CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN INTERGENERATIONAL AND GENDER RELATIONS
ARE ‘CHILD SOLDIERS’ IN SIERRA LEONE A NEW PHENOMENON?

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Abstract

Though the atrocities of so-called ‘child soldiers’ during the ten-year long civil war are shocking, there are ways in which the participation of children in war is made legible by historical continuities in the identity of ‘young warrior’ in Sierra Leone’s history. This chapter investigates the question of continuity and change in intergenerational relations and conflict in Sierra Leone. What light can be shed on the modern phenomenon of child soldiering by a historical analysis of the participation of children in war? Four eras of Sierra Leone’s history—the pre-colonial, early colonial, late colonial, and early independence eras—are examined, looking for evidence of the participation of children and youth in armed conflict. Although their participation has shifted in meaning and in substance over the years as the nature of war has shifted, two themes emerge. First, their participation has often taken place under the rubric of apprenticeship to powerful warriors. Second, in a gerontocracy, ‘youth’ is not simply a biological category; it is most productively understood as a political category. The chapter ends with reflections on the agency of children in war, and discusses whether they are better seen as the dupes of their elders or as a class for themselves. Finally, there is an assessment of the impact of the Western rights-based model of childhood on the potential political roles of youth in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

I. Introduction

The world was shocked by media images of children in Sierra Leone, sometimes as young as eight years old, wielding AK–47s and performing some of the worst atrocities of the civil war (1991–2002). The use

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