RITUAL VIOLENCE IN LIBERIA

Ritualised brutalities in Liberia prior to, during and after the Civil Wars: events, trends, causes and consequences

Teaser: Abstract & Introduction

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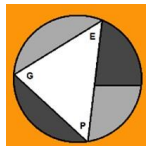
Ritual violence in Liberia

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Caspar ten Dam

> The dangerous spirits which are believed to infest the world, and which in normal times are under the ritual control of qualified people, such as the elders of the Poro, are stalking Liberia and may enter anyone at any time, even children. All that is required is to have a gun.
>
> Stephen Ellis, 'Liberia 1989-1994: A Study of Ethnic and Spiritual Violence' (*African Affairs* No.94, April 1995), p.194.

> The belief that consuming human flesh gives the individual special powers and protects the community proved to be still widespread and deep-rooted in Liberia in the second half of the last century.
>
> Fred van der Kraaij, *Liberia: From the Love of Liberty to Paradise Lost* (African Studies Centre 2015), p.34.

> When we took them there, in most cases it was to eat them
>
> Excerpt from found poem 'The Child Soldier' by Shanee Stepakoff, *Testimony – Found Poems from the Special Court for Sierra Leone* (Bucknell University Press 2021), p.40.

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Abstract

Ritual violence—violence characterised and justified by rituals i.e. observable ceremonial and sequenced acts, often involving human sacrifice and the removal of organs to attain magical power—still is rife in many places and regions across the globe, including West Africa. This treatise analyses lethal and non-lethal ritual violence in Liberia during her known history, but eventually focuses on the period from the Liberian Civil Wars of 1989-1997 and 1999-2003 to the time of brittle-and-violent 'peace' of today. It especially investigates the role of combatants in ritual violence during times of (major) internal war in Liberia—including child soldiers, their leaders and their victims (though forcibly recruited and indoctrinated child soldiers could be seen as victims as well), and on any other actors perpetrating such violence during times of (relative) peace in Liberia against any non-combatants and former combatants among families, larger kin groups and ethnicities—including former child soldiers. Generally, the treatise seeks to uncover the saliency, prevalence and nature of ritual violence in Liberia, and the causes and consequences of such violence for both perpetrators and victims (opposing sides may be both perpetrators and victims vis-à-vis each other), for indigenous peoples, other citizens and foreign residents in the country. For this it makes use of the author's theory and empirical research on *brutalisation* i.e. increasing violation of local and/or international norms of violence.

Even though few systematic, comparative studies on ritual violence have been done to this day, a fair number of anecdotal reports and in-depth case studies on particular tribes, peoples and societies show that this phenomenon is widespread, endemic and ingrained in many parts of the world—including Liberia, as this treatise confirms. Indeed, especially magic-ritual violence in both the private i.e. domestic and public i.e. political spheres is rife in Liberia to this day. There, perpetrators not just target individuals as perceived and actual (former) enemies in vendettas often originating from the civil wars—including Liberian migrants and asylum seekers living abroad or being deported back. They also frequently target peoples and entire communities at random, whereby they immediately attack victims or abduct them and torture, mutilate and murder them afterwards in rituals believed to bring magical, supernatural, otherworldly powers to the direct perpetrators and/or their benefactors who ordered these killings in the first place. Even Liberian migrants, deported asylum seekers and visitors could easily fall victim to this 'random' violence.

Introduction   Studying ritual violence in Liberia and beyond

Ritual or 'ritualistic'[1] violence is often ghastly brutal, perhaps even more so than many other forms of extreme violence. Ritual violence—i.e. violence characterised or justified by rituals based on religious, spiritual and other ideological beliefs (or quite opportunistic, self-gratifying motives masquerading with those beliefs)—frequently surpasses a society's until-then extant norms of what is considered defensible or even justified in such violence. For reasons ranging from brutalised behaviour due to atrocious warfare and internecine fighting to endemic corruption, crime and (semi-)anarchy, ritual violence in both the private i.e. domestic and public i.e. political spheres has been and still is rife in many places, countries and regions across the world—including particularly in Liberia (see Map 1), as West Africa specialist Fred van der Kraaij points out eloquently and rather bluntly: "Ritual killings have probably taken place in the area that now forms the republic of Liberia as long as people have lived there. And the practice is not limited to this country; it also occurs in other African countries and on other continents. In traditional communities, there is a widespread belief that ritual human sacrifice is necessary to protect or advance the interests of the community" (Van der Kraaij 2015: 33).

Van der Kraaij is far from alone in this dark assessment on the prevalence of ritual violence. Thus Fanuel Hadzizi, speaking on behalf of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), has observed that "ritual killings and human sacrifice happen in many, if not all countries in Africa. Cases have been reported in such countries as Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe" (Hadzizi 2011). For reasons not yet fully understood, ritual killings have become especially virulent ever since Decolonisation. Thus in Nigeria such killings were already on the rise in the 1970s: "Rumours circulated that penis thieves were on the prowl and were thought to collect male organs for obscure ritual purposes" (Atsenuwa apud Akinyele & Dietz 2019: 270). If one includes non-lethal instances of ritual violence—including such violence too limited in scope, tools and weaponry to be lethal, and failed attempts at such lethal violence even if scope, tools and

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[1] The term 'ritualistic' may better describe the phenomenon studied than the term 'ritual'— in the conceptual and phenomenological sense. Yet a frequent use of the former term would decrease the manuscript's readability.

weaponry were sufficient for it—then the phenomenon is even more widespread, indeed truly endemic.

Map 1   Liberia, West Africa, Africa

Source: Fred van der Kraaij, *Liberia: From the Love of Liberty to Paradise Lost*
ASC Leiden 2015, p.xiv.[2]

Prevalence of ritual violence in Liberia and beyond

Ritual violence is a broader, more widespread, lesser-known and more worrying phenomenon than 'just' religiously-motivated violence by fundamentalists and other fanatics which has caused so much alarm and (obsessive) concern across the globe since *9-11*. The most destructive single terrorist act to this day took place on 11 September 2001, when a dozen members of Osama Bin Laden's Islamist-fundamentalist *Al Qaeda* (The Base) network hijacked airplanes and plunged them into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC, killing 2973 people, almost all civilians, 2749 of them in New York. This unprecedented attack partially accounts for the subsequent "unprecedented international attention given to Liberia" already mired in civil war, brutality, criminality and anarchy, as places like Liberia were seen as "potential bases for terrorists" (Ellis 2007 (1999): xxiii). No wonder that the "Lord's Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A) in northern Uganda and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL) promptly appeared on the

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[2] The "clear and informative maps are the outstanding work of Nel de Vink (DeVink Mapdesign)" (Van der Kraaij 2015: xxvii). From here on the treatise frequently refers to 'Kraaij'—yet seek in Bibliography for Van der Kraaij.

United States' list of terrorist organisations, proscribed after September 11th" (Richards 2005: 2). Yet American and other Western policymakers, analysts and ordinary citizens tended to conflate means (e.g. ritualism) with motives (e.g. jihadism) of violence. And African perspectives on terrorism conceptions, applications and policies (e.g. Olukoju & Falaiye 2008) were hardly listened to. This in part led to misconceived, misguided one-size-fits-all Development, Conflict Resolution and War-on-Terror policies in West Africa and elsewhere (Ellis 2007: xxii-xxiv).

Arguably these one-size-fits-all policies from the West were and are applicable to Liberia least of all: its history, status and culture are markedly, perhaps uniquely different from the main body of newly established African states during the Decolonisation struggles of the second half of the twentieth century. Liberia stands out as Africa's first and oldest independent republic, founded in 1847 by free-born and liberated African-American and Afro-Caribbean settlers whose enslaved ancestors often originated from elsewhere in Africa. Yet tragically these settlers generally adopted the often arrogant, racist and colonial attitudes of White Americans and Europeans i.e. their former masters, rather than truly behaving according to the tenets of equality and liberty they were so proud of—as expressed by the motto 'The Love Of Liberty Brought Us Here' on Liberia's national flag and other emblems. Instead these "settlers, commonly referred to as Americo-Liberians, viewed the indigenous people as primitive and inferior. The Americo-Liberians were originally determined to impose the "civilized" customs they had acquired in the United States on the indigenous Africans" (Renda 1999: 63)—and annihilate native customs and beliefs, including native forms of ritual violence, in the process. Secular equalitarianism actually went hand in hand with Christian belief. Van der Kraaij:

> The missionaries' motivation to disclose ritual malpractices concurred with the prevailing mentality of the Americo-Liberian colonists who were all Christians. It also explains the latter's feelings of superiority towards the native peoples … . They, the newly arrived from oversees, were christianized and civilized whereas the indigenous masses were barbaric, wild and uncivilized. In their eyes this justified their mission: to colonize this region and these peoples in order to bring civilization, prosperity and

the Christian belief. Besides, wasn't this one of the main reasons behind the creation of the colonization societies in the United States of America? [3]

Paradoxically their very ideology of equalitarian freedom—and Christianity—made the Americo-Liberians feel superior to the natives who supposedly lacked such consciousness, belief and aspiration. The former "often conceived of their return to Africa as a form of civilising mission, a divine plan whereby Africans, via the sojourn of a number of them as slaves in North America, would be transformed into civilised, fully Christian, people" (Ellis 2001a: 225). Thus Liberia's history "in many respects was comparable to that of colonies of settlement" by European whites elsewhere on the African continent and the globe, "with the major difference that the settlers were themselves ultimately of African origin" (Ellis 1995: 175). These settlers quickly formed the Americo-Liberian elite in the country with (near-)continuous support from the United States at the expense of the indigenous tribes—at least until the civil wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which at least in part originated from grievances by the natives against the Americo-Liberians, who sought to subjugate and control them fully ever since the establishment of Indirect Rule through especially collaborating chiefs during the early twentieth century "in imitation of British colonial administrations elsewhere in West Africa" (Ellis 2001a: 231).

Actually one of the major threats facing Liberia's development and very survival ever since the arrival of the first Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean colonists in 1822 or even earlier were the "clashes and conflicts between the settlers (and later their descendants) with the tribal population living in the area claimed by the republic, i.e. the coastal counties and the vast Hinterland".[4] Liberian analysist and onetime opposition activist Emmanuel T. Dolo puts it even more bluntly: "The deportation of African Americans to Liberia was intended to achieve freedom. Instead, it brought about the repression of indigenous people by [these] settlers. As a result, tension,

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[3] Van der Kraaij, 'Ritual Killings – Past and Present: From Cultural Phenomenon To Political Instrument, Part I: Before 1950 – Concluding note on the sources of information' *Liberia: Past and Present*, [2005]; https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsConclusion.htm (quote). From here on we refer to 'Kraaij' in short for easier readability—yet one seeks in the Bibliography for 'Van der Kraaij' i.e. the author's full surname.
[4] Fred Van der Kraaij, 'Liberia's perennial problems' *Liberia: Past and Present of Africa's Oldest Republic*; https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/Perennial-Problems.htm. Elsewhere, Kraaij (see note 3 on use of his abbreviated surname) suggests that the first Afro-American colonists arrived at the 'Grain Coast', also called 'Pepper Coast' or 'Malagueta Coast', even earlier as they renamed it Liberia "in 1821" (Kraaij 2015: 3).

followed by bitter rivalry developed between indigenous peoples and settlers" (Dolo 1996: ix). Perhaps these 'atypical' features have led to unusual, even unique characteristics of political and ritual violence in Liberia and beyond. This possibility alone makes Liberia a crucial case-study in the analysis of patterns of ritual violence across the world.

This paper analyses lethal and non-lethal violence with ritual characteristics in Liberia from the First Liberian Civil War of 1989-1997—initially mainly between Samuel Doe's government and Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rebel movement—and the Second Liberian Civil War of 1999-2003—mainly between Taylor's government and the rebel groups Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL)—to the time of brittle-and-violent 'peace' of today. It focuses on the role of combatants in Ritual violence in both the private and public spheres during times of (major) internal war in Liberia—and on veterans and any other actors perpetrating ritual violence against any non-combatants and former combatants among families, larger kin groups and ethnicities during times of (relative) peace in Liberia. It particularly focuses on the role of (former) child soldiers, their leaders and their victims—though forcibly recruited and indoctrinated child soldiers could be seen as victims as well. Generally, the paper seeks to uncover the nature and prevalence of ritual violence in Liberia, and the causes and consequences of such violence for both perpetrators and victims (opposing sides may be both perpetrators and victims vis-à-vis each other), for indigenous peoples, other citizens and foreign residents in the country.

Assessing ritual violence among Liberia's tribes and other social (kin) groups

The Americo-Liberians, and the sixteen official tribes which overwhelmingly make up Liberia's population (90-95%)—the Bassa, Dei, Gbande, Gio, Gola, Grebo, Kissi, Kpelle, Krahn, Sapo (southern Krahn), Kru, Loma, Mandingo, Mano, Mende and Vai (variants spellings, names: see Kraaij 2015: xvii-xviii)—are unevenly distributed across its fifteen counties (see Map 2); they mainly speak one of three main languages—Mande and Mel concentrated in the North-West and Kru in the South-East—(see Map 3) a/o one of a few dozen distinct native languages, while normally being fluent English or its Liberian dialect (Ibid: 5 (note 3)).[5] This paper seeks to determine the degrees in which the Americo-Liberians and any of the native tribes or indigenous peoples have opposed or collaborated with each other in times of peace and war, as entire communities or perhaps crosscutting subgroups. As I am doing in my research on other peoples, one should try to "ascertain whether each of the named tribes, clans, sub-clans, other kin groups or localised ethnic (sub) groups however defined" among the Liberians and any Liberian(-led) combat units during the recent or ongoing armed conflicts in Liberia or elsewhere:

i)   is correctly identified by the indicated name;
ii)   exists at least 'formally' in name (*existent*);
iii)   is really *salient* i.e. vibrant and culturally active today;
iv)   is or has been politically a/o military active;
v)   if so, has been active in identifiable political a/o military formations;
vi)   if so, has exhibited identifiable brutalisation a/o debrutalisation patterns;
vii)   if so, whether any particular norms, beliefs, customs and practices account for any brutalisation and/or debrutalisation patterns (Ten Dam 2020: 257-258 incl. quote).

This paper will preliminarily investigate the very same aspects of relevant Liberian tribes, clans, sub-clans, other kin groups or localised ethnic (sub)groups involved in or victimised by ritual violence. More broadly this paper seeks to determine, for so far feasible at this stage, what kinds of ritual violence any (kin) groups and individual members of the sixteen official tribes and the Americo-Liberians (an effective 17th tribe in Liberia) have committed in the recent and

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[5] From here on we normally refer to Van der Kraaij as 'Kraaij' in short for easier readability and to save some space—yet one should seek in the Bibliography for 'Van der Kraaij' i.e. the author's full surname.

more distant past—and against whom and how frequently and brutally. Of course this paper can present only some preliminary findings on some particular traits and frequencies (if any) of ritual violence among such groups in Liberian society at home and abroad. In the foreseeable future one must conduct far more research on traits and frequencies of such violence in Liberia and elsewhere.

One must keep in mind that circumscriptions of and delineations between tribes, clans and other social (kinship) groups—as is generally the case with other terms and concepts, like ritual violence (see Chapter 1)—are contested, constructed for political and ideological purposes, defined for the researcher's particular case studies and purposes in mind only—or not explicitly or formally defined at all. Thus Stephen Ellis warns that what "exactly constitutes a Liberian 'tribe' is no simple matter to describe" or agree on (Ellis 2007: 31)—which appears to be one reason why he effectively applies the terms 'tribe'/'tribalism', 'ethnicity'/'ethnic group' interchangeably and quite broadly in his works (Ibid: 31-43; Ellis 1995, 2001a,b). In my own works and analyses I argue, while adopting classic-anthropological kinship definitions, that "most traditional societies conform to a predominant religion state, emperor, nation, ethnicity, or to a predominant collection of *tribes* i.e. kin groups without residential unity ('ethnic' if with perceived common ancestry); *clans* i.e. kin groups with residential unity; multi-clan or other mixed groups with residential unity and self-identification in hamlets, villages, towns or other localities; and finally to *extended families* and *nuclear families* within or straddling across kin groups" (Ten Dam 2020: 213-214 (quote); as first argued in Ten Dam 2010: 343).

Louis Dupree asserts that the "key ... is kinship, that reciprocal set of rights and obligations which satisfies and .. limits an individual's .. role" (Dupree 1997: 181; 183-92 on kinship typology (no clear 'tribe' definition)). In this regard one must keep in mind that scholars generally discern the same kinship or other social units, but apply different terms (family, clan, tribe, etcetera) for these—whereby they generally conceptualise 'tribes' as larger social units incorporating clans, sub-clans and progressively smaller units within these in turn. Thus most but not all scholars researching social groups broadly define the concept of 'clan' as the multi-household group with actual or perceived common ancestry—though just a few of them nowadays apply Dupree's classic-anthropological marker of residential unity or its absence to distinguish between 'clans' and 'tribes' (Ten Dam 2020: 213-214). Only a few scholars, like J. Gus Liebenow, consider the term 'clan' to refer to "a territorial unit rather

than a kinship grouping", constituting a "largest political entity among the various ethnic groups" of a country like Liberia at best (Liebenow 1987: 41). Yet most scholars consider and circumscribe clans as being some sort of kinship groups, territorially concentrated or no.

Generally I prefer to apply residential unity and other classic-anthropological distinctions for the terms 'tribe' and 'clan' whereby the latter may be a larger social unit than the former in a certain country or region—even if these do not fit well the formal and informal distinctions between 'tribes', 'clans' and other, often smaller kin groups made in Liberia's state and society. Van der Kraaij notes that in Liberia, "the term 'tribe' is used to refer to an 'ethnic group', by both official bodies and the general public. The terms have different meanings and, from a scientific perspective, the use of ' tribe' is controversial. However, .. Liberians themselves are more familiar with the term than with 'ethnic group' " (Kraaij 2015: 3 (note 2)).

Many or all of Liberia's sixteen official tribes may have been artificially constructed and distinguished from each other to some or full extent—and may be only partially based on the so-called 'stateless societies' formed by "clusters of lineage groups" in the past; yet even if a small tribe like the Kran or Krahn "hardly used that label" and "could hardly understand each other dialects" until well after the 1970s , it could still function nowadays as an overarching kin group without residential unity (Ellis 2007: 31-32 (quotes)). An official tribe like the Kran or some of its constituent clans may still originate from a native ethnic group with perceived or actual common ancestry. If so, I disagree with Ellis' assessment on the "inaccuracy of the use of the word Krahn as an ethnic category" (Ibid: 32). I also disagree with Ellis' apparent argument that any 'genuine' ethnic tribe must not just possess common kinship bonds, but also common dialects, customs and beliefs—and a "central locus of political authority" by chieftains, elders or other leaders and thus function as political units (Ibid: 33, 34 (incl. quote), 205 (common central authority)). To me, a genuine tribe is residentially and geographically spread group in a certain region with actual and/or perceived primordial kinship bonds and ancestries—whether or not it has a common culture, language and/or a political(ly active) structure beyond kinship bonds. More generally I define *ethnicity* as "actual or perceived common ancestry" in both primordial and constructive kinship senses, rather than common culture, language, etcetera (Ten Dam 2015a: 14 (definition nationalism); Ten Dam & Polanski 2015: 227 (Ibid)).

These conceptualisations of mine also extend to any other non-recognised yet extant tribes Liberia may have to date or may have had in the past. Thus when the first African-Americans—ranging from former, liberated slaves to free-born citizens of the United States—arrived there in the early nineteenth century with the support of the American government, the American Colonization Society and other such societies, the area called the Grain, Pepper or Malagueta Coast and eventually to be known as Liberia was "already inhabited by some 20 different tribes" (Kraaij 2015: 3). Naturally, one should analyse any ritual violence among and by any 'unofficial' tribes in Liberia as well, for so far available knowledge and sources allow this.

As I have argued elsewhere, the provenance, delineation, saliency and extancy of tribes and other kin groups in past and present may be contested and uncertain given the "lack of up-to-date knowledge and lack of consensus on the rare out-of-date knowledge" on these groups (Ten Dam 2020: 221). Yet given my own analysis and findings on Chechens, Albanians and other peoples despite the grave gaps in uncontested knowledge on these peoples, I have grown skeptical of the tendency among so many analysts to "even question whether such clans [and other kin groups] have ever existed at all, or dismiss these and their supposed customs as "mythical social structures" (re)invented by political entrepreneurs" (Ibid: 223).

Irrespective of the conceptualisations one adopts, I deem it "high time" for analysts, practitioners and decisionmakers to "further research on the oft-neglected role of ethnic and kinship bonds in present-day societies—not just the self-professed traditional or tribal ones, but also and above all the so-called modern or developed ones" (Ten Dam 2019: 156). The same can be said for studying the oft-neglected role of ritual violence among such communities in both past and present-day societies. Chapter 1 presents my analyses on adopted circumscriptions of ritual violence and its empirical variants vis-à-vis other concepts and theories of violence; Chapter 2 provides my overview of the (lack of) research on ritual violence in West Africa and other parts of the world. Chapters 3 and 4 present my focused study on ritual violence in Liberia's present and (recent) past; the Conclusion presents the main findings of this study.

Map 2 Political and administrative divisions (counties) in Liberia

Source: Fred van der Kraaij, *Liberia: From the Love of Liberty to Paradise Lost*
ASC Leiden 2015, p.xv.[6]

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[6] Maps are the "outstanding work of Nel de Vink" (DeVink Mapdesign)" (Kraaij 2015: xxvii).

Map 3   Language and ethnic groups (tribes) in Liberia

Source: Fred van der Kraaij, *Liberia: From the Love of Liberty to Paradise Lost*
ASC Leiden 2015, p.xvi.[7]

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[7] Ibid. English and "a local variant – Liberian pidgin English – are also spoken, nearly always as a second language besides the native language" (Ibid 2015: xvii).

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