

## **Chapter 6**

# **Disability as Embodied Memory? Questions of Identity for the Amputees of Sierra Leone.**

Maria Berghs  
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

### **Introduction**

The West African country of Sierra Leone suffered a decade-long civil war from 1991 to 2001. One of the features of that war was that all factions used amputation, primarily the Revolutionary United Front (R.U.F), affecting thousands of people (Richards, 1996). Amputation was an effective cultural weapon of war because it not only spread terror but it also deprived the enemy of the political and social capital of labor (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). In Sierra Leonean rural culture, power is linked to who controls, exploits, and has access to young male and female laboring bodies (Richards, 1996, Ferme, 2001). Amputation was a violent protest by the youth at the injustice of a local cultural system that allowed a political elite to treat its youth as laboring dependents and slaves, but also acted as a means of inverting such a system by declassifying it (Durkheim, 1893, Lockwood, 1993), turning thousands of government supporters into dependents (Richards, 1996, Peters & Richards, 1998). The image of the amputee (man, woman, child) thus soon became symbolic of the atrocities and trauma of the war in both global and local discourses and media imagery. After the war ended, the nation building began with a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' (T.R.C) aimed at putting the painful past of war behind. Very much at the same moment the first problems with the symbolic images, identities, and positions of the amputees in Sierra Leone society began.

In this paper, my aim is to examine this problematic construction of amputee identity in Sierra Leone society after the decade-long civil war through discourses and imagery of amputees presented in the media. Firstly, I examine how the government tried to contain and control amputee identity. Arguing that security and the physical rebuilding of the country was the first thing they should address, the government tried to contain and control amputee identities in camps. In establishing security and beginning the physical rebuilding of the country, the government used the bodies of the amputees in camps as a genderless visual metaphor for the trauma and threat of war, to gain aid from foreign donors. Furthermore, by rendering amputees in terms of their genderless bodies in camps, the government could hide the traumatic visible and invisible memories of the war. This entailed that the abuses that occurred during the civil war could be hidden from the country and not be a difficult priority to be addressed.

Secondly, I examine how amputees, with the help of foreign N.G.O's and religious organizations, rejected an idea of themselves as hidden victims and organized themselves into self-help groups such as the War Affected Amputee Association and demanded compensation and rehabilitation from those who had caused their injuries. Amputees began to see themselves as people who had rights and access to certain types of (economic, social, cultural, political) capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). The telling of their stories in their autobiographical terms became very important, and they even refused participation in the T.R.C if their demands were not met. Even more embarrassing for the government was that the amputees also made links, in the press, between their disabilities and a patriarchal history of colonial and post-colonial exploitation (the diamond industry) of Sierra Leone, as well as lobbied other governments and agencies for support.

Thirdly, I examine how amputee communities were created in amputee camps and how amputees rejected N.G.O and religious discourses of equality. For example, counter to ideas of gender-equality it was very important to male amputees to assert and regain their traditional roles as men. Amputation used as a violent cultural weapon of war erased differences of class, ethnicity, gender, and age (Richards, 1996, Peters & Richards, 1998). However, in reintegrating amputees back into society, while notions of ethnicity may not be so important, notions of class and gender continue to be relevant cultural markers in both local and global discourses and imagery.

In this way, I thus hope to trace the outline of what I feel is a struggle by amputees to create, for themselves, their own images, identities, and places in their communities in Sierra Leone. I hope to elucidate why and how amputee symbolic images, identities, and positions in society are problematic and explain why they continue to be problematic in present day Sierra Leone, both for themselves, Sierra Leoneans, and others.

### Controlling an Identity

Amputation was a feature of the decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone, used by all factions, but primarily by the Revolutionary United Front (R.U.F) rebels, to instill terror in the local population. In both global and local discourses in the media, the image of the amputee (man, woman, child) became symbolic of the atrocities and trauma of the war. Global media discourses on the war reported on the mindless violence and barbarism of young rebels high on drugs wielding machetes indiscriminately on a local population.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, local discourses on amputation understood amputation was used by all factions as a highly symbolic and rational strategy to enforce loyalty to either side of the fighting in Sierra Leone (Richards, 1996). In Sierra Leonean rural culture, power is linked to who controls, exploits, and has access to young male and female laboring bodies (Richards, 1996, Ferme, 2001). Amputation was a violent protest by the youth at the injustice of a local cultural system that allowed a political elite to treat its youth as laboring dependents and slaves, but also acted as a means of inverting such a system by declassifying it (Durkheim, 1893, Lockwood, 1993), turning thousands of government supporters into dependents (Richards, 1996, Peters & Richards, 1998).

The most infamous of those symbolic and rational strategies of amputation occurred in 1999, when the R.U.F rebels, after having entered the capital Freetown, were forced to retreat from certain neighborhoods. The rebels had already raped, killed, and amputated legs, hands and other body parts in their occupation of Freetown, but in their retreat they organized special 'hand-units'. These 'hand-units' were deliberately organized to amputate hands using machetes, axes or knives as a symbolic gesture of rebel power and protest against government failures.<sup>2</sup> To enforce this power in a more personal nature towards the amputees, they would sometimes even give people a choice of amputation, i.e. which arm and even 'long sleeves or short sleeves' (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

---

<sup>1</sup> In this respect see also Richards' (1996) and Ferme's (2002) arguments against Roger Kaplan's 'New Barbarism thesis' he outlines in *The Coming Anarchy* (2000), which argues that third world nations are doomed to descend into anarchy. In this respect, see also the film, 'Cry Freetown' made by Sorious Samura, which was seen as crucial in gaining international attention for an ignored civil war, as well as outlining the West's multifaceted complicity in the cause and propagation of war in Sierra Leone.

<sup>2</sup> Never explicitly mentioned, is the fact that Sierra Leone is also primarily a Muslim country and in the orthodox version of Islamic law, *Sharia*, a connection exists between amputation of hands' and theft. The governments in power before the civil war, as well as during the civil war itself, were understood in local discourses as governments of corruption, waste, and theft (Ferme 2002, p. 228).

In the Human Rights Watch report (1999) on the atrocities committed when the rebels entered Freetown in 1999, amputees described their amputations as occurring in these highly symbolic political terms; Amadu reported that after the rebels had hacked off his arms they had said to him, "... you go to Pa Kabbah and ask him for a new set of arms." Allieu, a double hand amputee, also reports, "They kept talking about President Kabbah and as they ordered me to put my other hand. I screamed, 'but I don't know anything about politics' and one of them answered, 'but you voted for Kabbah.' " These were all direct local references to Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's election slogan, "Give a Hand" which had gotten him elected to government in 1996, and whose government the rebels had toppled. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was also understood to be the 'father' of Sierra Leone, and cutting the hands of his supporters was also a symbolic means of protest against a system of rural power in which a male elite ruled.

During the war, thousands of people all over Sierra Leone were affected by amputation, but sadly most amputees did not survive their injuries. The amputees that did survive clearly made a direct link between their violent injuries and the political aims of the conflict. In their eyes, their support for their government was a reason for their amputation, and thus when the war ended, many amputees looked to their government for aid.

When the civil war ended in 2001, the nation building began with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (T.R.C). The main function and aim of the T.R.C. was for the country to come to terms with the abuses of war; however, it also gave rise to problems with the symbolic images, identities, and positions of the amputees in Sierra Leone society. The government and the United Nations' (U.N.) first priorities were security in terms of placating the rebel soldiers and the actual physical rebuilding of the country. Not quite knowing what to do with a huge amputee population that needed aid, the government organized camps for them. These camps, often refugee camps, were primarily places amputees could be medically treated, housed, and receive other health-care services. In this respect, the initial dealings with the amputee population in Sierra Leone were mainly medical in nature, with organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (M.S.F) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C) involved in setting up field hospitals where surgery on the war wounded or hacked limbs could occur.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main psychosocial problems to be addressed in such a medical sphere was phantom-limb syndrome (Broughton 2001, p. 1273). Phantom-limb syndrome is often described in psychoanalytical terms as a "psychic extension" of a former body image (Grosz, 1994) but amputee and anthropologist Steven L. Kurzman (2001, pp. 359-360) explains that phantom-limb pain is a normal and everyday and life-long reality for most amputees. Interestingly, neither Kurzman nor the amputees in Sierra Leone really felt that pain relief from phantom-limbs was a priority for them. Despite the government and N.G.O discourses about amputees initially being mainly medical in nature, even in psychosocial terms, amputees often felt that their priorities lay elsewhere. When amputees were asked what their priorities were, they all mentioned rebuilding their lives after the war in terms of finding family, homes, and employment (BBC NEWS, 2002<sup>a</sup>). While amputees were certainly helped by the early medical attention in camps, their actual physical problems and pain relief were seemingly not high on their agenda of priorities but high on the agenda of the government and certainly N.G.Os in terms of aiding the physical reconstruction of the country.

---

<sup>3</sup> This was very much a continuation of the same medical services I.C.R.C. had given during the war. While surgery was straightforward or reconstructive, in especially bad cases when people had both hands amputated they would use the krukenberg procedure. This procedure split bone and muscle tissue in the arms allowing pincers to be formed and some mobility in the limbs to be regained (I.C.R.C, 1998).

In the camps, amputee bodies and identities were relatively easy to control, and the government realized that the amputee could be used as a visual metaphor to aid the nation building and physical reconstruction of Sierra Leone. Allowing the media and N.G.O's access to the genderless bodies of the amputees in the camps meant that the plight of the country would be known in the global media and funds could be raised to rebuild the country. All foreign donors were invited to pass through the camps, and Lucile Papon (2005), director of Handicap International in Sierra Leone, recalled that the camps were, "...almost like a zoo" and very "chaotic." Abuses and corruption were widespread, and the humanitarian goals of the camps themselves often had to take a backseat to the military and political goals of those in power.

In viewing the amputees, what was at issue for the government, U.N. and N.G.O's were the R.U.F rebels and the possibility of the violence that they could once again unleash on Sierra Leone. It was not so much the plight of amputees that was at stake but security concerns linked to gaining money and aid from donors that had to go towards the military and towards helping former rebel soldiers. These rebels were not hidden from the rest of the country, not controllable in camps, and had to be immediately reintegrated. Violence or the threat of war was an important model of media discourse, and much in the same way that it had been in the war (Richards 1996, p. xxiv), this discourse was situated on amputee bodies. David A. Gerber (2003, p. 4) explains,

Disability and disfigurement are not incidental to war's purposes nor marginal to its effects, but rather alongside the murder of those killed, the point to begin with. Only in making victims can war achieve its potential ends.

In the early weeks and months after the civil war, the amputees were viewed mainly as genderless and classless silent victims who, much in the same way they had lost body parts, had lost their agency and subjectivity. It was the physical and material body of the people and the country that were the first issues to be dealt with, and not the messy trauma of people's minds and psyches. By keeping the amputees in camps, the traumatic individual visible and invisible memories of not only the war but the nation's history of slavery, patrimonial dependency, and failed emancipation were hidden from the rest of the country (Richards, 1996, Ferme, 2001). Viewing amputees and their disabilities mainly according to a genderless medical model, and in terms of a threat of renewed violence, meant a certain negation took place about the uniqueness of their identities and experiences. This allowed the government to avoid giving a completely new category of people new social, economic, political, and cultural positions and meanings within Sierra Leonean society.

### **Empowering Amputees**

The first people to actually address the amputees as a new category of people in Sierra Leone was not the government but foreign N.G.O's and religious (Muslim and Christian) organizations and movements. Amputees living in amputee camps became easily accessible to foreign N.G.O's and especially to religious organizations such as churches<sup>4</sup> and thus open to ideologies of empowerment and equality for disabled people. For example, Handicap International stated that one of their main tasks in Sierra Leone was the empowerment of people with disabilities, such as amputees (Papon, 2005). The United Council of Churches was another organization that lobbied for amputees to be treated fairly and argued in the media that the amputees should be treated as war heroes-and not be hidden away from the rest of the country. They also brought amputees into

---

<sup>4</sup> Evangelical churches seem to have been especially keen to work in Sierra Leone in order to spread their gospel.

contact with the idea that they had the potential to do whatever they wanted but that they needed resources, like prosthetic limbs, which could aid them (Fouke-Mpoyo, 2002). This challenged ideas that amputees had of themselves as silent or hidden victims.

Amputees formed themselves into self-help groups such as the War Affected Amputee Association. Furthermore, amputees began to see themselves as people who had rights and access to certain types of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which they could access through political capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Important too, but seemingly never mentioned, was also the fact that the amputees finally found ways and means to direct their anger and trauma at what had happened to them in the war. Being a victim for them did not mean having to be silent, but meant that one could take action and voice anger in productive but perhaps also in sublimated ways.

In order to access their political capital (Bourdieu, 1991), all amputees, were for example encouraged by N.G.O's to go and participate in voting in the first elections after the war. Provisions were made for everyone with disabilities to vote, even amputees, such as allowing them to be the first to vote, and allowing amputees to vote with limbs that they still had, such as their toes (I.F.E.S., 2001). However, it was also clear that voting, for amputees, was a way of expressing what they felt about the war, be it forgiveness, hope, or even revenge and anger. In a BBC News article, dated May 14, 2002, amputee Ya-Bom Kamara, remembering the reasons for his amputation stated,

I will never forgive them. When they cut off my hands they said, 'Go to (President) Kabbah and ask him to give back your hands.' I am voting for Kabbah. Who will vote for the RUF? (BBC NEWS, 2002<sup>b</sup>)

Being able to organize oneself, taking action by becoming a member of a like-minded group, and being able to express emotions, even negative emotions, were essential first steps for amputees in regaining trust in their surroundings, in terms of agency and control. More than any other experience, amputation, for the amputee, had taken away the idea that they could control their bodies and identities. In this sense, Jusu Jaka, a double hand amputee, who initiated the War Affected Amputee Association, decided that in response to the ways in which amputee images had been hijacked in an exploitative fashion, one of the first things that had to be stopped in the camps was the taking of photographs without the permission of the amputees themselves (Jung, 2004).

As well as regaining control of their images in the media, the telling of their stories in individual autobiographical terms became very important to asserting their agency. The government and N.G.O's had encouraged the amputees to tell their stories to gain attention (i.e. money and resources) for their causes, but the amputees did not always see a purpose in reliving the difficult moments of their amputations, especially if they felt it was nothing. The amputees came to realize, just as they could control their images, they could control their stories.

Once the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (T.R.C) began its workings in Sierra Leone, and had outlined the amputees as one of the main stakeholders in the process, amputees refused to participate. Amputees realized that their identities in the T.R.C were of individual 'victims' who had suffered due to the war, and they argued that if the T.R.C wanted individual stories of testimony, they had to give each individual amputee some form of compensation. Furthermore, feeling disenfranchised due to the fact that they saw all the attention and resources going to the ex-combatants, they decided to boycott the T.R.C hearings until their demands were met.

They presented a seven-point document, which included demands for shelter for each amputee, a bag of rice and 200,000 leones (about \$100) every month till they died, free education for their children, the provision of medical facilities, and a “re-integration allowance” of approximately \$150 (Dougherty 2004, p. 47).

While the government did not agree to amputee demands, they agreed to investigate how to improve the situation for the amputees in the future. In a highly symbolic gesture, the president Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, for whom so many amputees saw themselves as having lost limbs, met with amputee representatives from the camps. As a result, when the T.R.C hearings began, an amputee was the first person to give personal testimony (Dougherty 2004, p. 47).

In this sense too, amputees saw the telling of their stories in terms of a needed recognition of the extent of their suffering and sacrifice for the political power of the nation state and president. In initially refusing to testify in the T.R.C hearings, amputees also made a link between local beliefs that patriarchal political power is always gained through the consumption of bodies and especially parts of the body where environmental and social exchanges take place (Ferme 2002, p.182), as well as beliefs that saw the consumption of the bodies and limbs of Sierra Leoneans as an extension of a long history of colonial and capitalist abuse. The bodies of the Sierra Leonean people and the bodies of the nation state had a history of oppression and exploitation in terms of Western material wealth and gain, which the amputees felt they were also reminders of.

Amputees began making links in the press between their disabilities and this history of colonial and post-colonial exploitation (the diamond industry) of Sierra Leone. In a BBC News item dated September 10, 2002, Jusu Jarka, demands reparation from the diamond industry, which he accuses of “gross violations of human rights” (BBC NEWS, 2002<sup>5</sup>). Considering that most of the aid in order to rebuild the nation state was coming from the West and also Western businesses interested in natural resources such as diamonds, this was highly embarrassing for the government. Yet, as the government was not aiding them with reparations, amputees seem to have felt that they were morally right in making such statements and claims.

The amputee relationship towards the government before and after the T.R.C. hearings and media reminders about their situation remained tense. Amputees felt the government was purposely ignoring them, and they were continually outlining ways to lobby public sympathy and government action. Amputees in Freetown, seemingly influenced by people with polio, who staged a protest for better conditions, initiated their own protest to call attention to the worsening camp conditions, the fact that their food supply had been stopped, that their children needed education, and even the fact that they were tired of begging (CmetFreetown, 2001). However, publicly staged political actions in Sierra Leone did not always work in mobilizing their government, and so amputees began targeting their government by addressing themselves to more powerful political structures that the government depended on, such as the United States, Great Britain, and the United Nations (U.N.).

With the help of an American N.G.O., Friends of Sierra Leone (FoSL), amputees were able to make a trip to the United States in 2000, to get new prosthetic limbs and rehabilitation services. However, central to that trip was the political lobbying that the amputees did in terms of making not only the American public aware of their situation but also the political structures and figures of influence, such as the United States Congress and Bill Clinton (FoSL, 2005).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Other actions of political lobbying consisted of writing letters to political figures of influence. In 2004, the amputees wrote a letter to the secretary-general of the U.N., Kofi Annan, complaining that the government was ignoring them. They also expressed the hope that the publication of the T.R.C would also outline provisions for their welfare (Dougherty 2004, p.50).

In terms of gaining justice for their amputations, amputees saw the government of Sierra Leone and the T.R.C. as politically too weak to implement any real changes. Thus two Nigerian businessmen, who had become amputee victims during the war in Sierra Leone, also decided to take political action by lobbying the Nigerian government. They formed their own organization, Amputees Rehabilitation Foundation, and lobbied the Nigerian Supreme Court to review the refugee status of the former president of Liberia, Charles Taylor, in Nigeria. Charles Taylor had been implicated by the T.R.C in the civil war of Sierra Leone but had seemingly escaped justice by fleeing to Nigeria where he was given refugee status. The Nigerian amputees David Anyale and Emmanuel Egbuna testified in the Nigerian media, that it was also Liberian mercenaries who had amputated their limbs in Freetown, 1999, and Nigeria could not allow Charles Taylor to remain unpunished (Anyale & Egbuna, 2004).

These empowering organizations and actions for and by the amputees, whether locally or globally, were mainly political and public in nature, sometimes weak and unstructured and certainly not always transparent, but they did call attention to the amputees and their needs, and in this sense were very positive (Papon, 2005). Media discourses on amputees and amputee empowerment reveal that amputees, while also including women and children, were mainly men and represented by men in the media and public eye. It thus seems that men were primarily targeted by amputation as a means of compromising masculinity and what it meant to be a man in Sierra Leonean society. Or perhaps that it is more important for men in Sierra Leonean culture to be able to control, exert, and show a laboring body and subjectivity.

In Sierra Leone, to be a “big man” means to be able to have dependents that you are responsible for and due to these resources and influence they represent, you have access to political power (Richards, 1996, Ferme, 2002). Having political power meant that you also had the right and necessity to speak your opinions and to show yourself in a public realm. Your very bodily presence and image was represented as moral and cultured and seen as part of a symbolic and sacred system, which as big man or even elder you were upholding through your identity. As in Western discourses, a man is at risk of losing his masculinity and being viewed as feminine if he becomes too dependent or “...exhibits indecision, weakness, passivity...” (Gerber 2003, p. 10) or even becomes his body (Murphy, 1990). In this respect, amputee organizations and action in terms of accessing differing forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) through the political (Bourdieu, 1991) are also exercises in trying to regain and empower forms of masculinity and images of male authority for amputees.

### **Rejecting Foreign Notions of Disability.**

Regaining masculinity and male authority as first exercises in empowerment, while perhaps not in line with N.G.O and religious ideas on gender sensitivity and gender equality, seems in the global and local media and discourses to have been important to the amputees and by extension to the families of the amputees. Many of the traditional family roles, relations, and even ethnic kinship structures had been completely reversed due to amputation. The reversal of roles in the family structure, where for example, it was now the wife or children who had to care for their husbands or fathers caused a lot of emotional tension and friction (Onishi, 1999).

The camp structures successfully helped to aid in defusing these emotional tensions and frictions through organizing recreational activities for the amputees and their families. One of the most successful and also traditionally masculine activities was playing football.<sup>6</sup> Dee Malchow, a

---

<sup>6</sup> “Spectator sports are in most countries male dominated, and bring out a rich symbolism which has so far not been properly analyzed in relation to nationalism, violence, and sexuality” (Eriksen 2002, p. 172).

single leg amputee and nurse working in Sierra Leone, suggested to Pastor Mambud Samai, who was a youth counselor in the amputee camps, that he organize football games (American soccer) for the amputees. She donated some shoes, the rules of the game, and videotape so they could learn how to play, and the Single-Leg Amputee Sports Club was created (Samai, 2005).

Samai, now the program coordinator, explained while they began small with eight team members, they have grown to having over 80 members. The football club is also primarily a male affair and Samai explains that it has given especially young men a huge amount of confidence, sense of community, and also involved them in representing Sierra Leone abroad in a positive way.<sup>7</sup> He also explains that in Sierra Leone, women don't play football, but the team has grown to such an extent that their organization also supports women's recreational activities and is linked to micro-credit programs such as petty-trading schemes which women need. He also stated some women choose to be supportive to the club members by organizing religious devotionals or giving counseling, activities which he explained were needed and the women were comfortable with and very good at. The most important outcome, from Samai's perspective, was that things were gradually getting better and from a small group of eight men getting together to play sports, the team had grown to unite and support the amputee community in many differing ways (Samai, 2005).

In this sense the amputees in the camps felt solidarity with each other through the friendships, communities, and organizations that they had created, and the fact that they were all dealing with the same problems created common bonds which helped them (Richards, Bah, & Vincent 2004, p. 27). The camp structure also provided important and secure tools for dealing with issues related to embodiment and identity away from the idea of a norm that was 'able-bodied', such as in playing football together. Amputees' senses of self were now conditioned by images of bodies and ideas of selves, which challenged traditional boundaries, "...between individual and society, public and private, nature and culture, masculine and feminine" (van Wolputte 2005, p. 264).

Yet, these images and ideas, because they challenged traditional boundaries, were also at the same time ambivalent, for amputation and amputees were also problematic metaphors of how certain sacred and symbolic categories (young and old, birth and death, woman and man, human and animal, bad and good) related to dignity and vulnerability of the body that had been violated during the war (De Dijn, 2002). Amputees were a bodily reminder or living memory, to themselves and in their daily actions, that these moral boundaries had been transgressed and their bodies were both sites of dignity but also of disgrace. This meant that amputee identities were also ambivalent and often changed in multiple ways as a reflection of that ambivalence.

Mr. Johnny, a Sierra Leonean diplomat who lived and worked in Freetown in the years after the war, states that local reactions to amputees also have to be situated in terms of the transgression of moral boundaries, for while many local people feel sorry for the amputees and support them, they also want to forget difficult memories of war, as well as in some cases their own guilt, which amputees remind them of. This leads to very complicated emotional interactions with amputees, where people feel curiosity, denial, guilt, anger, pity, regret, self-hatred, but also care, warmth, and admiration. Due to the fact that amputees bring such difficult emotional reactions, many Sierra Leoneans wish to avoid them all together (Mr. Johnny, 2005).

Amputees play with these ambivalent reactions, accessing their identities as victims by removing their prosthetic limbs and showing their stumps to gain sympathy, support, and help,

---

<sup>7</sup> The club is registered with the Sierra Leone Football Association and has already played in England. Recently the club has been invited by the International Amputee Football Association to play in Brazil (Samai, 2005).



for example, in begging.<sup>8</sup> Rather than seeing their bodies as ‘defective’ or ‘disgraceful’, amputees began using their bodily limitations to access forms of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), for example by selling the food or material provided for them in the camps, outside of the camps. Their prosthetic limbs or hooks also became tools to be used as the amputees saw fit in keeping with the situation. Amputees, for example, use crutches while playing football and only the goalkeeper uses prosthetic limbs (Samai, 2005). Moreover, their ideas of their identities are reflected in how they perceive prosthetics as an aesthetic or fashion tool (Papon, 2005)). This meant that identities as ambivalent, could also at times be ironical and playful, but also manipulative, corruptive, and even exploitative of other amputees, N.G.O’s, and other Sierra Leoneans for economic or other gain (Papon, Mr. Johnny 2005). In this way, amputees also rejected a simplistic and dualistic moral framework that victimized them a second time, in terms of viewing them as good or innocent people just because something traumatic and bad, like amputation, had happened to them.

At other times, amputees also completely rejected any idea of having to undertake traditional gender roles or labels like a victim or hero or even survivor. Amputees were too busy concentrating on daily life, which made even simple tasks very difficult for them, for example, caring for a small child with no hands. Many amputees also suffered from post-traumatic shock, depression, and/or suicidal thoughts related to the war and the memories of how they had gained their injuries (Papon, 2005). Although it is never openly spoken about in local or global media discourses, some amputees found themselves completely unable to cope with amputation and apparently there have been cases of amputees who have committed suicide. One such case of suicide in Freetown involved a male double amputee, who the story goes, could not even open his pants to go to the bathroom when he needed (Mr. Johnny, 2005).<sup>9</sup>

In the camps too, contrary to N.G.O and religious ideologies of equality, a hierarchy of limbs was created where those with double amputations of arms were considered the worst off (Onishi, 1999). Amputees, who had lost legs or a leg, still had the possibilities of using their arms and hands as well as wearing prosthetic limbs, which could enable them to walk. Prosthetic limbs of arms and certainly hands were either cosmetic in nature or just hooks and were not seen as enabling identity in Sierra Leone, which is mainly a “hand” culture due to the emphasis on agriculture (Papon, 2005). The identity of amputees as victims in a hierarchical structure was also important with regards to ideologies of equality with other disability groups. Amputees rejected any notion of themselves as disabled. Amputees see those who are disabled in Sierra Leone as having an identity connected to a different moral realm, due to the fact that disability is understood as caused by witchcraft and voodoo. “In Sierra Leone, even today, if something bad happens to you, or happens to someone else, you look for a reason and that reason can be a magical reason” (Mr. Johnny, 2005). Another issue related to why those with disabilities are

---

<sup>8</sup>Economically, life was hard for the amputees and begging was considered one of their main sources of economic revenue but amputees would often have to compete with other beggars with a disability such as the blind or people with polio, and thus the identity of their injuries became important. Also due to the lack of infrastructure of the old disability networks, people with disabilities were increasingly forced out into the streets to beg. Before the war, begging had existed to a lesser degree. However, those with disabilities like the polio “street kids” had been organised in powerful urban gangs before the war, and after the war they once again accessed such resources with the increased aids of crutches and wheelchairs from N.G.O’s making them more mobile and some would argue more “dangerous” (Mr. Johnny, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Psychological support and counseling for amputees is still an issue that N.G.O’s like Handicap International are struggling with. There is only one psychiatrist in Sierra Leone and thus usually outsiders have to be trained to give psychological counseling to amputees. This is not given in culturally sensitive terms or always in categories that amputees understand and perhaps need (Papon, 2005)?

regarded with suspicion in Sierra Leone, and why amputees don't want to be associated with them, is due to their participation in the war. Stories and rumors apparently circulate among local people about how the disabled were often spies. Disabled people, such as people with polio, would enter into villages and then report back to the rebels allowing them to plan attacks. These disabled people were treated like "normal soldiers" and also had "rank" (Mr. Johnny, 2005).

This made the work of all N.G.O's, and in particular of Handicap International, in trying to unite amputees with other people with disabilities almost impossible. Lucile Papon states,

I have tried for over 2 years to get them to sit with each other and realise that they are facing the same inequalities but they see things in a different way. The amputees say, we are not disabled; we are different from polio victims. And the polio victims say, the amputees are not like us because we have been suffering from birth, and we have to combat witchcraft. The conflict between the two has been quite aggressive and certainly by focusing on the amputees we contribute to it. We (Handicap International) have decided to forget about these differences and try to unite them as people with disabilities but the population does not see it in that way (Papon, 2005).

Striking, however, is the fact that in such negotiations between amputees and others with disabilities, none of the N.G.O's enlisted any local positive identities related to disability in Sierra Leonean society and culture. Despite the fact that disability is linked to superstitious beliefs about witchcraft and voodoo in Sierra Leone, the anthropologist Marianne C. Ferme (2001, p. 206) relates that this does not always have to be in a negative context with regards to a person's social and cultural identity or position in society. In her work among the Mende people of Sierra Leone, she tells the story of Moifroy, a boy born with a deformed back, who although called "lump" was said to have special powers. In the Mende community Ferme was living in, the boy thus had a privileged and positive status. Also, during the civil war, a radio station that was very popular was called, Voice of the Handicapped because the information on the radio was given by a blind man who locals thought would speak his mind (Mr. Johnny, 2005).

While the N.G.O's are seemingly not accessing such positive identities, the government has decided to use such identities to try and unite groups with disabilities. In his inaugural address on April 8, 2005, on the seminar the government was hosting with N.G.O's, about Law on Disability, the president Ahmad Tejan Kabbah noted that he listened to Voice of the Handicapped radio station. In his speech too, he very much united amputee identities with those of other disabled people noting that both faced discrimination. He also made an analogy between the discrimination of those with disabilities and the racism that Sierra Leoneans as black people face. He pointed to the fact that both "polio victims" and amputees played football together on the beach with crutches and he saw sports as possibly uniting those two groups.<sup>10</sup> Lastly in his speech, he pointed out that everyone was in some way disabled and that the line between being "abled" and "disabled" was often very thin (Office of the President, 2005).

Equally important however, is that it is advantageous to the government to make such links among disabled groups for it places amputees outside of the political spectrum of patriarchal power and in the same moral realm as other people with disabilities. In uniting amputee identities to those with other disabilities, the government could not only please essential and necessary donors like Handicap International but also sidestep the problem of the embodied

---

<sup>10</sup> Mambud Samai contradicts this and states that amputees don't play football with polio victims because polio victims play with crutches to hit the ball and amputees while using crutches, hit the ball with one leg. He also explained that amputees don't like to play with "polios" because they are generally seen as too aggressive and violent while amputees are peace-loving. When I suggested it was because of witchcraft beliefs that amputees and polios don't play football together, Samai, laughed heartily, and stated they were playing in the cities and not in the traditional areas (Samai, 2005).

memories and trauma of war that the amputees symbolically represented. Amputee identities and places in society had to become connected with those who had other disabilities, and in conjunction be linked to the fact that everyone had disabilities, so that amputee identities were normalized. Amputees, after all, were Sierra Leonean citizens, facing the same problems of discrimination that everyone faced and could possibly face.

Another priority for the government in normalizing relations with the amputees had become the resettlement of amputees back into society. Initially, when the government, N.G.O's and churches wanted to move the amputees back to their communities, the amputees refused, due to the help and support they received in the camps, which they felt they would not receive from the government. The amputee and refugee camps were also located near or in cities, so logistically easy for amputees to access. For example, the amputee camp Aberdeen in Freetown was very close to the city centre and beaches, which were "prime areas" for begging but also recreational activities like playing football on the beach. Initially a good short-term solution for controlling amputee identities became problematic as amputees did not stay in camps but could be seen begging downtown in the capital, organizing protests, on the beach, and even going on trips abroad (Mr. Johnny, 2005, Anderson, 2005). This was felt to be detrimental to the rebuilding of the nation state in which reconciliation and forgiveness were central ideas and images.

In talks, interviews, and surveys done with the N.G.O's in charge of their resettlement, like the Norwegian Refugee Council (N.R.C.), World Food Program (W.F.P.) and CAUSE-Canada among others, amputees mainly seem to have agreed with resettlement programs because of the promise of new houses and new lives which they desperately needed. However, the N.R.C. in their final report on the resettlement process explains how the promise of houses to the amputees in camps had enormous unforeseen consequences for the entire resettlement process and the belief that all amputees were safely contained by the government in camps.

As words spread that the agencies were providing shelter and assistance for camp amputees and war wounded, other victims – some seriously disabled and traumatised – emerged from hiding, seeking help. In addition, many amputees and war wounded have returned from Guinea or Liberia. An assessment undertaken by NRC shows that there are still about 600 amputees and severe war wounded that are without houses or any form of assistance from aid agencies. However, NRC has not succeeded in calling on donors to assist these "hidden" IDPs and returnees. Unfortunately, the target group seems to fall between two stands of funding, relief work and long-term development (N.R.C. 2005, p. 2).<sup>11</sup>

Hundreds of amputees in Sierra Leone and their families had thus missed the boat in terms of getting aid and assistance. Furthermore, funding to aid amputees in terms of housing has now been stopped due to lack of donors.

In hindsight, Lucile Papon (2005) of Handicap International states that resettlement of amputees and problems related to resettlement, like loss of political power and disillusionment in the experience, was certainly one of the big mistakes of both the government and N.G.O's like the N.R.C. The new communities that were created for the amputees were often artificial villages of 10, 20, sometimes 30 houses and did not really integrate amputees in the social fabric of local life. In many ways, "...a camp logic of individual dependency was kept," Papon states, "...but just moved to another place". Those amputees who had been successful had rejected this discourse of individual identity and had asserted themselves according to their beliefs and identities. The resettlement of amputees to cities and villages was however only successful for those who gained culturally accepted and valued identities in terms of being able to provide and

---

<sup>211</sup> In total, N.R.C. only had the funds to build 420 houses in 56 localities (N.R.C, 2005).

give to the new communities they were trying to create. Resettlement communities that recreated a “camp logic” and identities of dependency entailed that amputees in such poor rural areas are now barely able to survive (Papon, 2005).

The unforeseen consequences of resettlement, bringing hundreds of amputees out of hiding and back from Guinea and Liberia indicated that the amputee population was much bigger than the government and N.G.O’s claimed existed in the camps. This furthermore reinforces the idea that medical aid and camp life was not a priority for amputees but finding family, homes, and employment was. The sudden emergence of so many amputees, many of them elderly, sick, female, and very young also raises many questions about the symbolic identities and the current status of amputees in Sierra Leone today outside of a government controlled camp environment. What are these amputees doing now? Where are they? Do they receive aid, skills, and support? How? Why were so many amputees still in refugee camps? Why did the government, N.G.O’s and other organizations not know this? Many questions thus remain unanswered with regards to the positions of amputees in Sierra Leone society. Furthermore, resettlement programs indicated that the individual experiences and needs of the elderly, sick, women, and children were certainly neglected and had to be addressed in a more communitarian logic, in keeping with the fabric of Sierra Leonean rural culture and life.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, my aim was to examine the problematic symbolic images, identities and positions of the amputees in Sierra Leone society. My intention was to show, through global and local media discourses and imagery of amputees, how amputees have struggled to create, for themselves, their own images, identities and places in their communities.

At first, amputees were mainly seen in terms of a problematic symbolic bodily image of trauma and war that had to be controlled and exploited in camps. In the second stage, amputees were empowered by the N.G.O’s and religious organizations as people who had rights and could assert themselves and their voices in a political realm. In the third stage, amputees created their own notions of what it meant to be an amputee, and learned which identities could help them as well as work against them in creating new communities in Sierra Leone.

At the same time, throughout their struggle, amputee symbolic images, identities and positions in Sierra Leone continue to be problematic in terms of the ambivalence of their identities, the fact that amputees do not want to be seen as disabled, and a resettlement process which has not been entirely successful and brought hundreds more amputees to the forefront of society. This paper thus only scratches the surface and gives an outline of the struggles of amputees in asserting their image, identities, and places in society. Many questions in this respect remain unanswered, particularly in terms of the experiences of amputee women, children, elderly, and families aiding amputee relatives. It is clear that amputee identity is tied in with Sierra Leonean ideas of masculinity and the rebuilding of the state in an ideology that is very patriarchal (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992, 2003) and this means that mainly a male amputee discourse is presented in the media. Also, it importantly remains to be seen how the local population deals with male and female amputees in their midst as symbolic images and embodiments of their memories of war and how this will continue to affect amputee identities and positions in Sierra Leone.

### Acknowledgements

Without the generous help of many people this paper would not have been possible. My heartfelt thanks go to Médecins Sans Frontières (M.S.F), International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C), the Norwegian Refugee Council (N.R.C), Mr. Johnny of the Embassy of Sierra Leone in Belgium, Lucile Papon of Handicap International, Mambud Samai of the Single-Leg Amputee Sports Club of Sierra Leone, Friends of Sierra Leone (FoSL), Professor Devlieger, and my fellow classmates of the M.A. course in Cultures and Disability at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, for their engaging discussions of this topic.

### References

- Anderson, P. (2005). Personal E-mail. 17th May.
- Anyaele, D. & Agbuna, E. (2004). Commentary: Why Put Charles Taylor on Trial. *Project Syndicate*. August. (<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/anyaele1/English>) (June 3, 2005).
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Appadurai, A. (1987). Putting hierarchy in its place. *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1): 36-49.
- BBC NEWS. (2002<sup>a</sup>). Phantoms of Sierra Leone's Past. *BBC NEWS*. June 16. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/2043773.stm>) (June 3, 2005).
- BBC NEWS. (2001). Reacting to Tragedy in Sierra Leone. *BBC NEWS*. July 7. ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/1426476.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/1426476.stm)) (June 3, 2005).
- BBC NEWS. (2002<sup>b</sup>). Sierra Leone Voting Ends. *BBC NEWS*. May 14. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1986122.stm>) (June 3, 2005)
- BBC NEWS. (2002<sup>c</sup>). U.N. Force to Stay in Sierra Leone. *BBC NEWS*. September 10. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2248317.stm>) (June 3, 2005)
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Thompson, J.B. (ed) and Gino, R. (trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The Forms of Capital. Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Richardson, J.G. (ed.). New York, Greenwood: 241-258.
- Broughton, M. (2001). Freetown: Controlling Phantom Limb Pain in Sierra Leone. *Lancet*. Vol. 357: 1273.
- CmetFreetown. (2001). Protest: Amputees Bring Freetown to a Standstill. *Concord Times*. May 22. ([http://www.cmetfreetown.org/Media/Print/Articles/CSS\\_Articles/ConcordTimes/CT-010522-01.stm](http://www.cmetfreetown.org/Media/Print/Articles/CSS_Articles/ConcordTimes/CT-010522-01.stm)) (June 3, 2005)
- CmetFreetown (2001). Baptists Donate to Amputees. *Concord Times*. July 3. ([http://www.cmetfreetown.org/Media/Print/Articles/CSS\\_Articles/ConcordTimes/CT-010703-02.stm](http://www.cmetfreetown.org/Media/Print/Articles/CSS_Articles/ConcordTimes/CT-010703-02.stm)) (June 3, 2005)
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. (1992). *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder: Westview.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. (2003). Ethnography on an Awkward Scale: Postcolonial Anthropology and the Violence of Abstraction. *Ethnography* 4(2): 147-80.
- De Dijn, H. (2002). Technology in Health Care. A Philosophical Ethical Appraisal. *Between Technology and Humanity. The Impact of Technology on Health Care Ethics*. (Gastmans, C. Ed.). Leuven: Leuven University Press.

- Durkheim, E. (1893). *The Division of Labour in Society*. New York: New York Free Press (1997).
- Dougherty, B.K. (2004). Searching for Answers: Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *African Studies Quarterly*. Vol 8, Issue 1: 39-56.
- Eriksen, T.H. (2002). *Ethnicity and Nationalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Fabian, J. (1998). *Moments of Freedom. Anthropology and Popular Culture*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- F.A.O. (2004). Disabled in Sierra Leone Prove that Disability is not Inability. *F.A.O. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Press Report*. December 3. (<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/MHII-67E7RE?OpenDocument>) (June 3, 2005)
- Ferre, M.C. (2001). *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Fouke-Mpoyo, C. (2002). Heroes and Amputees – Reflections From an Amputee Camp in Sierra Leone. *Church World Service*. July13. (<http://www.churchworldservice.org/news/archives/2002/07/39.html>) (June 3, 2005)
- FoSL (2005). Personal E-mail. May15.
- FoSL: Friends of Sierra Leone (<http://www.fosalone.org>) (June 3, 2005)
- Gerber, D. A. (Ed.) (2003). *Disabled Veterans in History*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Gupta, A (1997) The Song of the Nonaligned World: Transnational Identities and the Reinscription of Spaces in Late Capitalism. A. Gupta and J. Ferguson (eds.). *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Anthropology*. Durham: Duke University Press : 179-202.
- I.F.E.S. (2001). An Action Plan For Electoral Participation of People with Disabilities Sierra Leone Case Study. Political Access for People With Disabilities Briefing Paper Series. Global Initiative to Enfranchise People With Disabilities *I.F.E.S*. Volume II, Paper IV, July. (<http://www.electionaccess.org/>) (June 3, 2005)
- Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Handicap International (<http://www.handicap-international.org>) (June 3, 2005)
- Human Rights Watch. (1999). Getting Away With Murder, Mutilation, Rape. New Testimony From Sierra Leone. *Human Rights Watch Report*. Vol.11, No. 3(A).
- Ingstad, B., & Reynolds Whyte, S; (Eds.). (1995). *Disability and Culture*. Berkley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press.
- ICRC News. (1998). Sierra Leone: Over 400 operations in three months. *International Committee Red Cross News*. 10<sup>th</sup> of January. (<http://www.icrc.org>) (June 3, 2005)
- Jung, A. (2004). Neither War Nor Peace in Sierra Leone. *Magazine for Development and Cooperation*. Vol.4. (<http://www.inwent.org/E+Z/index-eng.html>) (June 3, 2005)
- Kurzman, S.L. (2001). Presence and Prosthesis: A Response to Nelson and Wright. *Cultural Anthropology*. Vol. 16, No.3: 374-387.
- Mr.Johnny/ Embassy of Sierra Leone, Brussels. (2005). Personal Interview. May 9.
- Médecins Sans Frontières (<http://www.msf.org>) (June 3, 2005)
- Murphy, R.F. (1990) *The Body Silent*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- N.R.C. (2005). Final Report N.R.C Amputee and War Wounded Housing Project. Sierra Leone 2001-2004. *Norwegian Refugee Council. Amputee Housing Summary Report*, January : 1-11.

- Office of the President. (2005). Statement by His Excellency the President Alhaji Dr. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah on the Launching of the Seminar on a Law on Disability. *Office of the President*. The Republic of Sierra Leone. April 8.  
(<http://www.slatehouse-sl.org/speeches/law-ref-apr8.html>) (June 3, 2005)
- Onishi, N. (1999). Sierra Leone Measures Terror in Severed Limbs. *New York Times*. August 22.
- Papon, L. (2005). Telephone Interview. May 11.
- Peters, K., & Richards, P. (1998). Fighting with Open Eyes. Youth Combatants Talking about about War in Sierra Leone. Bracken, P. J. & Petty, C. (eds.). *Rethinking the Trauma of War*. London: Save the Children/ Free Association Books.
- Richards, P. (1996). *Fighting for the Rainforest. War, Youth, and Resources in Sierra Leone*. London: International Africa Institute.
- Richards, P., Bah, K., & Vincent, J. (2004). *The Social Assessment Study: Community-Driven Development and Social Capital in Post-War Sierra Leone*. Washington: World Bank Report.
- Samai, M. (2005). Telephone Interview. June 7.
- Sierra Leone Web* (<http://www.sierra-leone.org/>) (June 3, 2005).
- Van Wolputte, S. (2004). Hang on to Your Self: Of Bodies, Embodiment, and Selves. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vo. 33: 251-269.

## **Chapter 7**

# **Making the “Unfit, Fit”: The Rhetoric of Mainstreaming in the World Bank’s Commitment to Gender Equality and Disability Rights**

Rebecca Dingo  
University of Missouri

Our goal is to support the fit and to help make the unfit fit. This is all about inclusion. (Wolfensohn, 1997, p. 5).

The disabled body exposes the illusion of autonomy, self-government, and self-determination that underpins the fantasy of absolute able-bodiedness. (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 46)

The terms “exclusion” and “inclusion” are not, in one sense, pure opposites. Since feminist analyses that did not explicitly concern themselves with the applicability and relevance of their analyses to “women on the margins” often perceived themselves as applicable to *all* women, that form of “exclusion” was simultaneous a problematic form of “inclusion.” (Narayan, 1997, p. 45)

## **Introduction**

On 23 September 1997 at the World Bank annual meeting, President James Wolfensohn delivered the important speech “The Challenge of Inclusion” to an audience of Bank members, non-governmental organization leaders, development experts, and Bank employees.<sup>1</sup> In this speech, which I closely analyze below, Wolfensohn argued that it was time for the Bank and development experts to take gender and women’s place in the development process seriously; it was time, he claimed, to “include” women and bring “into society [those people] who have never been part of it before” (1997, p. 1-2). Significantly, Wolfensohn went on to define the “challenge of inclusion” as “bringing more and people into the economic mainstream” (p. 3) in order to “make the unfit, fit” (p. 5).

Seven years later, in November 2004, I attended the World Bank conference “Disability and Inclusive Development: Sharing, Learning and Building Alliances” at the World Bank Headquarters in Washington, DC. The conference opened up with a series of public service announcement-style films that featured people with disabilities from across the world. For example, the film *From Exclusion to Inclusion* (World Bank, 2004) demonstrated the way that the Bank is working to factor people with disabilities into the Bank itself and into development projects at large.

The film begins by reminding the audience that there are 600 million people around the world that have one or more kinds of disabilities and then transitions to individual frames of several people in succession talking about their own disabilities. This portion of the film is not in color but in muted tones of brown. Each person is dressed in professional clothing and most speak English or American Sign Language (ASL). Because the camera frames their upper torsos,

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this essay received and benefited from generous comments by Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Jim Fredal, and Nan Johnson. Special thanks to Miranda Atkinson for her patient reading and source sleuthing.