There seems little doubt that the oppressive and collapsing Sierra Leonean state contributed to the outbreak of the country’s decade-long armed conflict. However, according to Sierra Leonean ex-combatants there was an additional crisis; widespread exploitation of young people’s labour by rural elites misusing customary law. This chapter will review evidence concerning the history of the rural society, and the role of the state in shaping that history. It is argued that the political economy of rural Sierra Leone from the colonial period is dominated by unresolved tensions between land-holding elites and dislocated peasants or ‘strangers.’ Post-domestic slavery conditions of social dependency and vagrancy reproduced themselves across generations giving birth to a young rural underclass, ripe for militia recruitment.

Introduction

From the mid-1990s, the social scientific study of war shifted to war economy, much to the exclusion of other factors causing and sustaining outbreaks of armed conflict. At about the same moment in time, the conflict in Sierra Leone appeared in the international headlines, and it did not take long before it was presented as the ultimate example of a conflict motivated by economic greed, rather than social or political grievances (cf. Collier 2001). A decade later, political and social grievances are back on the agenda as causes of conflict. There is now a wider acceptance of the possibility that the oppressive and patrimonial structure of the state in Sierra Leone had triggered the conflict. But a collapsing patrimonial system is not in itself a sufficient

In this chapter it is argued that Sierra Leone did experience an additional crisis, on top of a collapsing state. The existence of this crisis has in fact been pointed out by combatants who have been participating directly in the conflict (see for instance Archibald and Richards, 2002; Peters 2006; Richards 2005a). According to rural ex-combatants, Humphreys and Weinstein (2004) make clear that a majority of ex-combatants in the Sierra Leone civil war (more than 80 per cent) were from a rural background.

The root causes of the conflict in Sierra Leone can be divided into two kinds. One group of reasons plays out at national or state-level and reflects the consequences of a collapsing state, right at the end of the patrimonial chain running from Freetown politicians all the way to village youth in the rural areas. Here, the focus is on the state’s failure to provide accessible education for all, lack of job opportunities, and a desire for a democratic system to replace an unfair and divisive clientelism. The other group of reasons consists of issues playing out on the local level: complaints about a general unwillingness of seniors to help their juniors (see Shepler, in this volume); the injustice meted out by local courts controlled by corrupt elders and chiefs; and the control these elders exercised over productive and reproductive means such as land and labour, and the resources necessary for marriage.

It is rather striking that ex-combatants of different factions more or less state the same causes as being responsible for the outbreak of the war (Peters 2004). It is all the more remarkable that the causes brought forward do not differ greatly according to rank (rank-and-file or commander), method of conscription (volunteers and the forcibly conscripted), ethnic background, or age of ex-combatants. The obvious suspicion then arises—rather forcefully brought up by Collier (2001) and backed by Mkandawire (2002)—that these explanations are just post-event rationalizations, self-justifications, or a case of collective delusion. If so, it will be a challenge to explain, since former enemies provide similar analyses. Alternatively, might these local explanations not point to valid factors in feeding the conflict? This chapter will review evidence concerning the history of rural society, and the role of the state in shaping that history to determine whether and to what extent such processes of exclusion took place. An contextual analysis