and the link between Cassinga and refugee repeatedly asserted, there was little incentive for anyone interested in Namibian independence to examine how exactly Namibians had actually lived at Cassinga, or were then living elsewhere in Angola and Zambia. The label 'refugee camp' constituted these sites as generic objects intelligible to the international community, and which could be used to leverage responses from it, especially in the aftermath of a 'surprise attack' by the widely discredited apartheid regime. From May 1978, SWAPO received unprecedented support in the form of aid sent to its remaining camps and offers from foreign governments (above all Cuba and East Germany) to educate Namibians in their countries. Over the following decade, annual commemorations of 'Cassinga Day' became powerful sites for rekindling

²⁴ NAN, Institute for Contemporary History, 78 F80; 'I Visited "Vietnam" and Saw the Aftermath of the Battle', *Pretoria News*, 6 May 1978. Magdalena Nghatanga offers a similar account of being photographed after her capture at Chatequera in IDAF (1981).

²⁵ On 4 May the Angolan Minister of Defence issued a communique transmitted on the government radio station about the 'criminal attack' against 'defenceless people, women and Namibian refugees' (Alexander, 2003: 161). On 5 May Radio Moscow described the attack on Cassinga as 'a massacre in [a] town where there were several thousand old men, women and children who had fled from the South African invaders' (*ibid.*: 162–63).

commitment to the liberation struggle among diverse communities in Namibia and abroad.

At the same time, the Cassinga story achieved a symbolic power that lent itself to other uses in a Namibian exile community riven with substantial and recurring divisions. Although ‘Cassinga’ has been mobilised to dismiss many controversial Namibian histories and figures, none experienced its stigmatising power more directly than Andreas Shipanga. Imprisoned following a schism that split SWAPO in Zambia in 1976, Shipanga was the most senior SWAPO official to have expressed sympathy with a new generation of exiles whose increasingly vocal criticism of the liberation movement’s leadership culminated in the detention of 11 SWAPO officials and more than 1,000 PLAN guerrillas. In May 1978 Shipanga was incarcerated in Ukonga Prison in Dar es Salaam when he and other inmates first learned through newspaper and radio reports that he had ‘personally led the Boers to Cassinga’.²⁶ Released later that month, Shipanga travelled to the United Kingdom, where he had been granted political asylum, and publicly refuted the accusations made against him. Although the specific Cassinga accusation soon fell out of public discourse, Shipanga and others detained in the so-called ‘Shipanga Crisis’ were widely seen as having betrayed Namibian refugees at Cassinga and elsewhere (Williams, 2015; 2011). Moreover, organisations aiding SWAPO avoided public discussion of unlawful detentions and rumoured killings within the liberation movement, deferring instead to the humanitarian imperative to assist Cassinga survivors and other refugees (Sellström, 2002: 308–37; Soiri and Peltola, 1999: 125–28; Østbye, 2000: 96–102).

During the 1980s, as SWAPO’s mass purge of alleged spies in Angola began to receive international media coverage, ‘Cassinga’ was again central to how SWAPO and many of its supporters responded. From 1985 an organisation known as the Committee of Parents had been exposing SWAPO’s detentions through circulating, and later publicising, stories of their own family members who were among the hundreds detained, tortured and ‘disappeared’ in SWAPO camps outside the Angolan city of Lubango (Williams, 2015; 2013). Organisations in Namibia and abroad dismissed the committee’s claims

26 Shipanga (1989: 142–43); Tangeni Nuukuawo, Interview, 27 May 2011; Immanuel Engombe and Hizipo Shikondombolo, Interview, 12 June 2011.

through reference to the attack at Cassinga and the current needs of Namibian refugees. As Mokganedi Thlabanello, SWAPO’s information and publicity secretary, put it in a press statement in April 1986, the Committee of Parents lacked ‘concern about the plight facing numerous Namibian children’ and was uninterested in ‘children and parents’ killed during ‘South African raids on SWAPO camps in Zambia and Angola, including Cassinga ... “Where was the Committee of Parents then?” he asked’.²⁷ Later, the international community appealed to a report made by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) after a trip to Kwanza Sul, a camp founded in 1978 to accommodate Cassinga survivors and other Namibians in northern Angola. Although the trip had allegedly been taken to investigate abuses in SWAPO camps, the LWF report focused on food distribution, health services and pastoral care for ‘refugees’. It was cited by LWF’s president and others as evidence that ‘the accusations of human rights abuse’ were part of ‘an on-going South African propaganda war’ (LWI, 1988).²⁸

Namibian independence and the end of apartheid have had little impact on these and other memory practices surrounding Cassinga. In 1990, shortly after the repatriation of Namibian exiles, Namibia’s democratically elected SWAPO government declared Cassinga Day a national holiday. Since then, the Namibian government has organised annual commemorations repeating SWAPO’s official narrative of the camp. Women who were teenagers in 1978 and who entered the camp shortly before the attack have figured prominently at these events, speaking repeatedly on behalf of ‘the Cassinga survivors’. These women have also dominated the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation’s radio and television programmes on Cassinga, as well as the textbooks, monographs and exhibitions about Cassinga supported by the Namibian government (ya Nangolo and Sellstrom, 1995).²⁹ As a result, this knowledge production has tended to affirm a dominant representation of Cassinga while obscuring the experiences of individuals whose personal histories are

27 ‘Swapo Hits Back over Atrocity Allegations’, Windhoek Advertiser, 14 April 1986. For further references to Namibian refugees and/or Cassinga in response to the Committee of Parents, see Williams (2012: 71; 2015: 155–57).

28 It should be noted that Kwanza Sul, located far from Namibia’s borders, was a better candidate for the label ‘refugee camp’ than Cassinga had ever been.

29 The text includes 16 transcribed stories of survivors of the Cassinga attack (pp. 38–69). See also Namhila (1997), which contains a widely cited survivor’s account.

incongruent with, or threatening to, the Cassinga story. These include the trained guerrillas who administered Cassinga, whose personal histories I have incorporated above, and a wide range of other Namibians who never set foot in Cassinga but whose fate has become attached to the symbolic power of that site.

Humanitarianism and the politics of liberation movement camps

Humanitarian involvement in Southern Africa's liberation wars did not begin with Cassinga. In the mid-1960s, the Liberation Committee of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was receiving aid at its Dar es Salaam offices from Eastern Bloc countries, including items which it identified as 'humanitarian'. In turn, humanitarian aid was handed to liberation movements representing Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe for distribution among their respective members.³⁰ By 1969 the Swedish government had pledged direct, official humanitarian assistance to internationally recognised Southern African liberation movements, followed by the governments of Finland and Norway in 1973, and various United Nations bodies and non-governmental organisations across the 1970s and 1980s (Sellström, 1999; Peltola and Sorri, 1999; Eriksen, 2000). Although Nordic governments, the UN and Western NGOs spoke of the 'civilian' and 'non-military' purpose of their assistance, aid was often aimed at contributing to a political goal: the liberation of Africans from white minority regimes. As Tony Vaux writes in his contribution to this volume, 'the "solidarity" argument was the trump card in Southern Africa', both because apartheid came to be seen as 'the biggest threat to poor people' and because of increasing international pressure on humanitarian organisations to adopt this position. As a result, political solidarity displaced needs-based neutrality as the guiding principle for humanitarianism in the region, contrasting with aid delivered under the auspices of colonial and apartheid governments.

Humanitarian organisations' solidarity with Southern Africans' political struggles was expressed most definitively in and around the liberation movements' exile camps. Across the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s

thousands of people fled oppressive white minority regimes in their home countries for Africa's recently decolonised 'frontline states'.³¹ Although some of these exiles found refuge in camps administered by the UN or host governments, the great majority lived in camps directly administered by liberation movements, often with little or no oversight from a host nation or humanitarian agency. It is in these camps, which I collectively call 'liberation movement camps', where liberation movements distributed most of the humanitarian aid they received from an international community supporting liberation struggles against colonial and apartheid rule. Like Cassinga, distinctions between camps intended for combatants and non-combatants frequently blurred, and inhabitants were often identified as 'freedom fighters' irrespective of whether they had trained as guerrillas or intended to take up arms. Nevertheless, humanitarian organisations that distanced themselves from liberation movements' military aims did send food, clothing, medicine and other items that were distributed in the hybrid space of liberation movement camps. And some humanitarian literature worked to expand notions of Southern African refugees, emphasising refugees' qualities not as passive victims, but rather as agents who could change their conditions through commitment to a liberation movement, and with support from the international community.³²

Across such interventions, humanitarian solidarity remained deeply embedded in a political system structured around the nation-state. Nowhere was this structure more evident, and its capacity to contradict humanitarian principles more glaring, than in liberation movement camps. From the moment exiles entered a camp they were reliant on those who administered it to access the resources necessary for their survival and for fighting a war. Camp inhabitants were also required to follow the particular rules and routines of the camps in which they were living, including restrictions on their ability to move within and beyond the camp and to associate with other camp inhabitants. Deviations from camp

30 Shubin (1999: 76–77); Helao Shityuwete, Interview, 24 July and 17 December 2010.

31 The 'frontline states' were countries which had been granted independence and which were adjacent to countries still under white minority regimes. They included Tanzania, Zambia, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Following their independence, Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe also became frontline states.

32 See for example the description of the unique qualities of 'Namibian refugees' in UNICEF Area Office Brazzaville Mission Report (p. 26).

rules were met with various forms of discipline, including corporal punishment and detention. Under the circumstances, exiles were highly vulnerable not only to colonial regimes and their allies, which might target camps for attack, but also to the liberation movement officials who administered the camps. Not infrequently, camp officials abused their power to assert their authority and protect their interests.

In this context, humanitarian discourse played a crucial, and largely unrecognised, role in drawing attention away from camp conditions and histories. Although organisations aiding liberation movements often expressed their commitment in terms that eschewed the notion of political neutrality, they continued to work within a discourse on refugees that presented some individuals in some contexts as apolitical innocent lives. In turn, liberation movement officials were empowered to speak and act on their behalf. External donors did not respond uniformly when conflicts within the liberation movements came to their attention, with contentious debates within organisations about how to work with nationalist movements that were both receiving humanitarian aid and committing human rights abuses. These debates, however, and the seminal historical literature on them, worked largely from the premise that conflicts within liberation movements were external to humanitarian groups – and therefore not connected to the manner in which these groups and others distributed aid and mobilised discourse. To paraphrase anthropologist Liisa Malkki, humanitarians had given refugees ‘a voice’, but were not prepared to find out how the very modes of their intervention ‘silenced’ particular refugee histories and

produced generalising, and potentially oppressive, national narratives (Malkki, 1996).

Cassinga offers a dramatic example of how a humanitarian discourse on camps could be mobilised for nationalist ends. As demonstrated, the SADF’s attack on Cassinga drew the camp into a global debate in which supporters of Namibian liberation and the apartheid South African government presented the meaning of SADF violence through opposing sides of a humanitarian binary opposition. In turn, a story about the ‘massacre’ of ‘refugees’ at Cassinga became inseparable from the efforts of the international community to support exiled Namibians through aid to SWAPO. Moreover, it became a central component in Namibia’s history, drawing the suffering of innocent people into the heroic narrative of a nation and galvanising many to unite against their oppressors. These responses certainly achieved humanitarian objectives, strengthening SWAPO’s capacity to improve living conditions among thousands of Namibians living under its care in exile and contributing to the end of apartheid rule in Namibia. Nevertheless, the story of Cassinga refugee camp has remained a national story, detached from personal and local histories and protected from historical critique. It is, therefore, an instructive case through which to consider the limitations of humanitarian solidarity as it developed during Southern Africa’s years of struggle. It is also a productive case from which to imagine the forms of knowledge and critical sensibilities required for any future humanitarianism that may push against nationalism’s grain to protect all people.

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6 Humanitarian involvement in wars of liberation in Africa in the 1980s: an Oxfam perspective

Tony Vaux

Introduction

By the 1980s most of Africa's wars could be described as post-colonial conflicts fuelled or influenced by the Cold War. The superpowers backed their client regimes almost regardless of their policies in relation to poverty and disasters. Direct intervention by Western governments was restrained by fears of provoking Soviet retaliation and escalation, but the superpowers commonly supported rebel groups in countries dominated by the other superpower, creating conditions of widespread internal conflict. This in turn led to hunger, famine and high mortality. International aid agencies stepped forward to take responsibility for these issues.

Many US aid agencies were closely tied to their government's foreign policy, often acted simply as channels for US aid and showed relatively little inclination to challenge the national interest as perceived by their government (Stoddard, 2003). In Europe there was a stronger tendency for governments to protect their aid budgets from political influence. Some aid agencies, including Oxfam, put restrictions on the level of government funding they would accept.¹ Moreover, the proportion of government funding in relation to funding from the public was considerably lower in the 1980s than in subsequent decades. European aid agencies could make claims to be neutral, even though they still received substantial funding from their governments, and used this to argue for access to people on grounds of fundamental humanitarian principles, notably the notion that needs come first (the 'humanitarian imperative') and the neutrality

of aid. The first problem, however, was that the assessment of needs could be manipulated by political forces and had political effects. Second, the question 'which side in a conflict brings most benefit for poor people?' could not be easily dismissed: in some situations the outcome of a conflict would have profound implications for people's wellbeing.

Aid agencies grappled with these problems in different ways in different places. This paper focuses on two groups of wars: the liberation wars in the Horn of Africa, notably Ethiopia,² where the main problem was the manipulation of aid for political purposes by the protagonists and the political effects of providing aid; and Southern Africa, notably Mozambique, where the key issue was whether to align with anti-apartheid forces. This introduces the notion of 'solidarity' and the question of whether aid agencies can associate with organisations guilty of large-scale violations of human rights.

The 1980s are sometimes referred to among aid workers as a 'golden age' in which humanitarianism could claim to operate in a principled manner.³ For Western governments, aid offered a way to support client regimes and induce people living under Soviet-backed regimes to one day change sides. The Soviet Union did not provide direct humanitarian aid on a large scale, but may have seen advantages in allowing its client states to be supported by the West. Aid agencies secured strong public support by being seen as non-political. Aid workers enjoyed greater security and freedom than in subsequent years, when Western

1 This restriction was gradually eased, but in the 1980s there was still a general ceiling of 20% on UK government funding.

2 For the purposes of this paper Ethiopia is taken to include Eritrea, which did not achieve independence until 1992.

3 See Vaux (2001: chapter 2) and African Rights (1994) for further analysis of the limitations of this view.

governments became more assertive and claims of neutrality became less credible.

All this led to a focus on principles that would dissociate aid from Cold War politics. Aid agencies came together in the late 1980s and formulated principles that were widely accepted (at least in Europe) as the rules of humanitarianism: the Red Cross Code (IFRC, 1991), which focuses strongly on the ‘humanitarian imperative’ (Principles 1 and 2). They also began to give greater attention to international humanitarian law, especially the Geneva Conventions and the notion that offering aid to civilians in conflict was a neutral act to be respected by all parties in conflict.

The Eritrean and Tigrayan rebel movements were a particularly strong influence in the formulation of the Code and its extension into humanitarian neutrality.⁴ They made precise territorial claims, held sophisticated ideological positions and respected the general rules of war. They contested their political claims by deploying conventional armies and rarely engaged in terrorism. They were, in fact, highly sensitive to criticism for obstructing aid, even if it was going to ‘enemy’ territory. The Ethiopian government of the time kept a low profile in relation to aid on the rebel side. Above all, the parties to the conflict sought legitimisation by the international community. Hence they had an interest in appearing to comply with Western principles and codes.

There were also more shadowy organisations using violence as a tool to increase their political power or simply for looting. The collapse of colonial order had opened the way for organised crime to pose as liberation movements, and the need of liberation movements for financing often turned them towards organised crime (Berdal and Malone, 2000). In the early 1980s, most states still had the power, derived from their colonial heritage and Cold War backing, to limit (or in some cases monopolise) organised crime. Similarly, they were often able to limit or even manipulate armed groups left behind after the main liberation struggles, representing disaffected areas or social identities. Because these groups had control over territories in which there were acute humanitarian needs (caused by their own activities and counter-attacks by the state), agencies might consider communicating with them. This paper

4 I was one of the originators of the Code and drew heavily on my experience of these cross-border operations.

describes two examples: the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) in Uganda and RENAMO in Mozambique.

The issues discussed here are viewed from the perspective of an Oxfam emergency manager active in both groups of humanitarian operations – in the Horn and Southern Africa – in the 1980s. Within Oxfam there were wide differences of opinion with regard to both groups of conflicts. The focus of attention in this paper is why Oxfam reached a different position in each case. The paper describes how Oxfam staff debated the issues, and what this tells us about the application of humanitarian principles.

Oxfam’s experience is relatively well documented and to some extent may represent a general trend among aid agencies.⁵ The challenges facing other aid agencies would have been similar, but Oxfam was bolder in supporting liberation movements in the Horn of Africa than others (such as Save the Children), which maintained a position of only working through the recognised government. In Southern Africa, Oxfam may have gone further than others in openly adopting a ‘solidarist’ or anti-apartheid position.

In the case of the Ethiopian wars, the principles fell into a fortuitous alignment: the principle of impartiality was best served by adopting a position of neutrality. But in Southern Africa, neutrality had to be weighed against ‘solidarity’ and human rights presented a major challenge in relation to the principle of humanity. In this way three of the fundamental humanitarian principles of the ICRC (impartiality, neutrality and humanity) had to be weighed against each other. But the reason why this period is sometimes regarded as a ‘golden age’ may have more to do with the fact that the fourth principle, independence, was not a significant problem – or at least not nearly as significant as it was to become in subsequent decades.⁶

Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa

In 1983, before the Ethiopian famine had hit the international headlines, Oxfam was approached by the Sudan-based humanitarian ‘wings’ of the

5 Oxfam’s archive deposited at the Bodleian Library in Oxford includes documents relevant to this paper. See also Oxfam’s official history (Black, 1992) and my memoir (Vaux, 2001).

6 These are the first four of seven principles, the others being voluntary service, unity and universality.

liberation movements seeking to deliver aid to Eritrea and Tigray. These were primarily military and political organisations with aspirations of achieving legitimate power. Thus, they modelled themselves on government structures, and their humanitarian ‘wings’ corresponded to similar structures in the Ethiopian government. Oxfam had received disturbing reports about the seriousness of the food situation in northern Ethiopia and sent a Field Officer from Sudan to investigate. She crossed the border illegally carrying grain, tools and cash (Black, 1992: 263). No clear distinction was made in this case between development and humanitarian aid, and in general this distinction was never an important element in the debates of this period.

For Oxfam, the essential prerequisite for providing assistance in conflict areas was the presence of its own staff – or at least the theoretical possibility of directly monitoring all aid. From the beginning, the question was raised whether Oxfam was supporting and encouraging conflict. There was a shadow hanging over the entire operation from the war relating to the attempted secession of Biafra from Nigeria 16 years earlier. Oxfam had provided aid in and through the secessionist state and later came to regret it.⁷ This question was raised periodically, but for the time being Oxfam was satisfied with the result of the mission. Over the following years the agency’s cross-border operations became very substantial in scale.

Oxfam had an established office in Addis Ababa and had a close relationship with the government. As the scale of cross-border work increased, staff in Addis Ababa became concerned that they might be expelled if the government became aware of Oxfam’s cross-border work. Humanitarian operations in government-controlled areas, regarded as literally life-saving, would be stopped. Oxfam recognised that it could not run a covert operation and that Ethiopia’s extensive security services would be aware of its cross-border work. The outcome would depend on the reaction of the authorities.

In fact, the government never openly challenged Oxfam on this issue. Various factors may have influenced this decision. First, it may have been a matter of national pride not to acknowledge that large areas of the country were outside government control. Second, the Ethiopia famine had become the subject

of huge international attention and aid that passed through the government’s books, especially through its artificially elevated exchange rate, had become highly important to the government. In effect, Ethiopia was taxing aid and arguably paying for the war with the proceeds. It did not want to challenge the international community or expose the political foundations of the famine.⁸

Oxfam was one of the most prominent organisations working with the government, while other aid agencies were also involved in cross-border work. Western governments, beginning with the UK, and the European Commission began to fund this work through Oxfam. Perhaps, having missed the opportunity to challenge this activity in its early stages, the Ethiopian government simply decided not to rock the boat. Perhaps the Ethiopian leadership wanted to keep its options open, especially as backing from the Soviet Union was dwindling, and finally collapsed in 1989. But it seems implausible that Ethiopia ignored the cross-border operations out of respect for the humanitarian imperative (Ethiopian planes bombed cross-border convoys when they could find them) or out of respect for the neutrality of aid agencies. It was simply that the conditions allowed these principles to operate.

Oxfam was never challenged in public about its cross-border operations. In so far as justification was needed, it rested on the ‘humanitarian imperative’: cross-border operations were supporting those most in need, as became evident when large numbers of people fled into Sudan because of unbearable famine conditions and fear of being ‘resettled’ by the government.⁹ Oxfam did not entirely avoid the question of solidarity. It was put under pressure by the radical UK-based agency War on Want, which had decided to take a solidarity position in relation to the rebel groups and founded a consortium of agencies not only providing humanitarian support but also development aid. Oxfam’s involvement remained wary.

8 In the news programme that triggered a huge response in the UK in October 1984, BBC journalist Michael Buerk characterised the problem as a ‘biblical famine’ despite the warplanes and military paraphernalia all around.

9 As a counter-insurgency strategy the government moved large numbers of people from the famine areas to the south-west of the country. In addition to the pressures caused by the famine, people were also coerced more directly, causing considerable controversy among aid agencies. Some collaborated with the programme and others protested. After a brief engagement, Oxfam dissociated itself from resettlement but did not protest.

7 For a detailed account, see Black (1992: 121–31).

Nevertheless, some staff within Oxfam were suspicious that managers of the cross-border operations were becoming politically sympathetic to the rebels and would turn a blind eye to the diversion of aid for wider political and military purposes – as had happened in Biafra – and there were voices arguing that the overthrow of the Ethiopian government was the only real way to address poverty and famine. The rebel groups promoted this view and took great care to influence Oxfam staff travelling into the region. This raised a number of difficult questions, notably at what point does aid give way to a focus on ending the war causing the suffering?

Staff in Addis Ababa lived in a different environment, in which the rebels were seen as an obstruction to aid efforts and a challenge to the stability of the state. As views diverged on the issue of neutrality, Oxfam found it convenient to switch back to the ‘humanitarian imperative’. Staff in Addis Ababa could not deny that the cross-border operations saved lives, nor could cross-border managers deny that Oxfam’s work in government areas also saved lives. This led to a tolerable stand-off that could be called ‘neutrality’.

The Biafra effect, together with strong Quaker influences within Oxfam, gave Oxfam a strong aversion to any support for military activity.¹⁰ This was applied somewhat asymmetrically in Ethiopia, with a strong emphasis on monitoring the use of aid on the rebel side and business as usual on the government side. This also reflected the fact that Oxfam was much more vulnerable to criticism in the UK for supporting rebels than it would be for supporting (yet another) government that manipulated aid for military and political purposes. Accordingly, Oxfam never adopted a solidarity position in the Ethiopian wars: it avoided any public statement of alignment with one side or the other. By using a judicious balance of the humanitarian imperative and neutrality, Oxfam could steer a course between the different pressures it faced – or arguably these pressures made Oxfam steer a particular course. The Ethiopian rebel groups were sensitive to these difficulties and never publicised Oxfam’s support or pushed Oxfam into a corner on the question of whether humanitarian aid could be separated from military and political issues.

10 This was superseded after the end of the Cold War (and reduced Quaker influence in Oxfam) by increasing willingness to comment on military interventions from Somalia and Kosovo onwards.

Discretion also shaped Oxfam’s public communications. In public, Oxfam was careful to avoid terms such as ‘cross-border’ and ‘rebel’, but simply spoke about delivering aid to people in need. When a group of agencies came together to provide cross-border support as the Emergency Relief Desk (ERD), with a prominent office in Sudan, Oxfam decided to stay apart.¹¹ This was partly a reflection of Oxfam’s strong desire to monitor aid directly, but also reflected the need for a low profile. This also suited the European Commission, which by 1987 was providing half of its assistance to Tigray through Oxfam (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994: 97).

By 1988, deliberate hints by officials in Addis Ababa made Oxfam aware that the authorities had detailed information about the cross-border programme and that Oxfam was under surveillance.¹² This led to further pressure to strengthen monitoring on the rebel side. Whereas much of Oxfam’s work on the government side was delivered by Oxfam’s own staff, work on the rebel side was all handled through the rebels’ humanitarian ‘wings’. Oxfam stepped up the frequency of monitoring visits but it was scarcely credible that a solitary foreigner could understand what was happening, especially because, for fear of bombing during the day, travel was only possible at night.

The problem was especially acute in the case of local purchases of food, which became an increasing element in cross-border operations. Oxfam had been aware from its first intervention in 1983 that food surpluses were available for purchase in some rebel-held territories. This would relieve the problem of importing food through Sudan and then sending it on trucks for hundreds of miles into famine areas. As Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze had shown, famines do not normally arise from declining food availability but from a collapse in purchasing power or entitlement among a segment of the population (Sen and Drèze, 1981). Their analysis included a case study from the 1973 famine in Wollo, Ethiopia, showing that food had been available throughout a famine that took over 200,000 lives. Again, in the famine of 1984, people in some areas had suffered drought for several

11 The ERD, founded in 1981 and re-established in 1985, was mainly supported by Protestant churches, originally from Scandinavia. See Duffield and Prendergast (1994).

12 In a meeting of senior officials, Oxfam Director Frank Judd recalls that my name was mentioned in connection with the north of the country. This was taken as a hint that the authorities knew about but tolerated cross-border activity.

years and their efforts to buy food had also been thwarted by Ethiopian attacks on markets. Merchants were unwilling to travel and the price of food had skyrocketed. Oxfam's partner, the Relief Society of Tigray, proposed buying food from the merchants in Western Tigray and delivering it where it was needed.

Sceptics in Oxfam not only doubted whether such food existed, but also pointed out that the rebels could easily manipulate prices, commandeer the food for military purposes or force people to donate food back to the rebels after it was distributed. With these uncertainties and challenges, further discussion about solidarity and neutrality was terminated and Oxfam focused its attention on delivering and monitoring aid. Full-time local staff were recruited from among refugees who had no links with the rebel movements but could speak the necessary languages and engage much more closely with local people. Oxfam also maintained regular visits by senior managers and conducted various reviews and evaluations.

From 1984 onwards the UK government¹³ had held regular discussions about Ethiopia with the main aid agencies. Oxfam and others began to report on their cross-border operations, often giving private briefings to officials. The Aid Minister, Chris Patten, was initially sceptical about working with rebel groups, and it was only in 1988 that the UK finally gave its support through Oxfam. By this time it was recognised that the rebel groups might actually win the war (they did so in 1991), but this may not have been a factor. UK humanitarian aid was still supposed to be protected from political considerations. It was only after 2001 that the notion of 'joined-up government' developed, and resources for addressing conflict were pooled between the ministries concerned with defence, foreign policy and aid.¹⁴ In the 1980s Oxfam had no specific reason to suppose that UK funding for Ethiopia was unduly influenced by political considerations – and again this favoured a focus on humanitarian principles. Oxfam's largest donor to cross-border operations, the European Commission, showed even less sign of political interests. It started to give aid in 1984 and asked very few questions about the general situation. Discussions invariably focused on the mechanics of funding and monitoring.

13 Through the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), which later became the Department for International Development (DFID).

14 As shown by the creation of the Global Conflict Prevention Pool in 2003.

Problems between the Commission and cross-border aid agencies, including the ERD, were characterised mainly by internal bureaucratic issues and inter-departmental rivalries.¹⁵

The Cold War created a 'hands-off' climate among European states, leaving ample humanitarian space for agencies such as Oxfam. Driven by a much stronger anti-communist agenda, the position of the United States was very different. In order to avoid the risk of supporting Ethiopia (a communist state backed by the Soviet Union), the United States adopted a policy of working only through non-government organisations. Although Washington might have been expected to play a major role in cross-border operations (and could have used NGOs as a channel) it did not do so on any significant scale.¹⁶ This was probably because the rebel movements were also avowedly communist. The Eritreans continued to regard the Soviet Union as a strategic ally, causing friction with the Tigrayans, who rejected Moscow as any sort of ally and espoused a brand of communism proposed by the Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxhe. The US reaction was to seek out non-communist rebel movements, but these were scarcely credible.¹⁷ In contrast with European positions during the Cold War, the United States was far more driven by political considerations, but in this case played little role on either side because there were no 'good guys'. However, Washington watched the situation very closely. On returning from cross-border work in Eritrea or Tigray I could expect to be asked for an interview by one or other of the American 'researchers' who took up residence in the Acropole Hotel in Khartoum.

By avoiding the question of solidarity Oxfam sidestepped any role in public education and understanding. The famine continued to be portrayed

15 In 1983, EC food aid through the ERD amounted to only 10% of food aid on the government side, but the ratio steadily increased and by 1987 food aid through the cross-border operation was the EC's largest single programme in the world.

16 US officials may have found it difficult to decide which side was more communist. In comparison with the socialist policies of the Ethiopian government, the Fronts were positive towards commercial activity and collaborated closely with merchants in food aid activity (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994: 23). But the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF)'s commitment to a Stalinist form of communism (as espoused by Hoxhe) caused confusion in many quarters. The TPLF retracted to some extent when they found out that Hoxhe did not practice what he preached.

17 The United States focused its support on a spurious Western-oriented organisation, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance (EPDA), which had no real presence in Ethiopia.

misleadingly as a ‘biblical’ famine. The ways in which aid might interact with political activity were not discussed. The media generally focused on the heroism of aid efforts rather than the reasons for war in a famine-ridden country. Oxfam’s experience in Ethiopia helped to develop a classical form of humanitarianism disconnected from politics. This implied suspicion of solidarity and an aspiration to neutrality. But there was still a sense in which Oxfam’s relationship with the Ethiopian government was stronger than with the rebels. This made it difficult to claim strict neutrality and led to a focus on impartiality (or support for the humanitarian imperative) as less contentious.¹⁸ Oxfam claimed to be impartial between people except on the basis of needs. This ‘classical’ position did not solve every problem. When Oxfam and others provided massive humanitarian aid to the perpetrators of the Rwanda genocide after they fled to Zaire in 1994, aid workers felt uneasy with principles that allowed the *génocidaires* to use aid to dominate the relief camps, regroup and continue their violence. Critics argued that lack of political perspective led agencies into a false position, and that this same lack of a political dimension to their analysis has led aid agencies to repeat the same mistakes again and again.¹⁹ The classical position of neutrality remains a powerful influence in humanitarian thinking and a cause of much disquiet in today’s context of far greater politicisation of aid by Western donors, and the aid system’s greater dependence on them.

Other engagement in the Horn of Africa

Encouraged by the positive experience of cross-border activity with rebel groups in northern Ethiopia, Oxfam looked for other potential partners in Africa. The guidance for Oxfam staff (formalised in 1991) was that ‘while Oxfam will always try to respect sovereignty, in cases of serious need it will engage in cross-border operations into rebel-held areas without the agreement of the National Government’ (Oxfam, 1991). In southern Sudan the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) was waging a long war against the government in Khartoum, and had set

up a ‘humanitarian wing’ – the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA). In 1988, following representations by the SRRA in London, Oxfam sent one of its emergency staff to examine whether the organisation could act as a partner, and whether a cross-border operation in partnership with it could be mounted into southern Sudan from Kenya.

After some three months of effort, Oxfam gave up on the idea. The SRRA was not credibly separate from the SPLA. In small test cases, food aid delivered through the SRRA was openly seized by SPLA soldiers, who clearly felt that they outranked SRRA officials. Other agencies reported similar experiences, and when a cross-border operation was finally mounted in 1989, it was run by the UN with limited involvement from the SRRA. Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) was possible because of an agreement between the rebels and the government that allowed the UN to take the lead; this had never been achieved in Ethiopia. Direct management by the UN in South Sudan was less efficient than the model of aid agencies working with ‘humanitarian wings’ in Eritrea and Tigray, but because OLS was based on formal agreements it attracted substantial funding.²⁰ Both the SPLA and the Sudanese government manipulated the operation in order to meet their own political and military aims.²¹ Oxfam played a relatively minor role.

Although Oxfam explored possibilities with some of the smaller rebel movements in Ethiopia, such as the Oromo Liberation Front and its humanitarian wing, the Oromo Relief Association, it found no other rebel movement with which it could work on any scale.²² The main problem was that the ‘humanitarian wing’ was often a fiction to attract funding and had no reality or respect on the ground from political and military forces.

Because they had serious aspirations to achieve political power and needed the support of local people, the Ethiopian movements did not use terror tactics. But in other countries this was a serious problem. A history of insurrection and suppression of the Acholi people in northern Uganda had led to

18 There has been a great deal of debate about the notion of ‘solidarity with the poor’ but since all parties are likely to claim to act on behalf of the poor this easily leads to confusion.

19 Notably Terry (2002).

20 ‘ERA was able to move over three times as much food as Operation Lifeline Sudan for roughly the same amount of money’ (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994: 8).

21 *Ibid.*

22 Oxfam explored other channels in Ethiopia, such as the Ethiopian Relief Organisation in Wollo, but found them unable to meet its standards.

the emergence of the Holy Spirit Movement, which initially drew on grievances against the state but gradually degenerated into an organisation that looted, took part in the scramble for the region's rich mineral resources and used terror to achieve its aims. It was led during the 1980s by Alice Lakwena, a mystic who initially attracted some support for her messianic claims, but was eventually killed and succeeded by the notorious Joseph Kony, who forced children to become soldiers and commit atrocities under the name of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

As a measure of Oxfam's determination to explore all channels I visited northern Uganda in 1988 and, having documented atrocities by Lakwena forces (burnt-out houses, murder), decided that no further communication was possible, concluding in classical humanitarian style that 'The rebels appear to be a purely destructive force with no respect for humanitarian objectives, while the government does seem to be making a credible effort. This analysis indicates a policy of bias towards Government rather than neutrality, but we should avoid total identification' (Vaux, 1988: 2). Oxfam had taken on board a new part of the equation, terrorism, and had given this greater importance than the humanitarian imperative, but this position was never articulated in the codes and principles used at the time.

Southern Africa

Terrorism was an issue in decisions about involvement in Southern Africa, but the question of solidarity was far more important. The evolution of Oxfam policy in Southern Africa had started from a different position, dominated by the issue of apartheid. In the late 1970s, under the influence of its (Quaker) Director of the time, Oxfam expressed an interest in working on all sides in southern Africa and in trying to bring organisations towards better understanding and dialogue. But it took a pacifist position, excluding organisations that were openly committed to violence,²³ such as the African National Congress (ANC).

Many organisations representing the black population found this sort of neutrality unacceptable. They roundly criticised Oxfam for sitting on the fence and refused to have dealings with the organisation. They argued that the apartheid system was a fundamental

affront to humanity and the primary cause of poverty, humanitarian suffering and violence. The issue was hotly contested within Oxfam, especially between senior managers and field representatives. An internal campaign gradually changed Oxfam's position – initially to include support for refugees from the conflict, even if this aid was delivered through armed movements associated with the ANC. The position gradually hardened (under a new Director), and by the mid-1980s Oxfam had effectively adopted a position of close solidarity with black Africans against apartheid and open support for the ANC.

This was the context for Oxfam's engagement in Mozambique during the 1980s. The South African government was systematically undermining the FRELIMO government in order to prevent it from giving support to the ANC and rebel groups in South Africa. Part of this strategy was to support the rebel Mozambique National Resistance (MNR – more commonly known by its Portuguese acronym RENAMO). This organisation was composed largely of those who had fought on the Portuguese side in the liberation wars of the 1970s. RENAMO had strong connections with traditional religious practitioners, former administrators under the Portuguese and Christian groups and pastors opposed to the atheism of FRELIMO. Unable to mobilise significant armed forces, RENAMO attacked government infrastructure, including trains and buses, as well as travellers on them. Some of its methods were 'terrorist' – they used terror to force the local people to support them. As a loose guerrilla organisation in a country with long transport routes through almost uninhabited territory, RENAMO was able to disrupt practically the whole of Mozambique, prevent overland travel outside of the capital, Maputo, and effectively control extensive rural areas along the borders, retreating to bases in South Africa if needed.

Oxfam had long been sympathetic to the FRELIMO government because it was deemed to be pro-poor and also because it was seen as a victim of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Problems arose when Oxfam in Oxford received representations from far-right evangelical organisations in the United States suggesting that RENAMO could be a channel for assistance (Vaux, 2001: 101–104). Oxfam staff managing programmes in the region were strongly against this but, following the principles developed in the Horn of Africa, the agency felt that it must investigate the claims seriously. Oxfam emergency

²³ This section draws on Black (1994: 246–52).

worker Mike Powell had been involved in Oxfam's work with rebel movements in the Horn of Africa (and managed Oxfam's unsuccessful attempts to work with the SRRA) and had also worked in Mozambique in 1984 and again in 1986–87. In a retrospective comment written in 2014 he explains:²⁴

One theme that stands out very clearly from the [Oxfam] writing at the time ... is that of solidarity with Mozambique in the face of South African aggression. Although there are numerous comments about government 'errors' and some about the mistreatment, in one form or other, of civilians by government agencies including the military, the overall tone of all the Oxfam documents of the time is one of respect for what the government was trying to do for the welfare of its population ... The fact that the MNR as a military force was created by the illegal regime in Rhodesia and then taken over and supported by South African intelligence – was also a factor.

For Powell, the notion of dismissing MNR/RENAMO purely out of 'solidarity' with FRELIMO was not entirely acceptable, and he focused instead on human rights:

By most definitions ... the MNR's frequent and deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure, especially of hospitals and health posts which were the symbol of FRELIMO's most effective social intervention, would count as terror ... Unlike many of the organisations with which Oxfam had explored possible collaboration in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan, the MNR did not at that time make the slightest pretence of having civil programmes through which international support could be channelled to civilian populations. When mass suffering is the tactic of a war and the main purpose of that war ... was to defend the monstrosity of apartheid then, excepting the particular value and role of the ICRC, neutrality is not an option for an organisation with humanitarian values ... That at least was my view and I think it was shared by everyone else working on Oxfam's programme for Mozambique at that time.

²⁴ Mike Powell, personal communication in 2014, abridged. My additions are in square brackets.

During the 1980s I visited refugee camps in Zimbabwe and met people who had been living in RENAMO territory in the most terrible poverty and fear. If Oxfam had given prominence to the humanitarian imperative it might have tried to negotiate the right to deliver assistance across the border from Zimbabwe. This would have demonstrated neutrality. But Oxfam had adopted a position of solidarity, taking into account the bigger picture regarding poverty in the region, and tacitly added a principle that it would not work with a terrorist organisation.²⁵

Reflections and conclusions

Humanitarian principles come into conflict with each other and also contain internal contradictions. Neutrality can be a self-contradictory principle because its opposite is the potentially beneficial position of solidarity.²⁶ Accordingly, neutrality often appears to be the most freely negotiable of the principles. The solidarity position adopted by Oxfam in Southern Africa was by no means unique. In many parts of Latin America during the same period, Oxfam and other aid organisations had little hesitation in expressing solidarity with various partner organisations and even some governments and rebel movements. Even the humanitarian imperative was called into question in Latin America. In Colombia, many Oxfam partner organisations refused to take part in humanitarian work because they considered it to be the responsibility of government – and the government should be held to account for disaster relief.²⁷ The principle of humanity would suggest that an aid agency should dissociate itself from organisations that flagrantly abuse human rights. But this also is negotiable, especially in relation to impartiality. Oxfam may easily dissociate itself from a small terrorist organisation, but what about governments that abuse human rights?²⁸ In the end there is a trade-off between humanity and the need for access to people in need. Aid managers have to find an appropriate balance for each case. The significance

²⁵ Perhaps this principle never became formal because some governments also used terrorist methods.

²⁶ For a lively discussion on this, see Weiss (1994) and responses in the same journal.

²⁷ I visited Colombia for Oxfam in 1991 in order to explore this phenomenon and find ways to promote humanitarianism in Latin America.

²⁸ As an example, Oxfam did not openly challenge the Ethiopian government over its forced resettlement programme in the 1980s.

and order of priority between the principles may change in different situations. In contrast with the Ethiopia case, which focuses on the two principles of neutrality and impartiality, the Mozambique case balances three principles – impartiality, neutrality and humanity (human rights and dignity).

The 1980s in Africa could be called a ‘golden age of humanitarianism’ only in the sense that there was a fortuitous alignment of impartiality and neutrality (especially in the Horn of Africa), and relatively little problem with the principle of humanity. But there is an elephant in the room. The fourth fundamental humanitarian principle, independence, had such a low profile during this period that it could be disregarded in most of the debates. Public funding still left many agencies free to focus on the other principles. At that time, Oxfam limited its funding from governments and government aid (at least in

Europe) was to an extent insulated from politics. During the Cold War, the independence (or at least the appearance of independence) of aid agencies suited the great powers rather well.

Subsequently the principle of independence has become the critical problem of humanitarianism. Increasing reliance on funding by Western donors together with the increased politicisation (or securitisation) of donor aid now raises profound questions about the independence of aid agencies. Independence (or the lack of it) now plays a key role in determining how aid agencies position themselves in relation to the other three fundamental principles. The most critical questions are whether the nature of their resources will allow them to address needs impartially, whether they can make a credible claim to neutrality and whether they can respond objectively to violations of human rights.

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7 Humanitarian action in South Sudan: the case of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS)

Leben Nelson Moro

Introduction

In February 2015 a donor conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya, to mobilise resources to support the 2.5 million people displaced by fighting and associated disasters in South Sudan. Some \$620m was pledged, but the total amount required to support humanitarian response in 2015 alone was estimated as \$1.8 billion (OCHA, 2015). Although the conference in Nairobi was held in a different context, in which South Sudan had acquired the status of an independent state, donor meetings aimed at raising money for starving people in this part of the world are not new. In fact, they are familiar occurrences. Southern Sudan has faced many disasters, especially man-made ones, and, as a result, has accumulated extensive experience with humanitarian action.

Southern Sudan was consumed by armed conflict even before the former Sudan¹ gained independence on 1 January 1956 from the joint Anglo-Egyptian colonial regime. The war – between Anyanya rebels and regimes in Khartoum – lasted 17 years, leaving an estimated 500,000 people dead and thousands more displaced from their homes (Peterson, 2000: 179). The rebels were embedded within Southern Sudanese communities, with whom they shared resources. There was very little attention or assistance from the international community; the foreign presence in Southern Sudan was minimal, and became practically non-existent after the expulsion of all foreign missionaries by the Sudanese regime in 1964 (Rift Valley Institute, 2015: 50). As a result, the humanitarian impacts of the war were largely hidden from the international community.

The war ended in 1972 with the conclusion of the Addis Ababa Agreement between the rebels and the regime of Jaafar Nimeiri (1969–85), and aid organisations entered the south to support returnees and development projects. Indeed, the work of aid organisations and other actors substituted for development by the government of Southern Sudan, which was reliant on dwindling financial subventions from the central government, which was itself reliant on aid from others. Nimeiri's regime was the largest recipient of US foreign assistance in Sub-Saharan Africa. Alex de Waal describes the extent of Southern Sudan's dependence on aid as follows:

Foreign agencies took over many of the functions of local government, including education, health, veterinary care, water provision, agricultural extension, road building and the like. These agencies enjoyed far greater levels of resourcing than government departments and undermined the legitimacy of local government (de Waal, 1997: 29).

Ten years later, the relative peace that followed the conclusion of the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement ended when rebels organised under the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA) resumed their attacks on government positions. This round of fighting, which lasted 21 years, left millions dead or displaced. The media actively covered the war, and so it was not hidden from the world. Accordingly, humanitarian intervention in the conflict became a salient issue domestically and internationally. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), concluded in 2005, paved the way for the breakaway of the southern part of former Sudan. In 2011, Southern Sudanese went to the polls and delivered a decisive blow to those who hoped that the unity of the country

1 The former Sudan refers to the united Sudan before Southern Sudan broke away to found a new state in July 2011. The present Sudan is what remains in the North after the split.

could be sustained. About 98% of those who voted said yes to independence for Southern Sudan.

This paper focuses on Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), a unique UN-mediated humanitarian action to reach millions of civilians caught up in the second war. OLS did save many lives, but many others were not reached. For some years much of the international effort was directed at ensuring that OLS achieved its anticipated humanitarian outcomes, rather than focusing on ending the fighting itself. Arguably the international community lacked the political will to end the fighting, and instead focused on the symptoms of the deeper political failings that had dogged the country over many years. This reflected a broader trend at the time. As Pavlina Jirouskova (2014: 14) succinctly points out: 'International actors mostly failed to address political problems of crises in the aftermath of the Cold War and humanitarian aid was used as the only response'.

This paper is organised as follows: the next section discusses the events that led to the birth of OLS, and also dwells on some of the key political shifts at national, regional and global levels that allowed OLS to survive. Section three focuses on the evolution of OLS as political developments in the country dramatically changed in the 1990s, from dictatorship to democracy and back to dictatorship. Sections four and five examine the successes and failures of OLS, and the last section concludes the paper.

Birth

OLS was established in the former Sudan amidst escalating violence and associated civilian suffering, as well as repeated denials of assistance by both the government and the rebels. To a great extent, the relief operation was made possible by political changes both within the country and on the world stage.

Nimeiri's regime was largely propped up by US aid. The United States and other Western allies viewed the rising military threat from the mostly Southern-based rebel movement, which was supported by Ethiopian dictator Haile Mengistu, as part of the broader communist threat against their allies in the region. Some media outlets promoted the same view, and hence the core causes of the conflict, including Southern Sudanese grievances against misrule by leaders in Khartoum, were not clearly articulated. In

addition, the emerging humanitarian crises in Southern Sudan in the mid-1980s were neither adequately covered nor taken seriously by powerful countries.

Government forces and allied militias targeted rebel forces and communities thought to be supporting them, exacerbating the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Southern Sudan. Efforts by the UN and NGOs to set up humanitarian programmes to support vulnerable people were obstructed by the government under the guise of exercising its sovereign rights. Meanwhile, the rebels were also laying siege to towns in Southern Sudan, leaving people trapped within them vulnerable to starvation.

The Combined Agency Relief Team (CART) was established in Juba with the support of the European Community (EC) to provide relief to civilians in Southern Sudan. Key organisations, such as Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), Oxfam and World Vision, provided much-needed support to civilians. The operation, however, faced numerous restrictions from the government and was ultimately closed down in 1987. In 1986, due to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in government-held towns in Southern Sudan, the UN tried to organise an operation code-named 'Operation Rainbow' to address humanitarian conditions. The then UN resident representative in the country, Winston Prattley, was reported as saying that 960,000 people in Southern Sudan faced starvation (Efuk, 2001: 39). The government scotched the relief plan and ejected Prattley from the country for 'political meddling' (*ibid.*). Although Western governments and NGOs tried to persuade the government to temper its hardline attitude to aid in war zones this did not produce significant positive outcomes. Meanwhile, government soldiers, their local militia allies and rebel forces intensified their predatory activities, disrupting livelihoods and obstructing efforts to deliver humanitarian assistance. The government cut off rebel-held areas, while the rebels besieged and shelled towns.

Perhaps the most shocking humanitarian consequence of the war was the famine in Bahr el Ghazal in 1988, which left close to 250,000 people dead (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The media brought shocking images of the victims into homes around the world, galvanising public opinion for action, especially in Western countries. It became difficult for politicians in powerful countries and international bodies to continue to do nothing as civil society activists and ordinary people demanded action to alleviate the

suffering. Within this conducive political environment, the United States and other powerful countries as well as international bodies were willing to act, or at least to be seen as keen to do some good. The international community persuaded the Sudanese government, led by Sadig el Mahdi, and the rebel movement to allow humanitarian organisations to provide assistance to civilians trapped in war zones, especially in Southern Sudan. Under the direction of the UN General Assembly, the then UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, took the lead. In 1988 he appointed James P. Grant as executive director of UNICEF and personal representative to the former Sudan. On 8 and 9 March 1989, the United Nations and the Sudanese government held a high-level meeting in Khartoum, which adopted a Plan of Action for emergency assistance. The government established a High Ministerial Committee to oversee the implementation of the plan. Operation Lifeline Sudan was born.

The Plan of Action covered needs estimated at about \$133 million, out of which more than half was already available (OLS, 1989). To a great extent this demonstrated the wider support of the international community for the humanitarian effort, which was already backed by the key neighbouring countries of Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia. Some of the operations to be undertaken under the plan were to be carried out by these countries. Also, and more importantly, the rebel movement supported the Plan and committed itself to implementing it. The movement agreed eight ‘corridors of tranquillity’ with the government to enable the delivery of assistance to people in need. It also accepted the humanitarian principles, especially neutrality, under which aid would be provided.

OLS became the first multilateral humanitarian action following the end of the Cold War. In a way, the relaxation of Cold War tensions enabled the United States to exert pressure on the Khartoum government, which it had supported as an ally against Libya and Ethiopia, to accept the operation. In this changed political climate, the UN was poised to play a bigger role on the world stage as superpower rivalries receded with the demise of the Soviet Union. The SPLM/A also needed aid for civilians in areas it controlled so as to be seen as a legitimate authority providing for those under its protection and care. It also needed food for its fighters. As such, all the parties needed aid to flow into Southern Sudan, albeit not necessarily for the reasons they claimed. Access to humanitarian assistance fitted neatly into the political calculations of

the rebel movement and the government. As Soforonio Oniama Efuk (2001) points out, the government of Sudan and the SPLM/A were ‘jealously eyeing the resources channelled through the OLS by the international community’.

The operation was a tripartite arrangement involving the UN, the government of Sudan and the SPLM/A. Seven UN agencies were involved, including UNICEF and UNDP, and over 35 NGOs, along with the government organisation responsible for relief activities and the relief wing of the SPLM/A, the Southern Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SSRA). Operations to civilians in what came to be known as the Northern Sector were conducted from Khartoum, and from neighboring countries to Southern Sector or rebel-controlled areas. All activities in the Northern Sector were coordinated by UNDP. Activities in the Southern Sector were coordinated by UNICEF. Lokichoggio in Northern Kenya became the hub of operations in the Southern Sector. However, some assistance was also brought through Uganda by road and air. Airlifts to Juba and other areas from Entebbe in Uganda proved extremely important as road access was extremely dangerous or impossible. In part, it was thus a cross-border operation.

The underlying principle that the UN wanted to see upheld was that the delivery of assistance would not compromise Sudanese sovereignty or confer legitimacy on the SPLM/A. In reality, the sovereignty of the country was already contested as large parts were in rebel hands, and the rebels were already acting as a government in the areas they controlled. However, the façade of respecting sovereignty allowed the government to save face and enabled the humanitarian intervention to take place. The UN later developed codes of conduct or ‘Ground Rules’. Premised on the principle of neutrality, they were signed by various armed groups holding territory. The Ground Rules depended on the goodwill of the parties agreeing to them as there was no mechanism to enforce compliance or punish deviation. They had to be continually discussed and negotiated (Maxwell, Santschi and Gordon, 2014: 12).

Development

OLS developed through three phases: the initial phase began when the operation was launched in April 1989, and ended with the overthrow of Sadig el Mahdi.

The second phase commenced with Omer el Bashir's assumption of power in 1989, and ended with the split of the SPLM/A movement in 1991. The final phase ended in 2005, when the CPA was signed.

OLS began life during a period of democratic government in former Sudan ushered in by Sadig's election victory in 1986. This was his second time as prime minister, but he was returning to power at a challenging time. The economy was in dire straits, burdened by rising debts and the cost of the war. His soldiers were not doing very well on the battlefield, and were demanding more weapons or an end to the war. Sadig badly needed international support to shore up the economy and put pressure on the rebels to cease fighting and agree to a negotiated settlement. A convenient way of achieving this was to demonstrate empathy for people caught up in the conflict.

As well as agreeing to international efforts to improve conditions in the war zones in Southern Sudan, Sadig engaged in negotiations with the rebels to end the war. The prospects for a negotiated settlement were good. However, the talks were abruptly cut short in 1989 when Sadig's government was ousted by a military junta headed by Omer el Bashir. The coup dashed hopes for a speedy end to fighting. It also had significant negative repercussions for the country's relations with the international community. El Bashir labelled the war as a jihad against 'infidels' and took Iranian arms and money, angering the West and displeasing Sunni states in the Middle East, including Egypt. He forcibly conscripted young men into his fighting force, many of whom did not return from the battlefield.

OLS operations entered a new and more difficult phase. El Bashir insisted on his right as the leader of a sovereign country to decide what happened within the borders of the country, including allowing or denying entry to humanitarian assistance and deciding where it could be delivered. For example, in 1992 he allowed OLS to reach only six locations in Southern Sudan (Rone, 1993: 3). In effect, sovereignty was used to achieve his objective of undermining humanitarian activities and denying vulnerable people access to food and other basic necessities (African Rights, 1997).

The third phase of OLS followed the split of the SPLM/A in 1991. This was a direct result of the significant political changes in the Horn of Africa following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Ethiopia the Mengistu regime fell from power in

1991, depriving the SPLM/A of a vital platform and material support. Senior commanders launched a failed coup against their leader, Dr John Garang de Mabior, sparking the split. Tit for tat violence between the two factions killed or displaced thousands of people. The split also meant that the UN had to deal with more armed parties holding territory. Initially, OLS managers tried to ignore the new rebel groups. However, this was tantamount to depriving civilians in areas under the control of these groups of assistance, and hence defeating the aim of the aid effort. Ultimately, the UN had to work with all of the groups, feeding civilians in the territories they held and, indirectly, also feeding their fighters.

Although El Bashir's regime was a pariah in the West, it had powerful international friends, and the UN Security Council could not reach a decisive and unified position against the regime. China repeatedly blocked action targeting the regime so as to protect its burgeoning oil interests in the country, shielding Khartoum from scrutiny and accountability. The Chinese also provided arms to the regime. Some of the areas worst affected by violence were oil producing zones, where Chinese companies were busy at work. The government was determined to produce oil to rescue the economy, and government forces and allied militias carried out scorched-earth attacks against civilians to 'create a cordon sanitaire' around oilfields and protect oil workers and facilities (Christian Aid, 2001). Oil was exported from the country for the first time in 1999, but at a cost for civilians in oil areas: some 204,500 were reportedly displaced within Unity State between mid-1998 and February 2001 (Human Rights Watch, 2003: 416). Many of those who sought refuge in the state capital, Bentiu, and the nearby town of Rubkona were saved from starvation because of assistance brought in from abroad by the World Food Programme (WFP) and aid organisations. Ironically, at the time El Bashir's regime was telling the world that the country had produced thousands of tonnes of surplus food, part of which it wanted WFP's help in moving to the Horn of Africa to assist starving people there (EIU, 2003: 24). Later, reports emerged that trucks loaded with food had left for drought-hit Ethiopia (*ibid.*).

In time the main rebel faction, led by John Garang, improved its fighting capacity and regained some lost ground. As the rebels became more organised and hopes for an early military victory faded, El Bashir's regime became more amenable to international pressure and more receptive to calls for resolving

the war through negotiation. In 2005, OLS formally ended after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The expectation was that the war-affected parts of the country would gradually recover and transition to development. Instead, however, crises persisted and the need for assistance did not end. In December 2013 the new state of South Sudan descended into violence and humanitarian assistance became a major issue again.

Successes

The most significant positive outcome of OLS was the provision of much-needed assistance to civilians. During the war many people were cut off in insecure locations, where food and other basic necessities were absent or in short supply. Assistance reached many of these vulnerable people, and without it the death toll among civilians would have been much higher. At the end of 2001, more than two million people had reportedly died and four million others had been displaced from their homes (US Committee for Refugees, 2002). This number would have been higher if OLS had not been implemented.

Another success of OLS, albeit a small one, was that the negotiations over humanitarian access created ‘pockets of relative peace’ (Maxwell, Santschi and Gordon, 2014: 13). In particular, the ceasefires and ‘corridors of tranquillity’ intended to facilitate humanitarian access to civilians in need of aid provided local communities with some respite from violence. OLS also helped build capacities and governance structures. Humanitarian assistance went beyond giving food and basic necessities and included recovery activities, which meant that some structures were put in place in Southern Sudan. For example, the rebel groups organised their own relief wings to attract and coordinate assistance. The training that the individuals involved received meant that, when Southern Sudan broke away, the new state did not begin from the scratch.

Failures

It has been argued that assistance provided opportunities for conflict prevention and peacemaking, even though its aims precluded this (Akol, 2005: 54). However, it is doubtful that this was a significant positive outcome of the aid programme. In fact, it seems to have been the case that some powerful

countries were unwilling or unable to press the parties very hard to cease fighting and conclude a peace agreement, and instead contented themselves with giving aid so as to be seen as doing something positive.

The big powers and the UN did not deal with the root causes of the conflict, concentrating instead on the symptoms of the crisis. Militias ravaged local communities without fear of punishment as the focus of the world was addressing the consequences of their brutality. Peacemaking efforts came later, and were mainly spearheaded by neighbouring countries, with the support of Western governments, under the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). They picked up pace later and subsequently yielded an agreement in 2005. Other underlying factors, especially abuses by militias and obstruction of aid by the government and rebel groups, should have been prioritised in order to reduce harm to civilians (Efuk, 2010).

Humanitarian assistance was mainly conceived as a fast-acting answer to starvation in the war zones, but was not aimed at addressing the longstanding underlying causes of that starvation in the first place. Unsurprisingly, about ten years later, in 1989, famine in Bahr el Ghazal was in the news again. Ann Itto, who worked in Southern Sudan during the OLS years, was right to claim that a quick-fix approach does not produce long-term good for people suffering in war situations (Itto, 2000).

Conclusion

South Sudan, which became independent in July 2011, has suffered from several wars. As a result, many of its inhabitants have had to survive on assistance provided mainly by foreign humanitarian organisations. OLS, the largest humanitarian assistance endeavour in the country, was a UN-negotiated operation to provide assistance to civilians in government- and rebel-held parts of the former Sudan in the midst of the war that began in 1983 and ended in 2005. Like any huge effort to assist vulnerable people, OLS had significant benefits, as well as weaknesses.

The most important benefit of the operation was that many lives were saved. Without this relief effort, the death toll during the war would definitely have been higher. The operation went beyond providing food and other basic necessities to the needy, and included capacity-building as part of its recovery activities. The

capacities developed during the war proved vital after the CPA was concluded and the region embarked on building institutions and development. It did not begin from scratch.

The most significant drawback of the relief effort was that aid became part of the war economy. The belligerents manipulated assistance to pursue their military objectives, in the process exacerbating the crisis and increasing the need for assistance. In particular, the government used flight bans extensively to deny aid to civilians trapped in areas under rebel control. Instead of prioritising these abuses by the belligerent parties, the international community focused on providing assistance, which addressed the symptoms of the underlying crises, not their

causes. The lasting solution was a peace deal, but peacemaking efforts were led by regional countries and only picked up after many years of war.

Some of the failures of OLS appear to have been repeated in the current relief effort, in which government and rebel forces have been restricting access to some areas (Maxwell, Gordon and Santschi, 2014). Although urgent humanitarian assistance is essential, the international community is not pressing the parties hard enough to sign a peace deal. Sanctions have been threatened, but the key players are yet to suffer any direct action. Instead, the parties to the conflict are concentrating their resources on prosecuting the war, and the international community is dealing with the humanitarian consequences of the fighting (Grydneff, 2014).

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8 Church, humanitarianism and genocide in Rwanda: beyond criticism and apology

Richard M. Benda

Introduction: genocide and humanitarian action

It is now an accepted fact among academics and experts on the Rwandan genocide of 1994 that this event marked an unprecedented threshold as far as humanitarian intervention is concerned. In only three months (April–July 1994), the violence claimed between 500,000 and 800,000 lives.¹ Any study of the humanitarian response to the genocide is faced with a three-fold challenge. First, the genocide is located in a context of continuous violence, with the civil war of 1990–94 on the one hand, and the Hutu refugee crisis followed by the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on the other. In this context, it is difficult to delimit where humanitarian response to genocide starts and finishes in contradistinction with the two crises on either side of its timeline. This might explain why humanitarian response followed pre-established protocols that were unsuitable in a genocide situation.

Second, the Rwandan genocide was brutal, yet swift. A round period of 100 days has become the accepted length in the literature on the event. Anyone familiar with the politics and logistics of humanitarian intervention will be aware that this period would make a mockery of an organised and efficient response, even for organisations with the best resources. A final challenge resides in the ferocious nature of the violence, which forced even aid agencies used to political violence in Africa to evacuate their personnel. Of all international NGOs operating in Rwanda before the genocide, only Médecins Sans

Frontières (MSF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) remained in the country (Kuperman, 2001).

This three-fold challenge meant that the onus of humanitarian response was borne by local organisations, including Christian churches. In this paper, ‘church’ is used as an umbrella term to represent both Catholic and Protestant Churches in Rwanda, as well as the international and ecumenical bodies and networks of which Rwandan churches were part. These include the Holy See, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). I will use ‘church’ in the institutional sense and through its representative leaderships. In agreement with Fein (1979: 46), ‘Since the Church is the institution claiming the monopoly of moral sanction, the acts of its leaders should be source of public definition of the situation and the emergent norms in times of crisis’. On the eve of the genocide, this institution ministered to more than 90% of the Rwandan population.² The victims of the massacres as well as the perpetrators were in most cases members of the church.

In the aftermath of the genocide, the church was strongly criticised for failing the people of Rwanda, especially the Tutsi who were the primary target of the massacres. Critics argue that the church did little to prevent the genocide or alleviate victims’ suffering in any substantial way. The horror of the atrocities committed, often on church premises, has overshadowed acts of kindness and humanity. Moral outrage has also been an obstacle to an objective

1 The number of victims is still subject to debate, though the range given here represents the general consensus in the literature.

2 According to the 1991 census, the population breakdown was 62% Catholics, 18% Protestants, 8% Adventists, 1% Muslim and 10% following traditional religion.

examination of the humanitarian role of the church. This paper offers a historical perspective on the role of the Christian Church in the Rwandan genocide between October 1990 and July 1994. The aim is to offer a more judicious appraisal, distinguishing between disproportionate expectations and historical facts. The analysis will bring into focus three aspects of the humanitarian action of the church during this period, namely advocacy, pastoral care and humanitarian assistance.

The Rwandan genocide and the role of churches

In its seminal work on the Rwandan genocide, *Death, Despair and Defiance*, African Rights dedicated two important chapters to the role of Christian churches (African Rights, 1995). Chapter 7 opens with this bleak paragraph:

Bloodied, desecrated and comprehensively looted, it is the churches and parishes of Rwanda that speak most eloquently of the horrors that have ravaged this beautiful country. Mass graves, rotting corpses, latrines with dead bodies, blood-stained altars, bullet-ridden doors and shattered windows bear testimony to the killers' determination to kill – and to kill the belief of the Rwandese people that the church can protect the innocent ... room after room in parish after parish is marked by the evidence of horrendous crimes.

Guilty and victim: the church's response to genocide

*Eglises: Victimes ou coupables?*³ is the title of Tharcisse Gatwa's 2001 book on the role of the Rwandan church in shaping ethnic ideology between 1900 and 1994: ideology which ultimately culminated in the horror of April–July 1994. Like Linden (1977) before him, and Grey (2007) and Longman (2010) after him, Gatwa's work links the predicament of the church in the genocide to the historical relationship between religion/church and politics/state; from the relationship between the first missionaries and the court of King Musinga to the co-option of Archbishop

Vincent Nsengiyumva by the regime Juvenal Habyarimana. All of these studies have one conclusion in common: the ambivalence and ambiguity of the church's response to the genocide are rooted in history (Gatwa, 2012).

A historical approach to the church's role in genocide is important because more Rwandan citizens died in churches than anywhere else (African Rights, 1995). In fact, of the 50 massacre sites sampled throughout the country by African Rights, at least 38 were church-related. A staggering 76% of Tutsi victims were killed on church or church-owned premises. Many of the people responsible for the killings and the desecration of churches were members of the congregation, as were the majority of the victims. Finally, it is arguable that most survivors survived in or were rescued from church premises, often at great cost to the religious workers in charge of their care (Donnet, 1995). In the aftermath of the genocide, these facts led to depictions of the church as a tainted institution, and made it a target for criticism from within and without. As the state collapsed and the interim *genocidaire* government fled the country, the church became the only visible national institution. From within, words like 'shame', 'embarrassment' and 'sadness' began to emerge as flocks and shepherds groped for explanations of the church's failure (McCullum, 2004). Messages of contrition collided with accusations and self-exculpation. From without, journalists, academics and humanitarian workers came down hard on the church. In the words of Ann Mackintosh, Oxfam's representative in Rwanda at the time of the genocide:

Despite their reputation within the region as a substantive force in civil society, and notwithstanding the courage of individual staff in attempt to combat ethnic hatred, Rwandese NGOs as a body, along with every institution within the country, including churches, completely failed to provide any moral leadership or counterforce to the violence prior to or during the genocide (Vaux, 2001).

According to Vaux:

For those who spoke of religion, it was the case of ultimate religious collapse. Senior church figures, including a bishop, were accused of horrific crimes. Rwanda had received more aid than almost any other country in Africa and

3 The English version was published under the title, *The Churches and Ethnic Ideology in the Rwandan Crises 1900–1994* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

had as many churches as anywhere else. Was something wrong with the aid and the church, or the people? (ibid.: 197).

However, the most damning and incisive criticism was offered by Longman (2010), who charges churches with playing an essential role in the descent into violence:

Since its inception in Rwandan [sic], Christianity has consistently been, not a faith that preached brotherly love, but rather one that endorsed obedience to authorities, ethnic discrimination, and power politics. When the genocide finally occurred, thus, Christians, including some pastors and priests, felt little or no contradictions between their religious beliefs and their participation in the slaughter of Rwanda's Tutsi.

Assessing the church's willingness to act as humanitarians

Longman's and similar vehement criticisms raise serious questions about the theological position, political morality and pastoral mission of the church's leadership as far as the genocide is concerned, and with good reason. While many individual priests held firm to their faith and did their utmost to protect their parishioners, the moral authority of the Christian religion as a whole has been undermined by the tardiness and reluctance of its leaders to offer an objective assessment of the situation and clarify the institutional position of the church.

Beyond its ethnic colouring, the Rwandan genocide was first and foremost a political conflict born out of a political history and mythology profoundly internalised by successive generations of Rwandans. There has always been a school of thought within Rwandan churches, especially Protestant churches, that 'politics' is a dirty game and an arena not befitting Christian involvement. Clearly this does not reflect the church's actual record of consistent implication in the defining moments of Rwandan history. In the years of the civil war and the period leading up to the genocide (1990–94), reticence to speak out and reluctance to be proactive in the peace talks were the default position of most religious institutions, including churches.

When the genocide started, the acts of bravery and humanity described elsewhere in this article were the

acts of individuals who found themselves confronted by a tragedy that surpassed their understanding. These were not acts of 'heroes' but of people reacting to exceptional circumstances. Individual church leaders opened their doors to victims, but they did not go out looking for them. However, from available testimonies, including by MSF, once people had found refuge in churches religious workers were willing to provide as much care as they could. The injured were treated or referred to the ICRC/MSF when that avenue was open to them. Reluctance in the public sphere was not replicated in the privacy of church compounds.

In essence, humanitarian action is guaranteed and protected by internal and international law, and the willingness of states to abide by the principles of humanitarian law. Unfortunately, law and the state were the first institutional casualties of the genocide. In this situation of total lawlessness and extreme violence, even 'professional' humanitarian agencies were reluctant to keep their workers in the field and evacuated them in the first two weeks of the conflict (MSF, 2014). Yet even in a situation like the Rwandan genocide, with all of its corollary obstacles, there should be evidence of an express intention to intervene. Such intention was lacking within the institutional hierarchies of the Rwandan church.

This reluctance is in sharp contradiction with the reaction of the Holy See and the WCC. When the genocide started, the Pope was both prompt and forthright in condemning the killings (African Rights, 1995). Similarly, the general secretariat of the WCC issued a communique after a communique condemning the massacres and calling for Rwandan political leaders to act responsibly (CCIA, 2002). However, Rwandans had to wait a further week for Archbishop Nsengiyumva to make a statement. This was tardy, too mild and vague and did little to help people facing an unprecedented moral and political crisis. A joint statement by Catholic and Protestant leaders did not materialise until 13 May, almost 40 days into the genocide. It was too little too late, and to all intents and purposes useless, with its 'uncalled for equanimity' and 'conspicuous failure to call evil by its name, the deliberate confusion of war and genocide and [the leaders'] reluctance to confront those who were propagating crimes against humanity' (McCullum, 2004; African Rights, 1995). More damning still is the fact that a number of priests, pastors and nuns actively participated in or facilitated the killings of Tutsi. African Rights (1995) has provided a list of

some of these religious leaders, and there have been high-profile court cases, both in Rwanda and abroad, which have found such people guilty.

The failure of the church – or more correctly the criticism of this failure – must be put in context. I suggest that it is a product of a period close to the genocide when the humanitarian community as a whole was grappling with a guilty conscience. No one could escape that sense of global failure, least of all the church. With the benefit of time, it is possible to come to terms with the fact that institutional response failed across the board. No single institution, national or international, reacted quickly enough or adequately enough, and the church is traditionally known for being a very slow and cautious institution, especially in political matters. In fact, I argue later that the Rwandan church reacted better than most, and certainly more than it is given credit for.

Furthermore, criticism of the church should not lack integrity or honesty. The unprecedented brutality of the genocide and its accompanying lawlessness and atrocity should be taken into consideration and allowance made for human weakness, even fear. Political and pastoral expectations on church leaders must be carefully considered alongside the particular circumstances of the genocide, lest martyrdom become the norm by which we measure the efficacy of humanitarian action. Interestingly, in his recent biography of Pope Francis, Vallely (2013) produces an analysis of the Argentinian church during the military junta that is reminiscent of the position of the Rwandan church in the genocide.

Finally, giving prominence to what churches did not do fails to appreciate and learn from the many acts of humanitarianism accomplished by the church institutionally or by its individual members. It is this aspect that will occupy subsequent sections.

Church, genocide and humanitarian action

Vaux (2001: 197) asks whether it is possible for aid workers to come to terms with their own sense of guilt and learn from the experience of the Rwandan tragedy. Part of this process should involve moving past exclusively negative criticism of the church and offering an objective and critical evaluation of its

humanitarian action during the 1994 genocide. There is as much to learn from what was not done as from what was between 1990 and 1994. The humanitarian action of the church during this period can be examined under three categories: advocacy, pastoral care and humanitarian assistance.

Advocacy

This section deals with humanitarian advocacy carried out by the Rwandan church as well as global church networks – in this instance the WCC – between 1990 and 1994. Starting in 1990, two key events dominate the political scene which forms the immediate background to the genocide. The first was the ‘La Baule Conference’ in June 1990, where then French President Francois Mitterrand delivered his now famous speech to 37 African leaders: *‘Il n’y a pas de développement sans démocratie et il n’y a pas de démocratie sans développement!’*. Habyarimana, along with other African leaders of the France-Afrique family, were being told in no uncertain terms that aid from France and other Western countries would no longer be unconditional; it was time to usher in an era of democratisation and human rights. However, while Habyarimana pledged to initiate political reforms on 5 July 1990, a new constitution and a law legalising the formation of political parties were not adopted until June 1991. The intervening period, which saw the birth of a plethora of political parties, independent newspapers and human right groups, was significantly influenced by the second major event of that year: the start, on 1 October 1990, of the civil war between the Hutu-dominated Rwandan armed forces (FAR) and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), made up mainly of Tutsi refugees and their descendants exiled following the massacres of 1959–61. These two events signalled the beginning of years of political turmoil and the cycle of violence which ultimately culminated in the genocide of 1994. After initial reluctance, the Rwandan church became an active participant in events, and Gatwa (2001) provides a detailed and lucid historical evaluation of the church’s response to the political crisis of 1990–94. This is an authoritative account from someone involved in the process every step of the way, as a clergyman, activist, academic and journalist.

Before the emergence of an independent press in 1990, Kinyamateka, the Catholic Church’s monthly newspaper, was the only independent paper in the country. In that role, it had been the first media organ to adopt a very critical stance towards Habyarimana’s single-party regime. This led to the suspected assassination

of one of its most critical editors, Father Sylvio Sindambiwe (Sibomana, 1999). His successor, Father André Sibomana, not only carried on the Kinyamateka tradition, but was also influential within Rwanda's fledgling civil society. In addition to his role as senior editor of Kinyamateka, Sibomana was the co-founder and legal representative of the Rwandan Association for the Defence of Human Rights and Public Liberties (ADL), set up in 1991.⁴ Another priest, Jesuit Chrysologue Mahame, was behind the creation of the Association of Volunteers for Peace (AVP). Killed on 7 April at Centre Mahame, he was one of the very first victims of the genocide (African Rights, 1995).

The humanitarian role of these human rights groups was very important during the civil war. They were not content with issuing solemn statements. Rather, they were determined to systematically document and publicly report human rights violations (Sibomana, 1999). They also made it their duty to inform the diplomatic community and international media about what was happening. Thus, in collaboration with international human rights groups and activists such as the late Alison Des Forges of Human Rights Watch, ADL launched investigations such as the discovery of a mass grave in Nasho (*ibid.*). ADL also set up a network of informers, mostly parish priests, and trained teams of investigators to help grassroots activism (*ibid.*).

In early September 1990, 30 intellectuals including priests and church personnel issued an open letter to the president calling on him to honour his promise and allow free debate on political reform. Under pressure from this group, Habyarimana formed the National Commission of Synthesis to draft a new national political charter. Among its 30 members were church representatives (Longman, 2010). With the start of the civil war in October, church advocacy became more intense and diverse, both nationally and abroad. Beginning in 1991, the WCC engaged with the AACC in efforts to bring the parties to the conflict together to resolve their differences through negotiation (WCC, 2002; Gatwa, 2001). Catholic and Protestant churches were also involved in efforts towards peace. A joint commission of ten members, the *Comité de contacts* (Church Liaison Committee) headed by Bishop Thaddee Nsengiyumva (Catholic) and Pastor Michel

Twagirayesu (Presbyterian), was set up to support peace efforts until the signing of the Arusha Accords in August 1993 (African Rights, 1995; Gatwa, 2001).

After the genocide started, the WCC/AACC were one of the first institutions to react to the situation and alert the international community.⁵ Meanwhile, some church leaders called on the local authorities, both military and civilians, to protect the Tutsi. For instance, Bishop Frederic Rubwejanga went to a local military camp to ask for protection for Tutsi who were being attacked in Kibungo. Mgr Thaddée Nthinyurwa of Cyangugu preached against the killings on 10 April, and travelled to Nyamasheke parish when he learnt that Tutsi in the church there were under attack (Des Forges, 1999).

Critics of the church have pointed to the limitations and inadequacies of this aspect of its humanitarian action. Longman (2010) is particularly critical of the church hierarchies' failure to name specific crimes and their victims or single out the individuals and authorities responsible. He also criticises their failure to address the institutional nature of the violence. Gatwa, who was actively involved in this process, speaks of the church's lack of preparation. In terms of church advocacy, when the genocide started most voices fell silent. Only the WCC/AACC Secretariat persisted throughout the genocide, appealing to Rwandans and the international community not to abandon the country to violence and murder.

I maintain that this dissatisfaction bespeaks the guilt and disappointment generated by the genocide. Considered together, the combined efforts of church-backed human rights associations, the contribution of the WCC/AACC and the contribution of the national clergies represented a sufficient advocacy effort. Granted, it was ill-coordinated and left much to be desired. Yet the information it conveyed was such that 'none of the diplomats who were in Rwanda at the time can claim that they did not know what was about to happen' (Sibomana, 1999).

Pastoral care

There are few studies in the area of pastoral care as a humanitarian response to violent conflict, as if the two are mutually exclusive. Pastoral care has a vast scope, but in this paper I want to narrow its application to the moral, spiritual and psychological assistance provided to the Rwandan people by the church during the genocide. Both pastoral care and humanitarian assistance went hand in hand in most cases, whether

⁴ *Association Rwandaise pour la défense des droits de la personne et des libertés publiques*. He was also a cofounder of the very first human rights organisation, ARDHO (Rwandan Association of the Defence of Human Rights).

delivered by faith communities, church leaders or individual believers.

Pastoral care as a response by churches started before the genocide. For instance, following the outbreak of the war in 1990, the Episcopal Conference of Catholic bishops issued letters speaking out against violence and calling for peace, reconciliation and ethnic harmony (Longman, 2010). It is also important to mention the role played by Protestant and evangelical institutions such as the African Evangelistic Enterprise (AEE), which sought to comfort people and awaken their moral and spiritual consciousness through prayers, religious revival and the Word of God (Gatwa, 2001).

When the genocide started, throughout Rwanda tens of thousands of people gathered in churches and parishes. In many cases the priests responsible could only encourage people to sing and pray. As one nun put it:

Me and my colleagues would bring people together to sing and congregate until the time of death. We sang hymns, said the rosary, did the mass. It is enough for me not to have died, to continue to have my faith in God. If it wasn't for God, everybody would have perished (African Rights, 1995).

In some instances, providing pastoral care was hazardous. In *Faith under Fire*, Antoine Rutayisire tells the story of Pastor Kayihura of ADEPR-Gakinjira. As RPF fighters closed in on the church, where 700 Hutu and Tutsi had taken refuge, he was asked to save himself, to which the old pastor replied, 'These are the children the Lord has given me. This is the flock the Lord has put under my care. How can I, a father and a shepherd, leave my children and the Lord's sheep and go? I will stay with them up to the end'. A few days before, a member of the Hutu militia had held a gun to his head and demanded the keys to the compound where Tutsis were hiding. He refused to hand them over and the militiaman fired, not to kill him but to frighten him. Still he refused to open the door (Rutayisire, 1995). Tutsi survivors reported the help provided by Frater Bahizi and Father Oscar Nkundayezu of Cyangugu Parish to refugees in Kamarampaka Stadium and Nyarushishi camp. McCullum (2004) tells the story of Canon Karuhije Alphonse of EER-Saint Etienne, who saved and comforted many people before he was killed in June, betrayed by a fellow priest.

With generalised institutional collapse, the burden of carrying religious witness was left to individuals. Many believers put their lives in great danger to rescue fellow believers, hide them and feed them, refusing to hand them over, even on pain of death. Hutu believers relinquished luxuries and comforts to accommodate strangers threatened with death. With many believers involved in the killings, it is easy to overlook the actions of those who sold their businesses to feed people they had rescued or to buy them out of a certain death. It can be easy to ignore the actions of someone like Pastor 'Fabian' who, throughout the genocide, organised a 'network' to ferry people across Lake Kivu to the island of Idjwi, transforming his house into a restful stopover for body and soul (Rutayisire, 1995). When many believers were involved in looting, it is easy to overlook the efforts of those who looked after the properties of fugitives or tried to salvage belongings and mementos from fires and looting so that the survivors would have something to remind them that they had actually lived before death and fire engulfed their past (*ibid.*).

Other believers played a more complex role, for instance by tracking the killers so that potential victims could be moved safely from one hiding place to another. This complicates the definition of 'bystanders' during the genocide because standing by could have been less passive than it appeared. For instance, how could one tell simple bystanders from people who were monitoring the movements of killers and the position of roadblocks in order to facilitate the escape of fugitives at night? Rescuing, hiding and getting people to safety involved different people performing different tasks. Some Hutu believers literally put their lives on hold and dedicated their time and effort to ensuring the safety and protection of Tutsi fugitives.

Pastoral care happened before and after the genocide, but more could have been done. Religious leaders could have said more. More could have been done between 1990 and 1994 for the Tutsi victims of pogroms in Bigogwe, Bugesera and Kibuye. More should have been done in displacement camps such as Nyacyonga. More should have been done for the people incarcerated in stadia after the *ibyitso*⁶ night of 4–5 October 1990. Another fact that is often overlooked is that pastoral care was needed not only by victims of the genocide but also by many Hutu

6 Literally 'accomplices', used in reference to supporters or sympathisers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front.

who, in Sibomana's words, 'were left alone with their consciences' (Sibomana, 1999). At the level of research, it is important to gather all available archives and oral histories for this period to develop a clear picture of what it is like to provide pastoral care with limited means in situations of extreme violence.

Humanitarian assistance

Like pastoral care, humanitarian intervention covers a wide range of actions and interventions. With regard to the topic this article is concerned with, I will primarily focus my analysis on the key role played by church premises (church buildings, church schools, hospital schools, etc.) as impromptu gathering centres for Tutsi refugees fleeing massacres. It is a well-documented fact that houses of worship, especially churches, became slaughterhouses.⁷ The horror of what happened in them often overshadows the fact that they had initially been opened as shelters. Church premises registered the highest levels of casualties, but this was a direct consequence of the fact that they had received more Tutsi than anywhere else. Throughout the country, priests and bishops opened their churches to the displaced and persecuted. Keeping the doors of churches and mosques closed would have been immoral, criminal and inhumane.⁸

I pointed out previously that churches were one of only three humanitarian organisations that remained operational during the genocide. At this point, it seems relevant to explore the level of collaboration that existed between local agencies, with the churches as an example, the ICRC and MSF. A perusal of ICRC literature on its response to the genocide reveals very low to non-existent collaboration with local organisations, including churches. If such collaboration occurred, it does not warrant mention in ICRC's records. For instance, Philippe Gaillard, head of the ICRC delegation in Rwanda between 1993 and 1994, does not refer to any local agency, faith-based or otherwise, except the Rwandan Red Cross, in his post-genocide reflections, aside from a passing reference to a conversation with the Apostolic Nuncio.⁹ However,

Gaillard speaks abundantly and in glowing terms of collaboration between ICRC and MSF. In fact, it is to MSF that one should turn for a better account of the collaboration between these two expatriate NGOs and their rapport with local NGOs, including churches. *A Médecins Sans Frontières Speaks Out* case study of 2014 is dedicated to the Rwandan genocide and the way MSF understands its role in the tragedy (MSF, 2014). In my opinion, the document should be on the reading list of any humanitarian serious about their desire to understand how humanitarian orthodoxy as an ethos was found wanting in the face of such an unprecedented crisis.¹⁰

MSF's self-evaluation attributes the inadequacies of the humanitarian response to the crisis to poor analysis of the conflict as well as a lack of contextual and local political knowledge. Dr Jean-Herve Bradol, the Rwanda Programme Manager for MSF France at the time, observed: 'Even though we'd been working there for several years, there was no thinking in the group here, and even less internationally, that integrated the work of others to better understand the conflict' (MSF, 2014: 13). A colleague from MSF Holland goes further: '[w]e in MSF, did not know what was going on ... we knew nothing about the context, so what exactly were we doing?' (*ibid.*). This lack of local and contextual knowledge is as understandable as it is alarming. It is also unsurprising because it reflects the humanitarian culture prevalent in pre-genocide Rwanda – a culture dominated by a sort of 'Expats Club', whose members would not deny a certain level of arrogance or disdain towards local agencies and their expertise. Instead, international humanitarian agencies like MSF and ICRC had developed what one MSF cadre calls a 'fatalistic attitude': 'We perceived the genocide ... not through the lens of the Rwandan context ... It was viewed with that ability of MSF of getting used to certain situations, of seeing it as somehow normal'.

This disregard for or lack of confidence in local agencies explains why MSF and the ICRC chose to collaborate closely during the genocide. In fact, for a number of reasons, MSF teams operated under the banner of the ICRC, whose delegate was sole spokesperson (MSF, 2014). The extent of this collaboration constitutes the bulk of MSF's report. Most revealing is the manner

7 The Catholic Church of Nyamata, now a genocide memorial, has become a symbol of desecrated places of worship. See <http://www.genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Nyamata>.

8 African Rights (1995: 901) recorded only one instance of a pastor who refused to open church doors to fleeing Tutsi.

9 See for example his otherwise insightful conference paper delivered in Geneva on 18 October 1994: <https://www.icrc.org/fr/resources/documents/misc/5xdjps.htm>.

10 It is important to remember that whilst the international community hesitated on the adequate qualification of events unfolding in Rwanda, MSF Belgium was the first to apply the term 'genocide' to the atrocities being committed against Rwandan Tutsi (on 28 April 1994). See MSF (2014: 29).

in which the special relationship between these two organisations evolved – and at times threatened to reach breaking point as MSF sought to protect its independence from the ICRC in order to challenge humanitarian doctrine and call for armed intervention in Rwanda. This situation is reminiscent of the Biafra conflict (Desgrandchamps, 2012).

As for the matter that concerns this paper, there was a level of collaboration between ICRC/MSF and religious institutions. The following extract is a rare but informative example: ‘The religious institutions that had taken in casualties phoned the ICRC delegation requesting the evacuation of the patients ... The religious institution we went to had been attacked ... The churches had also been transformed into slaughterhouses’ (MSF, 2010). This clearly shows that there was some exchange of information and people between religious institutions and ICRC/MSF, although the volume, frequency and number are not precisely known. It also offers proof that religious organisations were sheltering people, including serious casualties. Yet what is intriguing in this short excerpt is the underlying impression that what these religious bodies were doing did not qualify as humanitarianism. One gets the impression that humanitarian action occurred during the evacuation and treatment of the patients. However, the role of religious institutions in welcoming and harbouring Tutsi fugitives constitutes an act of supreme humanitarianism.

Given the nature of the Rwandan genocide, it is difficult to estimate to what extent the collaboration between ICRC/MSF and local agencies could have been enhanced or optimised. However, it is clear that ICRC/MSF could have used local organisations to gain a better understanding of the political nature of the conflict, the stakes involved and the potential for deterioration. Local human rights groups had sought to alert the international humanitarian community in Rwanda to the gravity of the situation (Sibomana, 1999).

When the genocide started, the freedom of movement ICRC convoys enjoyed put it in a better position to liaise with faith-based institutions sheltering refugees and coordinate humanitarian care accordingly. Obviously this would have been more successful in Kigali, where ICRC and MSF were more active. It would not have been unheard of for the ICRC to cooperate more extensively with local agencies: in the Nigeria–Biafra conflict, which had a profound influence on the ICRC, the agency ‘accepted the

support of other organisations, including religious groups such as the World Council of Churches’ (Desgrandchamps, 2012). It is curious that ICRC did not make use of its experience in Biafra in the Rwanda response. In fact it could be accused of the same ‘insouciance’ the organisation was charged with back in the days of the Biafra war (*ibid.*). Did it run out of time? Did its neutrality prevent a swift and adequate response? These questions remain unanswered. However, when a history of the ICRC in the Rwandan genocide is finally written, it should highlight the absence of fundamental consideration of local agencies as equal and capable partners in assessing and responding to the conflict.

Despite suggestions that killers tended to avoid harming foreign personnel (Kuperman, 2001), it is well documented that a significant number of non-Rwandans were murdered, including ten Belgian peacekeepers. It is also important to note that foreign priests and nuns stayed in Rwanda out of solidarity with the Rwandan people. The story of Father Vijecko Curic is representative (Belton, 2014). But above all, it is Rwandan priests and nuns who were in the vanguard. It is not uncommon to come across the question, ‘why did the people go to the churches?’. There are many reasons. During the violence against Tutsi in 1959, 1961–64, 1973 and 1990, people had sought shelter and found safety in churches, and religious workers had usually been spared. As recently as February 1994, the Jesuit-run Centre Christus had sheltered many Tutsi who had fled their homes after a series of murders following the assassination of Martin Bucyana, the president of the Hutu Coalition for the Defence of the Republic (CDR). According to African Rights, this might explain why the centre became the scene of the very first massacres, at 7am on 7 April (African Rights, 1995).

It has also been noted that the Catholic Church dominates the narrative on churches and genocide. ‘Its influence is everywhere and its huge parishes sit on many of the most beautiful hillsides’, notes African Rights (1995: 869). Many Tutsi took refuge in these churches because they offered significant advantages that other churches did not have. One major advantage was space. Most churches had satellite convents and adjoining schools, which ensured more hiding places. They also had hospitals or health centres, meaning that refugees could benefit from basic medical care. More importantly, they were more robust, being built to protect the privacy of their

religious residents and – quite literally – keep out worldly influence. This was also the case for some Protestant locations. For instance, at the Pentecostal church of Gihundwe, instead of seeking shelter in the church building, which was exposed on a hill, Tutsi preferred to hide in the Groupe Scolaire next door, which was not easily accessible.

When assessing the humanitarian response of the Rwandan church to the genocide, paying special attention to humanitarian assistance for Tutsi fleeing the massacres, it is important to bear in mind the huge disparity between parish size and the number of clergy in charge. Most parishes were looked after by an average of 3–5 priests. For instance, the Parish of Mibilizi received close to 6,000 refugees under the care of Fr Boneza, Fr Rwakabayiza and Fr Kabera (African Rights, 2003). Centre Saint Paul in Kigali hosted 2,000 refugees under the sole care of Fr Célestin Hakizimana. Fifteen thousand Tutsi took refuge in church buildings in Kaduha parish. There were 4,000 Tutsi hiding in the parish of Kibuye and close to 3,000 in the church of Ntarama (Sibomana, 1999). This situation was replicated throughout the country.

From a humanitarian perspective, these are phenomenal statistics. To put them in context, the ICRC, by far the best equipped agency logistically during the genocide, managed to evacuate and/or look after 10,000 people.¹¹ Even with careful planning, financial and logistical resources and adequate security protocols, emergency sites with thousands of vulnerable people are difficult to manage. With none of the above and under siege from unrelenting attack, the situation was beyond critical for most parishes in 1994. It was in these circumstances that church personnel delivered humanitarian aid to Tutsi refugees. Sibomana (1999: 68) summarises the situation with remarkable understatement: ‘it was difficult to save Tutsi, to hide them and to feed them’. Yet that is what they tried to do. They stood by the refugees during the worst experiences of their lives. They made food and medical assistance available to the displaced and kept them hopeful. Others organised escape networks which smuggled Tutsi into Zaire, Burundi and other neighbouring countries, at times hidden in sacks or

by passing them off as corpses or wounded patients. They negotiated with killers for the lives of refugees.

In some cases, priests actively participated in repelling attacks on refugees when it became evident that the *gendarmes* who were supposed to protect them were in fact aiding the killers. African Rights’ *Tribute to Courage* and Rutayisire’s *Faith under Fire* contain astonishing stories of faith workers doing incredible things in the most horrific circumstances. In doing so, many priests and nuns lost their lives alongside the people they were trying to protect.¹² They also managed to save lives. Two thousand people survived in Centre Saint Paul, and around the same number survived in Mibilizi parish before being moved to Nyarushishi camp. Fewer than 300 people escaped death in Kibuye parish, whilst in some parishes priests and refugees all perished. Little wonder, then, that some surviving priests who lived through this harrowing experience felt what most aid workers in war zones have often felt, namely intense depression and feelings of abandonment (Sibomana, 1999).

Not surprisingly, most of the priests and pastors who lived through these experiences are yet to publish their stories. It is also unfortunate for humanitarian literature and policy-making that not enough research has been dedicated to uncovering what really went on behind the walls of besieged church premises. Such research would shed much-needed light on how humanitarian relief and pastoral care can be provided and improved in situations of extreme violence. It would also go a long way to show the full extent of church premises as humanitarian assets, and how they can be efficiently put to use in times of crisis.

Another point worth highlighting is the fact that most parishes managed to hold out for at least two weeks. In fact, there seems to be a pattern: most attacks on churches happened between 17 and 25 April. Kuperman (2001) has suggested that, by 21 April, three-quarters of Tutsi victims had already perished. Yet in the context of the Rwandan genocide, 25% still represents 125,000 people, and I would strongly argue that most were sheltering on church premises.

Despite well documented shortcomings, the churches turned out to be the only institutions that possessed ‘intrinsic readiness’ and assets without which the

11 See ‘1994–2003: Génocide au Rwanda et crise dans les Grands Lacs’, <https://www.icrc.org/fre/who-we-are/history/150-years/index.jsp?rdpage=fre/who-we-are/history/150-years/timeline/timeline-1994.htm>.

12 For the number of religious workers who were killed in the genocide, see African Rights (1995: 875–94).

genocide could have been even more catastrophic. This was possible because of readily available buildings and space, a history of providing shelter for the persecuted, people's psycho-religious predisposition to seek refuge, a pastoral mandate to care and counsel as well as the moral authority to keep 'evil at bay', albeit temporarily. Despite the lack of any protection, these places managed to save more people than the whole international community put together and even the RPF, which is generally credited with stopping the genocide.

Conclusion: humanitarian lessons from Rwanda

'To tell you the truth, until the day I left, even after I arrived back in Holland, I didn't know that it was a genocide. I had never worked before in a genocide. I didn't know what a genocide was. I knew what a war was ... To me this was ... a civil war where everyone kills each other' (MSF, 2010).

The Rwandan genocide was an unprecedented experience for the humanitarian community, to which norms of traditional humanitarianism proved inadequate. In the words of McCullum (2004), 'Rwanda shook the international aid-relief-emergency humanitarian community to the core ... It showed that 40 years of experience in dealing with disasters had several shortcomings'. More than anything else, the genocide was a political act: at best, a result of the failure of the Rwandan state to protect its people, and at worst, the direct and active extermination by the state of the Tutsi population. Notwithstanding the concern of experts such as Uvin (1998) and Vaux on the possibility of humanitarian assistance aiding violence, the humanitarian community – Rwandan and international – can only be held accountable for their response, not for the genocide itself.

The genocide also highlights the importance of reacting quickly to crises that can escalate at phenomenal speed, cause a staggering number of victims and abate very suddenly. If one takes the two-week period suggested by Kuperman as an indicative

window of opportunity for intervention before tragic escalation, is this sufficient to assess whether a state has failed? Even if this assessment were carried out, is a humanitarian response possible in such a short time? Between 1994 and now, technology, in particular communication and information technology, has come on in leaps and bounds, even in developing countries. It would be helpful to reflect on ways in which the combination of institutional networking and telecommunications technology could help in expediting aid and relief within these tight timeframes.

With this remark in mind, 'Rwanda 94' vindicates the importance of regional and local humanitarian organisations. If and when they fail to react adequately, as was the case in Rwanda, the crisis escalates beyond acceptable and manageable thresholds. In this context of local institutional collapse, the Rwandan church was expected to stand out and lead the way. Although it did so to a certain extent, in the context of a tragedy of unimaginable magnitude, it is difficult to put a positive gloss on the humanitarian actions of the Rwandan church.

The aim of this paper was to show that, in order to draw a clearer picture of the Rwandan experience, a guilt-free and objective approach to the historical role of the church in the genocide is needed. Such a step is important if humanitarian agencies are to learn from what churches did not do, what they did badly and what they did better than most other humanitarian groups. At the level of the church itself new initiatives have been emerging, pointing to alternative ways of responding to crises. One such is Church World Action Rwanda (CWA-R), a joint initiative by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and WCC which, in its conceptualisation, seeks to go beyond 'mere' humanitarianism to tackle the structural causes of violence and conflict (McCullum, 2004). This kind of comprehensive response is what critics of the Rwandan church wanted to see in the 1994 genocide. However, it is important to remember that pastoral and humanitarian care 'can only ever be the first word and never the last word whilst responding to a situation of great need that has a political dimension' (Bretherton, 2010).

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8 The evolution of rights-based humanitarianism in Sierra Leone

Melissa Labonte and Ishmeal Alfred Charles

Humanitarians should not worry about being accused of missionary zeal. It is the people who will decide.

Archibald and Williams (2002: 363)

Introduction

The effectiveness (and our perceptions) of humanitarianism nearly always involves a trade-off between principles and pragmatism.¹ While humanitarianism as a system remains very much a goal-oriented, reactive enterprise, its main actors seldom have either the time for or the luxury of deep reflection and philosophical engagement, which often takes a backseat to doing what's needed in the here and now to save people's lives. Indeed, principles of humanitarian action are foremost a means to an end – and comprise a commitment to aid and action designed to alleviate suffering, save lives and enhance and protect human dignity during and following human- or nature-induced disasters.

But increasingly, the humanitarian system and the actors that inhabit it find themselves grappling with new and unforeseen challenges that prompt reconsideration of traditional approaches to meeting the needs of communities and individuals caught up in humanitarian crisis. While the core principles of humanitarian action have remained largely unchanged since their codification in the 1960s, their socially-constructed value has been subject to flux in tandem

with changes that mark the social and political contexts within which they are implemented. The humanitarian principle of independence, for example, has taken on new meaning with the advent of humanitarian crises in the context of the global war on terror. In a similar manner, the ICRC principle of voluntarism has come under challenge with the creation of for-profit humanitarian enterprises. And the humanitarian principle of neutrality has always been subject to conditional and qualified interpretations that differ profoundly among international and local humanitarian actors.

One way to approach these new challenges is to take stock – to peer into the rear-view mirror of humanitarianism's history and revisit its roots in select settings in order to generate new insights and help avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. A number of recent studies have taken just this tack (Barnett, 2011; Fassin, 2011) to good effect, traversing the moral and political landscape upon which humanitarian ideas, norms and practices mutually constitute each other in their respective global orders and eras.

In that spirit, our research is built on a focused historical examination of the evolution of rights-based humanitarianism in Sierra Leone. The historical legacy of present-day humanitarianism in Sierra Leone is rooted in traditional cultures of care, maintenance and hospitality that have been shaped and reshaped by decades of political patronage and corruption, engagement with traditional and religious authorities, civil war and poverty. In addition to these cultures, the emergence of a rights-based approach to humanitarianism was facilitated by historical antecedents that date not only to the founding of the colony in 1787 and the protectorate in 1896 (combined into a single political unit in 1947), but also to the

¹ We are grateful for the insights and comments provided by participants in the March 2015 'History of Humanitarianism' workshop in Addis Ababa hosted by the Humanitarian Policy Group and Africa Humanitarian Action, and for the feedback and commentary offered by Sara Pantuliano, Christina Bennett and Hanna B. Krebs.

post-colonial era. This approach waxed and waned following Sierra Leone's independence in 1961, and re-emerged during the nation's civil war in the 1990s. Presently, rights-based humanitarianism in Sierra Leone comports with prevailing social norms that underpin the global structure of liberal peacebuilding, in which a good deal of humanitarian activity is situated. Perhaps most importantly, it is aligned with faith-based traditions that have characterised the landscapes of both peace and war in West Africa, and which also serve as benchmarks for human security and wellbeing (Ellis and Haar, 2008: 181).

We explore how humanitarian action has come to be understood by select stakeholders through the intersection of politics, violence, gender and human rights. The humanitarian consequences of mid-twentieth century one-party rule, late twentieth century civil war and twenty-first century humanitarianism and peacebuilding are explored, particularly as they relate to shifts in perceptions of the role individual human rights plays in ensuring social justice and sustainable post-conflict transitions. The work of religious and faith-based humanitarian actors features prominently in this study, especially within the context of their role as drivers of human rights norms. The obstacles facing these actors as they have practiced their brand of humanitarianism and missionary activity over the centuries, and their efforts to promote fuller understandings of humanitarianism as a bridge to ensuring human respect and dignity and facilitating the building of cultures of peace and tolerance within Sierra Leone are also analysed.

This work is based mainly on desk research using historical sources, interviews conducted during fieldwork in Sierra Leone in 2010 and 2013 and the intimate local working knowledge possessed by one of the co-authors, who is responsible for humanitarian programming within a faith-based humanitarian organisation headquartered in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown. Our work is qualitative, using a process tracing method to identify and analyse turning-points where ideas that are foundational to a rights-based approach appear, and assess their effects on key actors and programming. The limitations of this approach are mainly that it is not highly generalisable to other cases, but rather provides fine-grained exploration of the nature and evolution of humanitarianism in a key case. In particular, the research reveals how the dynamics of bottom-up and top-down processes have unfolded in Sierra Leone, alongside the nascent

consolidation of institutions that have the potential to consolidate a rights-based approach and facilitate durable peace.

Unlike many of its neighbours, Sierra Leone's civil war was not fought on the basis of religious difference or ethnic identity per se. At its core, it was a war that stemmed from a combination of greed and grievance (Berman and Labonte, 2006; Hoffman, 2011; Peters, 2011), which interacted in ways that facilitated the assertion of rights-based humanitarianism founded on human dignity and social justice – norms that had long been denied to most Sierra Leoneans. The resurgence of these norms has occurred in parallel with the longstanding salience of religion in the everyday lives of Sierra Leoneans.

Rights, faith and humanitarianism

We begin our survey of the origins of this approach and our assessment of the implications it carries for contemporary humanitarianism by discussing basic elements of a rights-based approach, followed by a brief treatment of it in terms of faith-based humanitarianism. Typically contrasted with more paternalistic forms of charity, or what Slim (2002) calls philanthropy, rights-based humanitarianism engages formal and informal political actors in demanding forms of justice to ensure the equality and dignity of human life. It infuses the enterprise of charity and compassion with notions of duty and responsibility that go beyond 'a bed for the night' (Rieff, 2002). Rights-based humanitarianism affirms individual agency and compels a measure of political accountability that has long been missing in the discourse of traditional humanitarianism (Mamdani, 2009).

Indeed, Slim's (2002) rationale for the shift from a philanthropic to a rights-based humanitarianism entails explicit justification of action based on clearly articulated values and common ideological language. To be clear, a rights-based approach to humanitarianism is not a panacea – it does not guarantee that particularism or paternalism will not rear their ugly heads in aiding the suffering. Nor does this approach presume that 'good ideas' are easily implemented in real world settings devoid of political context (or that 'good ideas' are themselves 'enough'). Most importantly, rights-based humanitarianism can readily be co-opted by those who are really in the business of delivering charity dressed up to look like rights (Slim, 2002).

That said, however, it is undeniable that human rights norms have assumed unprecedented importance in international politics. They form the bedrock of international treaties and covenants, declarations, Security Council resolutions, the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect, every peacekeeping mandate authorised since 1999 and all manner of civilian protection ideals. These ideals are found in literature, law, politics, religion and art. They are part of the essence of what it means to be human. In the words of Samuel Moyn, the contemporary power of human rights is best understood by focusing on their utopian dimension. Human rights are, as he puts it, perhaps the last utopia – their prominence recognised as a result of the failure of other (political, economic and/or social) visions. '[H]uman rights are best understood as survivors: the god that did not fail while other political ideologies did' (Moyn, 2010: 5).

Faith-based humanitarianism is not new to West Africa. Religious and missionary activity are at the core of the region's history, including external intervention by missionary societies and the deep involvement of faith-based non-governmental organisations in education, women's rights, children's rights and humanitarianism. This work has been carried out mainly by organisations whose missions embody core religious norms and tenets, reflected in organisational memberships or programmatic approaches, although few can be described as purely missionary in the traditional or literal sense. While not an exhaustive list, such organisations include the American Friends Service Committee, Caritas, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), ChildFund (formerly Christian Children's Fund), Jesuit Refugee Services, Lutheran World Relief, the Mennonite Central Committee, MercyCorps and World Vision International. Faith-based humanitarianism is rooted firmly in the discourse of human rights – and the intrinsically complex relationship between the 'power of the spiritual to transform both individuals and society' (Tyndale, 2003: 23). Its appeal for Sierra Leoneans is attributable to many factors, not least among them the value religious practices have in individual and community well-being. It is through interactions with the unseen world of faith and religion that many Sierra Leoneans come to believe that they are able to shape and influence their lived-in world (Ellis and Haar, 2008: 181–82).

The primary elements that inform faith-based approaches to humanitarianism include dignity, recognition, affirmation and mutuality, along with the

belief in the sacredness of what it means to be human. Indeed, there may well be universal appeal embodied within the notion of the power of the spiritual. Appeals to justice and solidarity are also features of a faith-based approach to humanitarianism – and can be absolutely critical in legitimating transboundary universal human rights values that may build bridges across different traditions and cultures. This marries with the understanding of religious practice as a 'technique for living' (Ellis and Haar, 2008: 183). Taking a rights-based approach to humanitarianism requires emphasising accountability and longer-term, holistic programming that engages deeply with local communities and individuals. The focus on accountability is especially important in conflict transition settings and in societies where social welfare and justice are viewed as arbitrary and fleeting, and where legitimacy and credibility are often in short supply (Dicklitch and Rice, 2004: 661). And, as a technique for living – living a better life – faith-based humanitarianism is greatly valued by many Sierra Leoneans.

Rights-based humanitarianism and faith-based humanitarian organisations have (re)found a natural alliance with one another. In some ways they reflect a modern reintegration of pre-colonial contexts, in which effective governance could not be possible without religion (and all of its foundational values) playing a significant role. Together they hold promise as a form of humanitarianism based on humanism, individual agency and human security grounded in social justice – something much more than paternalism masked by the veneer of benevolence and charity. And, as an expression of the desire by individuals to be agents of change in their own political, social and cultural lives, faith provides both the practical and spiritual tools to encounter and effectively manage an outwardly secular political system that has utterly failed its people.

The origins of rights-based humanitarianism in Sierra Leone

Founded in 1787, the Freetown settlement (and subsequently the colony of Sierra Leone) was built on the vision of abolitionists like Granville Sharp, who set out to create a homeland for freed slaves and to foster a new political community dedicated to ending the African slave trade. Sharp and others sought to establish 'legitimate commerce, Christianity,

representative government, and the benefits of Western civilization in Freetown' (Everill, 2012: 1; 9). In particular, the expectation of the colonisers was that the colony would embrace the values and norms of the Christian framework and become an example of progress for the rest of Africa (Devenaux, 1976: 47; Porter, 1953: 4–5; Abdullah, 1998: 86).

Like most social engineering experiments of this era, it was premised on a range of assumptions which, on the one hand, relied on the rhetoric of humanitarian universalism, while on the other smacked of paternalism imbued with what Slim (2002) has termed the always resilient 'colonial gaze'. Indeed, the fact that most founders of the Church Missionary Society (supported by the Church of England) were also leading members of the Sierra Leone Company illustrates the overlapping interests that paved the way for colonisation (Porter, 1953: 7). By the mid-nineteenth century, the norms of liberation and human rights that underpinned this experiment had become internalised by many in Sierra Leone through the education system, itself supported by missionaries and the government. Yet these norms were short-lived owing to growing anti-abolitionist movements in the UK and US. Colonisation as a solution to end the slave trade started to become passé, even as the ideals of this movement provided the rationale for expansion and imperialism in the region, particularly by Britain (Devenaux, 1976: 45; Everill, 2012: 81–83, 177).

Settler activity came to be characterised by 'agricultural expansion, trade, militias, and mission', and a 'coercive engagement' with the indigenous population, which resulted in extraction by the former at the latter's expense, fully supported by the colonial authorities (Everill, 2012: 178). The humanitarian 'impulse' that initially prompted the anti-slavery movement in Sierra Leone (and Liberia and other parts of West Africa) quickly succumbed to the logic of imperialism, which itself was put into the service of the colonial national interest. Human rights were no longer part of the rationale informing settler–native relationships. Perhaps unsurprisingly, missionary organisations played a central role in this chapter of Sierra Leone's history, and functioned much like other business, military and political actors operating within the highly complex abolitionism/anti-abolitionism dynamic. Indeed, Sierra Leone was the last colony in West Africa to abolish slavery (in 1896), but it was not technically outlawed until 1928 and routinely continued under the Chieftdom system (Harris, 2014: 25).

It was during this period paralleling the establishment of the Protectorate (which encompassed all territory outside the colony, and is reflected within Sierra Leone's current national borders), where the struggle between material and ideational norms in respect of human rights reasserted itself. Linking recent violence to the slave trade, British and Krio officials in the 1890s supported a reorganisation and reinforcement of colonial military capability in order to 'protect' the local population, whilst also ensuring peace and economic prosperity (Abraham, 1978: 117), albeit at the expense of individual rights and freedoms. In order to administer the Protectorate, the British favoured a system of local rule overseen by Chiefs, as well as customary and native law. Chiefs were given the power to adjudicate, through local courts (overseen ultimately by a District Commissioner), all matters of governance except disputes involving the slave trade (Abraham, 1978: 117). British authorities agreed that local assent would be essential to ensure effective rule, but in reality the Protectorate came into force without any such assent being granted by the local populace.

The administration of the Protectorate Ordinance was framed in a way that still resonates with regard to contemporary humanitarianism and peacebuilding in Sierra Leone. The foremost goal was securing respect for the imperial power's fundamental values, but within the local context. Local actors (Paramount Chiefs) were allowed to utilise traditional norms to exercise their authority, but only if those norms did not contravene those of 'humanity and civilization' (Abraham, 1978: 125; 178–80). A dualist system of rights and norms emerged from this arrangement, with the traditional being conditioned and constrained by the colonial. Paramount Chiefs were also given a range of powers over the inhabitants of their villages, while being charged with a number of responsibilities that further constrained and distorted individual and community rights, and generated tensions with colonial powers. Foremost among these was the collection of a newly-imposed house tax (also referred to as a 'hut' or poll tax), which was intended to help fund the administration of the Protectorate, but was really a form of 'hegemony on a shoestring' (Harris, 2014: 17). Chiefs interpreted the tax as a transgression of justice and further loss of their sovereign power, and revolted violently against it (Abraham, 1978: 134–35; Harris, 2014). The short-lived Mende war in 1898 was characterised by massacres of groups or individuals perceived to be connected to the colonial administration, including Christian missionaries (Abraham, 1978: 147).

Once the military regained control, retribution ensued, and a number of Chiefs were tried and executed (Abraham, 1978: 148–49). For individual Sierra Leoneans, resistance to the house tax stemmed from the logic that to be taxed on one's property implied a rent which, in turn, nullified individual ownership rights over one's home, land and, by extension, country (Abraham, 1978: 158). Local authorities never considered the house tax to be just. Rather, it was interpreted by Chiefs and villagers as an infringement of the human dignity and rights of local communities to exercise authority over themselves and their property, and remained highly contested into the early twentieth century (Abraham, 1978: 165–67).

Following the Mende war, the British diminished chiefly authority and power considerably. Chiefs were outranked formally and legally by the British, who were able to appoint and dismiss them as they deemed appropriate. This resulted in Chiefs looking inwards or downwards to their communities to assert power and authority, further consolidating the power asymmetry between Chiefs and individual community members. Reciprocity, rather than individual human rights, underpinned all communal relations. Local governance relied on hierarchy, religious and cultural norms and reciprocal imperatives that typically left Chiefs better off than their subjects (Harris, 2014: 19).

This dovetailed well with the aims of colonialism, which depended first and foremost on maintaining order, especially at the local level. And order itself required co-opting Chiefdom allies as implementing partners, because colonial administrators were so few in number and had extensive portfolios of responsibilities that far outstripped existing resources. However, this tended to exacerbate latent tensions among competing factions at the local level, and further disrupt community relations (Abraham, 1978: 172–76). In an effort to resolve this problem, the British arbitrarily demarked new municipal boundaries to form what today are Sierra Leone's provinces, districts and Chiefdom boundaries. By attempting to keep municipal boundaries aligned with local identity groups and designating 'treaty' Chiefs and Kings as Paramount Chiefs, colonial administrators found that they had to expand the number of Chiefdoms. This, in turn, resulted in further political fragmentation and higher levels of inequality between local authorities and community members, while feeding directly into a broader divide-and-rule strategy.

Curiously, the British did an about-face in the early twentieth century when valuable minerals (iron ore and diamonds) were discovered in Sierra Leone. Extractive economic development became the key colonial strategy, and an unwieldy number of Chiefdoms was incompatible with these new goals. Between 1925 and 1961 the colonial authorities slashed the number of Chiefdoms by a third, from 217 to 146. Perhaps most importantly, the new arrangement provided salaries for Paramount Chiefs, who were then expected to engage in the local governance and development of their Chiefdoms. Individual rights were rendered virtually meaningless, and the incentive structures that motivated Chiefdom actors rarely aligned with rights promotion. As one of the most enduring aspects of colonisation, it fuelled parochialism and extreme 'power consciousness' on the part of Chiefs (Abraham, 1978: 231–32), and has been identified as one of the underlying causes of the 1991–2002 civil war. However, the arbitrary exercise of power by Chiefs, in part driven by the structure of the Chiefdom system itself, also sowed the seeds of renewed grassroots interest in social justice and human rights norms that faith-based humanitarianism in Sierra Leone came to promote.

One-party rule: no justice, no rights, no peace

The legacy of the 'ruinous political methods' (Harris, 2014: 7) that defined mid-twentieth century Sierra Leone also facilitated a 'new humanitarianism' (Bah, 2013). Rooted in human rights, this 'new humanitarianism' was shaped in important ways during the era of one-party rule from the mid-1960s through to the early 1990s. The All People's Congress (APC) led by Prime Minister Siaka Stevens gained power following elections in 1967, but it was beset by coups and political challengers. In 1978 Stevens declared Sierra Leone a one-party state (Harris, 2014: 48). He consolidated the APC's power through military authoritarianism, keeping the nation in an almost perpetual state of emergency, and assigned civilian policing duties to the national armed forces. This soon took its toll in both rural and urban areas, and made access to basic human needs and justice a daily struggle. State institutions were degraded and patronage systems of power prevailed across the country. District Councils, the only vestige of democratic governance, were abolished in 1972,

while the Chiefdom system was co-opted in the service of maintaining and expanding patrimonialism and predatory politics. Self-determination and human rights were conspicuous by their absence, and local communities became increasingly isolated from the powers that ruled from Freetown. After Stevens stepped down in 1985, his successor Joseph Momoh continued the practices of the past, further eroding civil and political rights.

By the early 1990s the country was on the verge of war.² As one former combatant lamented, 'Sierra Leone ceased to belong to the citizens' (Bah, 2013: 14). Global financial institutions ceased providing assistance to what was an increasingly dysfunctional government. In 1990 the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded the eastern part of Sierra Leone, marking the beginning of the civil war, and two years later Momoh was deposed in a coup by disgruntled army officers led by Valentine Strasser. The brief junta rule of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), ultimately led by Julius Maada Bio, was followed by renewed fighting until a ceasefire was called in 1994.

Despite the violence, there were spaces where rights-based humanitarian efforts could, and did, emerge. For example, the ceasefire prompted a wave of civil society activity, including the formation of more than 60 civil society, 'unionist', women's and trade groups, as well as religious organisations such as the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, which formed the National Coordinating Committee for Peace (NCCP). Although their efforts to jumpstart a peace process ultimately failed, they did lead to the Bintumani I and II national consultations, which succeeded in convincing the junta government and Bio to hold democratic elections in 1996. The war was halted only briefly: in 1997, the democratically elected president, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, and his government were ousted and exiled following a coup led by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which formed a new junta government with the RUF.

Almost immediately a new wave of rights-based humanitarianism emerged, led by the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL), which had among its core members institutions of faith spanning Islam

2 Momoh is attributed as having claimed that education, for example, was a privilege, not a human right (Harris, 2014: 76).

and Christianity.³ Committed to a discourse of civil disobedience and nonviolent active resistance against the junta, the IRCSL helped ensure that human rights ideals did not succumb to the vagaries of violence and conflict and illegitimate rule. Its representatives met often with the junta (many had gone to school together or had close family ties), but they were also under constant threat from armed factions, and many IRCSL members were arrested, detained or killed by AFRC/RUF militias. Following Kabbah's restoration to power in 1998, the IRCSL continued to play a role as the voice of human rights advocacy nationally and as an intermediary between the government and the rebels. The Council was instrumental in keeping dialogue open in the lead-up to the 1999 Lomé Peace process, while also arranging humanitarian assistance to all sides of the conflict and engaging in confidence-building measures. It continued its work after the end of the war, leading national dialogues on reconciliation, holding days of prayer and advocating tolerance and peace-making. It also played a formal role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process, chaired by Bishop Joseph Humper. Indeed, not only did religious communities across Sierra Leone work closely with commissioners and local communities to achieve meaningful engagement, but they also provided much-needed logistical resources, assisted in overseeing and running hearings, identified and prepared witnesses and helped ensure protection for witnesses, victims and perpetrators who offered testimony.

The IRCSL found a nation ready to embrace faith-based humanitarianism articulated through and informed by a human rights discourse, emerging as it was from more than a decade of violence and human rights abuses. The period following the war presented its own challenges for rights-based humanitarianism, but it also offered a number of opportunities that many in Sierra Leone have seized, including the re-emergence of a national and sub-national discourse centred on peacebuilding and social justice.

3 Members of the IRCSL included the Catholic Dioceses of Freetown and Bo, Kenema and Makeni; The Council of Churches in Sierra Leone; the Pentecostal Churches Council; the Supreme Islamic Council; the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress; the Council of Imams; the Sierra Leone Islamic Missionary Union; and the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone.

Embracing faith and rights amidst and beyond war

Paraphrasing Archibald and Richards (2002: 339), the religious embrace in Africa, which developed in parallel with the (re)emergence of a rights-based approach to humanitarianism in Sierra Leone, was motivated historically not only by a search for ‘true belief’ and to gain a broader faith, but also through appeals characterised by the search for better law. ‘Unbelief’ does not imperil communities the way that injustice does. This is especially true in communities living with pervasive structural and direct violence. And so, religious embrace in the Sierra Leonean context can be examined rather fruitfully through the lens of justice – justice founded on individual human rights and reinforced through the humanitarian principle of preserving and nurturing human dignity.

Sceptics (Duffield, 2001; Donini, 2010) point out that the embrace comes at potentially considerable cost, notably that it may become an enabling device for what has been called the meta functions of aid. Among these meta functions are compassion, change and containment – all of which produce knowledge, standards and technology that shape how the South functions as part of a globalised world (Donini, 2010). According to this logic, adopting a rights-based approach to humanitarianism may well obscure broader patterns of social and political control, which are in part designed to reduce instability and mitigate direct violence without resolving underlying structural causes of conflict and human suffering. It also reinforces humanitarianism as a vector for Western ideas and modes of behaviour; elides real participation and consultation with beneficiary communities; and substitutes for the state, rendering national sovereignty moot. Where human rights becomes the new missionary project, core ‘universal’ principles are put into the service of goals established by Northern elites, imposed upon recipient communities in the South with little or no consultation with or input from them.

This is far too simplistic an explanation for the outcomes we often see in the humanitarian realm, particularly as it relates to the nexus of rights-based and faith-based approaches to humanitarianism. Local agency and perspective matter. They matter deeply and always have, particularly in informing our understanding of how and why the human rights embrace is not readily explained by the

superimposition of global power masked as humanitarian beneficence alone. Sierra Leone provides an ideal case from which to examine these phenomena, particularly through a historical approach that takes seriously the role of local agency in shaping the evolution of rights-based humanitarianism.

Sierra Leoneans haven’t been sitting idly by waiting for the international community to create local realities that protect rights and ensure social justice, thereby reducing the likelihood of widespread conflict in the future. Rather, local communities have re-embraced rights-based humanitarianism from the bottom up. Where the international community has integrated top-down interventions, such as the TRC process, these are often hybridised and reshaped through local power structures and institutions, resulting in a more authentic humanitarianism that attempts to shore up human dignity while attending to matters of justice.

This is particularly true in relation to post-conflict reconciliation, where local agency is not merely linked to faith and the ‘elective affinity’ that ties these two phenomena together (Philpott, 2007: 4); it is informed deeply by psychology as well. In environments where significant impediments (e.g. physical risks, conflict, widespread insecurity) to direct control over one’s life are prevalent, there is an increased need to believe that events are not occurring simply by chance but are controlled by some higher power. In such settings, individuals often achieve a sense of psychological control by altering their understanding and expectations of their experiences of and encounters with particular events. In the case of Sierra Leone, individuals compensate for personal loss of control over their physical environment by deepening their belief in the existence of a ‘controlling God’. Religious faith has provided a critical mechanism through which Sierra Leoneans have experienced reconciliation and forgiveness following the war, including keeping a ‘cool heart’, grassroots practices of recovery based on ‘social forgetting’, the forgiveness of perpetrators and renunciation of revenge or retaliation (Millar, 2012: 133–36; Shaw, 2005: 7–10).⁴ This has been especially important in reintegrating former child combatants into society and restoring one’s relationship with God and

4 Social forgetting does not displace individual memories of injustice. Rather, it involves not raising personal memories of injustice in the public sphere owing to a strong belief that to do so calls forth the injustice again, thus risking more violence and injustice. See Shaw (2005: 9–10).

ancestors, as well as ‘remaking’ the individual into a new social person (Shaw, 2005: 9).

The discourse of rights is not unfamiliar to Sierra Leoneans. Recent research suggests that hunter-militia groups like the Civil Defense Forces found such discourse completely aligned with pre-existing ethical codes that informed their ‘practices of the self’ (Ferme and Hoffman, 2004: 79–82) to engage in conduct *unlike* soldier-rebels (sobels), insurgents and combatants. Taken together, these become key ingredients for a peace that is shaped but not dictated by the international community – and is relevant and effective for communities at the local level. This is especially true in the post-civil war transition, which has been marked by a broad social and political narrative underpinned by principles of faith, peace, justice and human rights. As Archibald and Richards (2002) have demonstrated, these are trans-boundary debates spanning different social, political and religious groupings.

There are multiple and overlapping realms of justice in Sierra Leone. This stems from the way in which colonial divide and rule policies infused the Paramount Chieftdom system with certain customary legal powers, particularly outside Freetown (Abraham, 1978). In rural areas, local justice is provided by Chieftdom networks of administrators and civil servants, and is not codified in any national native legal code. Indeed, the arbitrary nature of local justice has been compellingly argued as one of the main causes of the 1991–2002 civil war (Archibald and Williams, 2002; Ellis and Haar, 2004; Richards, 1996). Poverty, corruption and marginalised youth all contributed to a climate that rendered social justice practically impossible to obtain, let alone consolidate. The ‘generational contract’ broke down completely. The older generation obstructed vertical mobility by the young, while the state was unable to fill in gaps by creating paths to sustainable livelihoods, education and basic levels of security (Boersch-Supan, 2012: 29).

In some communities, attempts by Chiefs to manipulate post-war humanitarian aid to their benefit (and the benefit of favoured community members) resulted in local resistance premised on human rights and social justice. Youth and others objected to what they considered unjust forms of power wielded by local authorities, and appealed to human rights and principles of equity in an attempt to reshape aid distribution in ways that would reinforce human dignity (Archibald and Williams, 2002: 345–47). The restoration of the

Chieftdom system towards the end of the war was one attempt to address grievances that were not resolvable under the informal system of law that prevailed in rural areas before the conflict, and perceptions that corruption and unjust governance had flowed directly from chiefly involvement in the equally corrupt and unjust system of one-party rule dominated by the APC.

As Archibald and Williams (2002: 350) note: ‘[H]uman rights offers a straightforward story about common humanity’. It is unjust to engage in social goods distribution (as represented by humanitarian aid, for example) in ways that diminish human dignity. Indeed, to base such distributions on anything but our ‘humanness’ is to cede our fate to personalistic and particularistic forms of power that destroy rather than strengthen communities and the nation. Both political and social classifications (including religious identity) dissolve when we embrace human rights as the benchmark for humanitarian aid. It also reflects the moral authority and authenticity these actors enjoy within and among local communities, and is not viewed as mutually exclusive to humanitarian programming.

In the Sierra Leonean context, this applies to programming concerning public health, education, women’s rights, children’s and youth rights and sustainable human development. The human rights abuses that characterised the civil war left an indelible mark on many communities and a deep desire not to repeat the mistakes of the past. By marginalising youth, the RUF could more easily recruit. By distributing social goods using patrimonial and predatory logic that had nothing to do with human need, the social fabric of communities unravelled, leading to localised conflict that then could be tapped by rebels and other groups and transformed into broader, national conflict (Archibald and Williams, 2002).

In reshaping how the post-conflict transition phase was to unfold, a number of aid organisations leveraged their faith-based missions and made clearer connections with the discourse of human rights tied to social justice. Critics of this approach cite the emphasis on rights without an equal and balancing emphasis on responsibilities as something that continues to exacerbate intergenerational tensions (Boersch-Supan, 2012). Rights-based tutoring and sensitisation, steeped as it is in the discourse of resistance and empowerment, has not entirely displaced prior institutions and channels of power. However, change is afoot in a number of areas.

For example, in the area of women's and children's rights and improved gender relations, rights-based humanitarianism has been facilitated through faith-based NGO programming focusing on life skills, microenterprise and small business collectives – all of which challenge pre-war hierarchal traditions. In the realm of rule of law, the enactment of the 2003 Education Act and the 2007 Child Rights Act are positive steps in utilising rights as the basis for equity, social justice and access to resources and public goods that otherwise were constrained through systems of patrimony. The Child Rights Act, for example, uses a single standard for determining childhood: chronological age. This contravenes traditional understandings of childhood ending when a girl gives birth or marries. It also prohibits the traditional practice of female genital cutting by appealing to norms of inhumane treatment and bodily or mental harm. The Child Rights Act does not reconcile all the tensions between customary and domestic law, but it codifies a wide range of human rights that are slowly being implemented, often through the work of faith-based humanitarian NGOs (e.g. ChildFund Sierra Leone, CRS, Caritas) in collaboration with Chiefdom authorities. ChildFund Sierra Leone, for example, aids in this process by providing resources and training to support local communities across several Districts in reviewing and understanding each component of the Child Rights Act. Community forums are held to discuss issues of concern, especially parental rights and the treatment of children. ChildFund's work also supports inter-District and regional exchanges of Local Councillors to engage in mutual sharing and learning about their roles and responsibilities in relation to their communities.⁵

In the area of legal rights, CRS has for nearly a decade provided legal aid services to vulnerable and underserved groups such as okada (motorbike/taxi) riders, many of whom are ex-combatant youth, across Sierra Leone. Among its goals are helping okada riders to improve their working conditions and livelihoods, while sensitising them about their roles and responsibilities, and how to access justice in their locales. CRS programming with okada riders, in particular, is a good illustration of how important rights-based humanitarianism can be in post-conflict societies. Often perceived by other community members, including the police, as problematic elements, okada riders have historically

been mistreated and exploited. The police often extort money from, unfairly detain or assign random fees to them. For their part, okada riders often operate without licences and do not always uphold the rules of the road. They also lack the knowledge to avoid exploitation. In some cases, okada riders have resorted to violence against the police.

CRS has assisted okada associations with training in licencing procedures and adherence to professional principles of conduct and legal standards, along with rules/regulations and safety standards for themselves and their passengers. CRS staff also helped reduce illegal fee rigging by local authorities by coordinating with the Sierra Leone Road Transport Authority (SLRA) to publish and disseminate licencing fee guidelines. CRS also facilitated meetings where grievances between local police and okada representatives could be worked through, emphasising legal rights, accountability and responsibilities.⁶

In the area of civil and political rights, ChildFund Sierra Leone has invested in programming designed to dovetail with the ongoing, nationwide decentralisation of governance down to the local level which, if effective, would strengthen local communities in exercising their rights regarding fair and responsive governance and accountability vis-à-vis Local Councils and Chiefdom actors. ChildFund SL helps inform communities through information-sharing and sensitisation about the responsibilities Local Councils and Chiefdom Councils have to provide basic services, and has established Regional Information and Community Centers (RICCs), which serve as forums to review fiscal policies, engage in strategic planning for community development and ensure transparency of process for all local governance activities. ChildFund SL has also engaged in multi-year efforts to encourage Chiefdom actors to see the human rights benefits of becoming more reliable and responsible stakeholders in Ward Committees, which represent community constituents and serve as implementing partners in local development programming. The organisation has also made inroads in the area of gender rights, developing programmes designed to increase female participation in local political processes. In 2004, for example, there was not a single female Councillor elected among the 24 from Koinadugu. By 2010 there were six, and the position

5 Co-author interview with ChildFund Sierra Leone senior programming staff, Freetown, 2010.

6 Co-author interview with CRS Senior Programme Director, Freetown, 2010 and 2013.

of Deputy Chair of the Koinadugu District Council was held by a woman.⁷

Other faith-based humanitarian NGOs engage in rights-based programming whose effectiveness is in large part dependent on the longstanding relationships forged with local (e.g. Chiefdom, Local Council) actors over decades. A key goal is to ensure that communities affected by conflict undertake initiatives to promote peace, tolerance and awareness of basic human rights. CRS, for example, partners with the Catholic Church and civil society on all of its programmes. Operationally, its Church partners operate through the Justice, Human Rights and Peace Commission, while CRS' community-level partners work closely with District-level authorities. CRS has extensive experience working with Chiefs and elected authorities since the beginning of the war: the emergency phase (provision of relief), rehabilitation phase (assisting with IDP returns and camp management; infrastructure projects; and getting people back on their feet); and the development phase (since about 2005, focusing on agriculture, youth rights, governance and health interventions). Local actors are taken into confidence at every stage of project implementation in CRS programming, enhancing trust, transparency and accountability.⁸

The national and community-level support for consolidation of a rights-based approach to local governance, for example, may well create conflict with the parallel system of Chiefdom rule, but increasingly Chiefdom powers are being delimited and circumscribed (and, in tandem, Chiefdom actors are becoming more educated about basic civil and political rights, along with their responsibilities as leaders). Eventually this system may end up serving a minor governance role – or perhaps a more ceremonial role in people's lives.

Lessons for practitioners and researchers

So what explains the embracing of rights-based approaches to humanitarianism in Sierra Leone, an approach that seems also to tap into faith-based

7 Co-author interviews with ChildFund Sierra Leone senior programming staff, Freetown, 2010.

8 Co-author interview with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Country Director and Senior Programme Director, Freetown, 2010 and 2013.

humanitarian networks? How should we best understand these trends, and what can we learn from them? We can look to rational explanations, particularly frameworks that centre on 'thick rationality', whereby conventional rational choice explanations (utility maximisation) are reinforced by perceptions of identity (Yee, 1997; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993). We can also look to social constructivist frameworks to help explain the observable implications of this phenomenon in Sierra Leone. The values embedded within human rights discourse are not intrinsic. Rather, they are imbued with socially-constructed meaning in a deliberate manner by norm entrepreneurs who are able to frame social norms in ways that increase their resonance with a broad array of actors within a given society (Barnett, 2011; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Labonte, 2013; Payne, 2001).

The embrace of rights-based approaches to humanitarianism can also be said to derive in part from social norms (Durkheim, 1915), which are generally understood as values and beliefs held and reaffirmed by a social group regarding the behaviour of its members. Such norms have a conditional dimension, as compliance with them can be implemented formally or informally, and they are often known to members of the group through verbal discourse. Where members depend on the group for some aspect of survival, for example, the compliance effects of social norms can be highly effective. Thus, the rights-based approach's emphasis on human dignity is partly derivative of a social norm in that organisations model their behaviour in alignment with certain expectations of these norms, namely that it is neither appropriate nor just to engage in humanitarianism that is exclusionary, marginalising or partial, or is based on anything other than human need. By emphasising social norms, rights-based approaches to humanitarianism reinforce human agency because the value of a particular set of norms is judged by the effects they have on people's lives, not some intangible or intrinsic normative value per se.

Unlike some of their neighbours, Sierra Leoneans embrace religious coexistence and syncretism, the simultaneous belief in multiple religions, including traditional spiritualism and institutionalised world religions such as Islam and Christianity (Harris, 2014: 25). While technically a majority Muslim country (60% of the population practice Islam), Christianity is practiced within and across

communities, with Christians constituting some 10% of the national population. Alongside identifying with a particular world religion, approximately 30% of Sierra Leoneans engage in indigenous forms of faith, and many practice multiple forms of religion in parallel. Unlike in other settings, this does not create tensions with politics – perhaps because there is such fluidity between and across faith and political preferences and identification.

Moreover, the historical shortcomings of neopatrimonialism at all levels of governance have rendered it virtually bankrupt as a means of guaranteeing social welfare and justice for Sierra Leoneans (Archibald and Williams, 2002). This was especially true in the lead-up to the civil war, and during the war, as displaced people shared information and knowledge of urban and rural abuses of power (and some humanitarian organisations unwittingly perpetuated the patrimonial abuse of power through various forms of aid distribution). As the war dragged on, however, Chiefly prerogative came to mean little as many Chiefs fled their communities, leaving the remaining citizens to establish mechanisms of justice and social welfare in which a spirit of individualism emerged (Archibald and Williams, 2002). This spirit has also carried over into the contemporary peacebuilding environment, which has helped establish a power-sharing arrangement between Chiefdom actors and popularly-elected District and Local Commissioners.

These efforts have emphasised decentralising authority to the local level, and represent a new challenge to the logic of patrimonialism in Sierra Leone by attempting to foster responsive governance and local-level accountability (Labonte, 2012). Rights-based approaches to peacebuilding, therefore, have become a viable and desirable alternative to the traditional ways of ensuring human dignity and justice in the post-war environment. Such approaches are authentic reflections of the prevailing social context because they assign the value of human dignity to everyone – not simply to those who are deemed by others to ‘count’.

Conclusion

Rights-based humanitarianism, therefore, has hit upon a critical need facing most Sierra Leoneans: the need to cultivate common human dignity that exists

irrespective of the machinations of ‘big men’. It has also linked up with faith-based humanitarianism, which taps into the need to provide a spiritual basis for governance, both in order to legitimate it and to help render it more effective (Ellis and Haar, 2008: 184). It also lends itself to the prevailing context of hospitality, which has long served Sierra Leoneans in times of need. By every indication the people of Sierra Leone have demonstrated positive spirit in showing hospitality to one another, and often even more to strangers. This tradition can be traced to the days of community bonding, when people living in smaller communities would share and eat together from the same dish. People were able to identify and meet the needs of their neighbours, and increasingly came to rely upon churches and mosques as charitable institutions able to provide support for basic human rights, as well as addressing governance and justice concerns. In many ways, a rights-based approach to humanitarianism in Sierra Leone also represents ‘working with the grain’ (Booth, 2009) as it accepts that local-level power dynamics exist, but creates social and political channels which, on the one hand, work against outright elite capture of social welfare resources (which creates injustice) and, on the other, cultivate in elites a positive perception of rights-based social welfare distribution (which reinforces justice and, by extension, responsible authority).

That said, there is resistance. Community elders complain: ‘We used to have power. Now human rights and the government interfere with local things’ (Boersch-Supan, 2012: 45). Rights-based humanitarianism and its core norms are not deeply internalised everywhere in Sierra Leone. This is especially true in rural areas, where such discourses affect communal labour, property rights and land use, local courts and child-rearing practices, and foretell greater limits on the powers of elders and Chiefs within local communities than in the recent past. Rights-based humanitarianism must seek to create responsibilities that coincide with the rights it champions. The rights-based approach to humanitarianism, particularly as it is interpreted and implemented by faith-based groups, should stress the coincidence of interest that exists between youth and elders/Chiefs – this is particularly important in terms of conflict management on a local level.

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refugees at N'Nobi camp receive
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