

## CHAPTER TWO

# CHILD COMBATANTS AND ADULT WARS IN AFRICA

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A large proportion of child combatants are indeed to be found in Africa—at the heart of modern warfare. This chapter will explore the involvement of children in armed conflicts within the African context by analysing the extent of the ‘child soldier phenomenon’, methods of and reasons for recruitment, the treatment they receive and their contributions to armed forces and opposition groups as well as the consequences of their participation for themselves and the wider society.

The statistics are illustrative as outlined in Table 1. In Liberia, where under-eighteens make up 50% of the population, the NPFL established Small Boy Units who killed without question and on which the force was very dependent. An estimated 15,000 children became embroiled in that country’s conflict.<sup>51</sup> Next door, in Sierra Leone which has one of the worst records of using children in war and where 50% of the population are under eighteen, more than 10,000 children served as soldiers for the various fighting factions<sup>52</sup>. Further south in Angola, children under the age of eighteen consist of 52% of the population but 3,000 were used in the conflict<sup>53</sup> and in Mozambique the figure was approximately between 8,000 and 10,000.<sup>54</sup> Towards the east in Uganda, where under eighteens represent an overwhelming 56% of the population of 20 million, between 8,000 and 10,000 children have been abducted in the north by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, who have been fighting the government since 1989.<sup>55</sup> Figures from Ethiopia, where under-eighteens form 53% of the population, are harder to elicit as the government vehemently denies the participation of children in its conflict with Eritrea, which began in May 1998. However, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers has received credible reports that thousands of children were forcibly recruited into the Ethiopian army, particularly during the build-up to the major offensive launched by Ethiopia in May 2000.<sup>56</sup> From these statistics there is no doubt that children involved in armed conflict have become a dominant feature of the African landscape.

**Table 1: Proportion of Child Soldiers Deployed in Armed Conflicts across sub-Sahara Africa**

Name of Country	Population	U-18s as % of Population	U-18s used in Armed Conflict
Liberia	2,467,000	50	15,000
Sierra Leone	4,428,000	50	10,000
Angola	11,569,000	52	3,000
Mozambique	18,265,000	51	8,000–10,000
Uganda	20,791,000	56	8,000–10,000
Ethiopia	60,148,000	53	N/A <sup>57</sup>

Source: Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers, 2002

## Demographic Profile of Child Soldiers

It is widely agreed that the groups of children particularly vulnerable to recruitment are those from:

- Poor or otherwise disadvantaged sectors of society;
- The actual conflict zones themselves;
- Disrupted or non-existent family backgrounds<sup>58</sup>

The last group are said to be exceptionally susceptible to recruitment by armed groups because the family is supposed to provide “a measure of physical protection and assistance in strategies for avoiding recruitment”;<sup>59</sup> and once the family structure breaks down, this level of protection and assistance becomes more difficult to maintain. It is also important to draw a parallel between this group of children and those vulnerable to child labour during peacetime. Such a linkage has been referred to by both Brett and Nordstrom. According to Brett, “the categories of children most likely to be child labourers in peacetime are also the most likely to become child combatants in times of war.”<sup>60</sup> With regards specifically to the actual experiences of girls during war, Nordstrom claims that it becomes difficult to draw easy lines between wartime and peacetime: “what people tolerate in peace shapes what they will tolerate in war.”<sup>61</sup>

## Forced recruitment

Both government forces and rebels have used (and continue to use) compulsory recruitment and coercion to involve children in conflict in defiance of the UNCRC and its Optional Protocol on children in armed conflict. Children have been abducted from their homes at night or from school or the fields during the day. It is essential to recognise that the lack of accurate birth registration, particularly in many rural areas across the continent leaves children under the age of eighteen at a high risk; without birth certificates, children cannot prove their immaturity, and thus can be more easily coerced to join an armed faction. One of the tactics used by the RUF when it invaded Sierra Leone was to capture youngsters as they attacked villages. In the Oromo region of Ethiopia, the year 1999 witnessed the closure of an unknown number of schools while heavy conscription took place. In the case of Liberia, boys were threatened with death either to themselves or their families; on one occasion an armed group threatened to beat a thirteen year-old boy with a cartridge belt.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, recruiters deliberately destroy the bonds between their new recruits and their families and communities in order to end resistance from the communities and block the possibility of the children returning home. Mozambique and Angola are particularly illustrative case studies. In Mozambique, Mozambican National Resistance (Resistencia Nacional Mocambicana – RENAMO) soldiers forced new recruits to kill someone from their own village.<sup>63</sup> In Angola, where the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and government forces both forcibly recruited Rwandan refugee children who were living on the border as well as their own nationals, children fighting for UNITA were forced to kill their relatives and neighbours or to raid and loot their own villages. This was “done to cut links and eliminate the desire to escape and join family and community.”<sup>64</sup> The children were also forbidden to use their birth names, traditional names or nicknames that were related to their past experience with families and communities. Rather, they were given new war names such as ‘Rambo’, ‘the Russian’ and ‘the Invincible’, names given to boost their confidence and enhance their combative performance.<sup>65</sup>

## Child ‘volunteers’

Some authors have asserted that a substantial number of children make an active decision to participate in the conflict and ‘volunteer’ to join an armed group. McConnan’s research in Sierra Leone led her to claim that young ex-combatants

had “clear rational reasons for joining a militia force.... these are neither dupes nor victims.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, in some cases child recruits go beyond what they had been ordered to. In an Algerian village, for example, an eyewitness reported that not only were all the killers boys under the age of seventeen, but, that some twelve year-old boys had decapitated a fifteen year-old girl and played ‘catch’ with her head.<sup>67</sup>

Although the reasons children ‘volunteer’ include a desire for revenge, adventure, fun-seeking, a sense of belonging and peer pressure, most of the evidence points to survival as the primary reason for enlisting. In Liberia, Human Rights Watch (HRW) discovered that although warring factions forcibly recruited children, most children joined for survival. According to HRW, only a small percentage of children reported being forced to join. One UN official in Liberia told HRW, “children went to fight because their economic situation was so bad.”<sup>68</sup> Pentecostal Bishop, W Nah Dixon, supports this view,

Many of the Liberian youths who joined Charles Taylor’s NPFL to overthrow the Doe administration saw the civil war as an opportunity to acquire property and riches...Their motives was not liberating the people but looting their properties by use of the gun.<sup>69</sup>

In the case of Sierra Leone a substantial number of child soldiers joined the RUF, again, because they had no other means of survival.<sup>70</sup> The alternative to enlisting could be unemployment. Furthermore, it has been argued that the RUF bush camps offered alternative schooling for which many of the youngsters were grateful, as the formal education system had collapsed. Therefore, in their opinion offering their services to the rebels and thus participating in the rebellion, was a chance to resume their education.<sup>71</sup> The reasons children ‘volunteer’ for war, then, are firmly situated within the socio-economic contexts within which wars emerge. With regards to Sierra Leone, Abdullah and Muana argue that:

Central to an understanding of the war in Sierra Leone is the role of alienated youth, especially lumpen youth in the urban and rural areas, for whom combat appears to be a viable survival alternative in a country with high levels of urban unemployment, where the economy is dominated by a precious mineral sector in long-term decline.<sup>72</sup>

This point emphasises the importance of rehabilitating and restructuring the wider society in order for the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers (or any other war-affected group) to be effective.<sup>73</sup>

The link between the socio-economic context of war and the ‘volunteerism’ of children and youth has led some commentators to ‘problematise’ the concept of ‘voluntary’ recruitment. According to Machel, it would be misleading to consider children presenting themselves for service as ‘voluntary’ because, “rather than exercising free choice, these children are responding more often to a variety of pressures—economic, social and cultural.”<sup>74</sup> Poverty is said to be one of the most dominant pressures on child ‘volunteers’ because they believe that joining an armed group is the only way to ensure regular meals, clothing and medical attention. Therefore, “too great an implication of freedom of choice should not be associated with the term ‘voluntary’ in this context.”<sup>75</sup>

## Why children?

The use of children in numerous armed conflicts across the continent has led some commentators to infer that it is a legitimate African tradition and thus an inherent part of the culture. This section shall attempt to show why this inference is flawed and present an alternative approach.

A useful definition of ‘culture’ has been put forward by Bennett, who defines culture as follows:

Culture is an amorphous concept denoting anything that contributes to the unique character of a social group, thereby distinguishing it from other groups....It follows that culture may include artefacts, language, laws, customs and moral codes, in fact, a people’s entire intellectual and material heritage.<sup>76</sup>

Tradition, in turn, is the vehicle in which cultural beliefs are exhibited to ‘outsiders’ as well as transmitted to future generations. The importance of culture in defining and understanding a group is evident. However, it must be recognised that traits that are assumed to be cultural to a group are not there *a priori*; they do not just drop from the sky nor do they simply emerge as a result of group consensus. A limited number of traits are selected, normally by elite groups (and sometimes, even by outsiders), as cultural emblems,<sup>77</sup> thus making culture a conscious construction instead of “a spontaneous outgrowth of community practice.” As a deliberate construction, then, it can be argued that culture is not a homogeneous entity that can be captured and kept static; rather, it is dynamic and therefore, prone to change. Thus, the distinctive features used as cultural symbols by a group change due to the fact that “values and priorities also change over time as new experiences are encountered and

previously unknown influences make people change the direction of their lives."<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, it is crucial to be aware that, as a conscious construction, culture can be manipulated by dominant forces in society, such as elites, to achieve a particular goal.

In order to attribute a particular practice to culture, it is important to test its normative value by examining its continuity or persistence over time.<sup>79</sup> In the case of child soldiering the findings are interesting: although from as early as the age of seven, African children in past societies were assigned duties and responsibilities, their use in conflict was not as prominent as appears to be the case in most African countries afflicted by war today:

Although the warriors of pre-colonial African armies would not have attained complete adult status, children were not recruited to regiments nor did they bear arms....At most, as in the case of the Zulu, children gave incidental support as non-combatants.<sup>80</sup>

Just as Bennett argues that in pre-colonial African societies, co-opting relatively mature men was less a matter of principle than of pragmatism<sup>81</sup>, this study takes the view that co-opting children in modern conflicts is less a matter of culture and a dysfunctional (or lack of a) notion of childhood and more a matter of pragmatism, economics and demographics. Therefore, the use of African children in wars is not an inherent part of tradition and culture, not least for the following reasons: firstly, child soldiering is a global phenomenon and secondly, there is not simply one African tradition or culture but many, with diverse, and even disparate, features and norms.

Evidence supporting this is abundant. Apart from the easy availability of small, lightweight weaponry in conflicts of today, qualities particular to children facilitate their participation. Their comparative agility, small size, and the ease with which they can be physically and psychologically controlled, are regarded as advantages by military commanders.<sup>82</sup> For example, the small size of children, as well as their agility and relative inconspicuousness, makes them good spies or messengers.

There is another dimension to consider that centres on the recruitment of children as part of a deliberate military strategy. Lacking confidence in its own army and in adults who did not respect the rules, the APC government of Sierra Leone conducted its recruitment among the youth of both sexes—many of whom were street children from Freetown who had previously been involved in petty theft. Therefore, by giving them an AK-47 “the government

gave them a chance to engage in theft on a larger scale."<sup>83</sup> Civilians came to hate these children who shared the same background as the youthful recruits of the RUF and they were suspected of causing as much mayhem as the rebels; this led to the use of the term 'sobel': soldier by day, rebel by night.

The shortage of manpower also shapes the military strategy of both rebels and government forces. Mwizi Mthali of TransAfrica Forum argues that:

Long-running regional conflicts, poverty and an AIDS epidemic that has depleted the number of young men available to fight have made children and the military the strangest of bedfellows.<sup>84</sup>

Those pointing to a shortage of manpower as a primary reason for the use of children in conflicts argue that this is evidenced by the fact that child recruitment is rare in the early stages of the conflict, but increases as the conflict progresses and the number of adult men dwindles.<sup>85</sup> This assertion is supported by Machel who provides information to show that the longer a conflict continues, the more likely it is that armed groups will turn to children to fill their ranks as their supplies of adult men are depleted.<sup>86</sup>

Common roles for children to play are as porters, carrying loads of up to sixty kilograms, standing guard, manning checkpoints, acting as messengers or spies, laying and clearing landmines and stealing and foraging for food as well as performing household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In addition, both boys and girls, but especially the latter, are often required to provide sexual services for older soldiers. Many children are also used in active combat; as soon as they are old enough to handle an assault rifle or a semi-automatic weapon (which is normally at the age of ten), children very often end up on the front line, in the heat of battle, drugged, killing and being killed. In the case of Sierra Leone a clear distinction was made among the child recruits; those who had some schooling were taken for armed training where they were indoctrinated with the RUF ideology whilst those who were uneducated were assigned manual tasks. The example of Uganda is also illustrative. At the main LRA base just across the border in Sudan, all children abducted from northern Uganda receive basic military training, including the use of small weaponry, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. After repetitive drilling in the use of weaponry, these *kadogos* (child soldiers) are sent to fight, loot villages for food or capture other children. It is important to note that 'fighting' often consists of children being forced "to run towards 'the enemy' thereby acting as a distraction and human shield for the adult rebels and their commanders. Those who retreat are beaten or killed, often by other children"<sup>87</sup>

Children are treated in the same violent way as other recruits. Child combatants are often plied with drugs, alcohol and other hallucinogenic agents before battles in order to boost their courage. In Angola, children not only reported being given *liamba* (marijuana) and eating gunpowder to be strong, but, also being compelled to drink the blood of their victims in order to become both strong and fearless.<sup>88</sup>

With regards to Mozambique, Boothby and colleagues have outlined the RENAMO process of 'socialization into violence', which included physical abuse, and humiliation, punishment for displaying feelings for victims, exposure to violence, drills and exercises, forced participation in killings and ritual initiation. The rationale for this treatment of their young recruits was that a brief period of mental terror and physical abuse allegedly produced particularly fierce warriors.<sup>89</sup>

Similar reports have emerged from Liberia, where many child recruits were beaten if they resisted and tortured if they disobeyed orders. They were frequently beaten, flogged and subjected to a form of torture called *tabay*, previously described. Moreover, former child combatants reported being drugged on a mixture of cane juice and gun powder or with 'bubbles', an amphetamine that was supposed to make them feel 'strong and brave' for fighting at the front.<sup>90</sup> Children were also forced to rape, particularly upper-class women, at checkpoints. Additionally, some children were sodomised by older children or adults.<sup>91</sup> This latter point, the homosexual rape of young boys during conflict, has received less attention than the experiences of girls.

## **Consequences of child soldiering on children and society**

An article entitled, 'Boy Soldiers' published in Newsweek as a special report in August 1995, stated dogmatically:

Even if they survive the rigors of combat, it's often too late to salvage their lives. Unrelenting warfare transforms them into preadolescent sociopaths, fluent in the language of violence but ignorant of the rudiments of living in a civil society.<sup>92</sup>

This sensationalist focus obscures the fact that the experiences of children as combatants during wars have profound consequences for both the individual child and for the wider society to which he or she belongs. These need to be addressed in the subsequent post-conflict period of reconciliation, rebuilding,

rehabilitation and reintegration. According to Dodge and Raundalen, “psychological wounds and trauma suffered in childhood may affect the individual child and, as a consequence, the society for decades.”<sup>93</sup>

## **Educational consequences**

Apart from a few instances where some kind of education is provided by armed groups in training camps, most child soldiers risk forfeiting their education at the outbreak of war. In fact, the educational institutions themselves are often destroyed. In the example of Sierra Leone, the RUF targeted property as well as civilians and burnt many schools and colleges. Thus, it fair to say that during conflict, opportunities to develop skills other than those of a military nature are few and far between for most children.<sup>94</sup> As a result of their limited education caused by war, child combatants returning to school in peacetime may be placed in classes with younger children. The further humiliation of having to struggle to keep up with these younger children often discourages ex-combatants from returning to school. From another perspective, teachers and parents may also object to “having former child soldiers enrol at all, fearing that they will have a disruptive effect on other children.”<sup>95</sup>

## **Physical consequences**

Besides dying in action, physical injuries resulting from conflict is expected for all soldiers; in fact, they can be referred to flippantly as an occupational hazard, but research has shown that children are at a greater risk than older and more experienced combatants. The younger the child the higher the risk of injury or death. According to Brett and McCallin, the most frequent references to specific injuries suffered by child soldiers are loss of hearing, loss of limbs and blindness.<sup>96</sup> All three injuries can affect the reintegration of children into their families, communities and society generally. Loss of sight or hearing can impede educational, vocational and social development whilst loss of limbs limits the potential for economic productivity, a quality highly valued by most post-war societies. Instead of contributing to the economic reconstruction of their worlds, these children are seen as being an added burden the community can ill-afford to bear. Thus, they are often marginalised or rejected. Other factors influencing the physical health of child combatants have been noted and include: sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), respiratory tract infections, worm infestations and other water-born diseases due to poor hygiene and lack of basic facilities.

## Psychological consequences

There is a general consensus that the development of a child continues at all times, including during war, and is determined by his or her experiences at this time—be they positive or negative. Although, much contention surrounds the appropriateness of Western therapeutic models in non-Western societies, it is worth noting that during their research in Uganda, Sudan and Mozambique, Dodge and Raundalen identified Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in children and argue that the psychological effects of war on children can be described in terms of “psychological reaction patterns ranging from aggression and revenge (an aspect we think is exaggerated) to anxiety, fear, grief and depression.”<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, the use and abuse of children by armed groups can result in low self-esteem, feelings of guilt, violent behaviour, shame as well as lack of trust and confidence:

A 10 year-old who had been abducted by RENAMO, subjected to brutal training and ultimately forced to kill civilians and soldiers before escaping and finding refuge in a Maputo orphanage, was found to be suspicious of adults and suffering from “flashbacks” in which events from the past would come flooding back at unexpected moments to haunt him.<sup>98</sup>

From interviews with children in the Gulu District of northern Uganda, Stavrou and Stewart noted that, even 5 years after escaping from the LRA, former male and female abductees continued to experience the following:

- sleeplessness, nightmares and flashbacks;
- an inability to cope with and a general fear of the unknown;
- unstable weight maintenance and poor self-image;
- ongoing depression and suicidal tendencies;
- sensitivity to strange or loud noises and sudden movements; and
- irritability either while at home, at school or at work.

Former boy soldiers further expressed other problems including:

- feelings of shame about past actions and of guilt about having survived while others died or continue to be in captivity;

- low self-esteem and hopelessness about the future;
- a lack of confidence in their ability to create a home or family, to make a living and to improve themselves;and
- anger at rebels for taking away their youth, at the government for doing nothing and at their communities for not understanding them.<sup>99</sup>

Although the impact of sexual violence on girls has been relatively well documented, a great deal remains unknown about the long-term psychological effects on boys who have been sexually abused during conflict. Furthermore, the fact that children in armed factions were plied with drugs and alcohol in order for their combative performance to be enhanced worsens the situation.

Thus Graca Machel asserts that “a formerly cheerful twelve year-old may return home as a sullen, aggressive and alienated sixteen year-old.”<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless returning home to families and communities seems to be the main prescription issued in rehabilitation programmes, as there is a belief that re-attachment to families will assist in the rehabilitation and reintegration of a child into civil society. After all, it is believed that the initial separation from family at the inception of violence is at the heart of the ‘trauma’ suffered by a child soldier. Stavrou and Stewart use Uganda, where the family network is central to the fabric of society, to explain why this is so:

The severing of the link between the child and the parent and family has ramifications that go beyond the immediate stress or trauma. The family is the primary arena through which the process of socialisation occurs. This process is central to children’s learning about the world and their role within that world. Through interaction with the family and greater social environment, the individual becomes aware of the self and learns what is considered acceptable behaviour and what is not.<sup>101</sup>

At the same time it is important to consider the post-war state of this family. As mentioned earlier a disproportionate number of child soldiers come from poor, indigent and/or marginalised families and communities, the very people who bear the brunt of war and find themselves even more impoverished than at the beginning of the conflict. To compound their situation, it must not be forgotten that many child soldiers were forced to commit atrocities against members of their families and communities. Thus, the ‘sullen sixteen year-old’ returning home will find that his or her family has also changed:

Each member has had to develop survival strategies during the time in which she had been absent. Some members could have died, perhaps others had to turn to prostitution to survive, or had to betray important values to stay alive.<sup>102</sup>

It can, therefore, be inferred from this examination of the experiences of children in armed conflicts that “embedded in the nature of today’s armed conflicts is an onslaught on childhood itself.”<sup>103</sup> This onslaught on childhood within the African context has arguably produced a ‘scarred generation’ who are expected to become the leaders, drivers of economic well-being and the future of the continent.<sup>104</sup> It is for this reason that this study argues that child soldiering is creating, in many parts of Africa, a dysfunctional notion of childhood and thus affecting culture, a dynamic and evolving process, rather than the reverse being true.