Changing environments, occult protests, and social memories in Sierra Leone

THE OMNIPRESENT PAST

HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF AFRICA AND AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Contributors to this volume discuss a variety of ways the African past (African history) influences the present-day of Africans on the continent and in diaspora: cultural (historical) memory as a factor of public (mass) consciousness; the impact of the historical past on contemporary political, social, and cultural processes in Africa and African diaspora.

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On the cover: The 'Door of No Return', the monument on the site from which the slave traders' ships are said to depart to the New World, in the city of Ouidah on the Atlantic Coast of the Republic of Benin. Photo by Dmitri M. Bondarenko.

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CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS, OCCULT PROTESTS, AND SOCIAL MEMORIES IN SIERRA LEONE

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Introduction

Since the end of the Civil War (1991–2002), Sierra Leone has faced a period of rapid socio-economic changes. Numerous projects have been started or completed in the following decade, for example, the upgrading of some of the main roads in the capital and major highways across the country, the exploration and discovery of new mineral deposits, and the completion of the Bumbuna hydroelectric power station. With the support and consultancy of leading international agencies and NGOs, the government of Sierra Leone was able to create the conditions to attract foreign investments. Thanks to generous mining concessions (NACE 2009), the attention of foreign investors has been focused above all on mineral resources, particularly on diamond, gold, iron, rutile and bauxite. Contracts for several hundred million dollars were signed with international mining companies (Gberie 2010). Thus, the mining sector continues to be, as in the past, the main source of economic wealth for Sierra Leone.

The former president of Sierra Leone, Ernest Bai Koroma heavily emphasised the results achieved by his government between 2007–2017, and thus created high expectations for future national goals such as becoming a middle-income country by 2035. This, in turn, fuelled expectations of a material well-being that would be shared by all, not only by a privileged wealthy urban élite. While politicians and local and foreign businessmen indeed gained more prestige and power – and, some, in a short time, accumulated extraordinary wealth – a large part of the population has continued to face the same old difficulties and uncertainties. In a decade, Sierra Leone timidly rose from the very bottom of the United Nations' development index – where it had been at the end of the civil war –, however, the ambitious aim of halving the number of people living below the poverty threshold by 2015 fell short by a long way. As for 2012, about two-third of Sierra Leone's population still lived on about one dollar a day (UNDP 2012).

Subsistence agriculture and artisanal mining remain the main sources of employment. Despite all the contracts for the building of infrastructure, and the agreements signed with the government for small and large-scale mineral exploitation, unemployment continues to be high, especially among young people (Awareness Times 2012). Those who have found a job – for example, in large-scale mining – have to fight to obtain better contract and salary conditions. Therefore, discontent among the people has grown and found expression in various ways. The reaction of the government, however, has been harsh. In some public protests the police intervened by shooting on the crowds, killing or wounding some of the demonstrators.[1]

In this context of high expectations and unevenly distributed opportunities, of discontent with labour exploitation and violent repression of open forms of protest, the concern with the role played by the occult in the daily lives of Sierra Leoneans seems to have increased. Rumours of ritual killings (Mansaray 2008; Awoko 2009; Kai 2009; Peep Reporter 2009b; Moiguah 2011), news of mysterious accidents (Fonti 2009, 2011), and findings of ritual material in unexpected places (Awareness Times 2010; Koroma 2010, 2011; Moriba 2011; Samura 2011)[2] attracted the attention of the local media, confirming and reproducing suspicions, fears and feelings of anxiety and epistemological and ontological insecurity.

The hidden forces mentioned by the people of Sierra Leone to explain these occult phenomena often include the so-called 'devils' [krio: *debul* (sing.); *debul dem* (pl.)]. These invisible entities, which are not necessarily evil, were made accountable for accidents to people, the breakdown of machinery owned by mining companies, the theft of machinery, or actual sabotage, targeting above all the main works of 'modernization', (e.g., dams, railway lines, and electricity lines). In other cases, these same entities were consulted by ritual specialists in order to identify the humans responsible for those acts of sabotage or theft (Awoko 2011a; Peep Reporter 2009a).

The underlying question to be asked here is: Why was all this happening then, in Sierra Leone? What did all these phenomena have in common? President Koroma saw a link between the acts of sabotage aimed at the mining companies, the demonstrations of the workers and the rumours about the *debul dem* infesting the main mining areas in the country.[3] On several official occasions, President Koroma

stated that the rumours about *debul dem* served simply to deceive ordinary people, to mask the true reality of thefts and damage caused by saboteurs, or unscrupulous people who, for personal gain or political rivalry, 'are bent on seeing the downfall of the country' (Turay 2011; cf. Awoko 2011b).

In this paper, I put forward a different interpretation. Criminalizing what lies 'behind' the *debul dem*'s actions or considering them as mere 'superstitions' has a triple effect at least: 1) hiding or underestimating the importance of the historical and socio-political contexts in which such occult narratives arise; 2) underestimating the potential political significance of the actions generically grouped together under the label of *debul* and, in particular, their capacity to open up negotiations between unequal subjects; and 3) tacit justifying of the use of force to put down or repress dissent.

My aim is to show the multiple levels of meaning and action necessary to understand the discourses and practices related to the *debul dem*. On the one hand, narratives on this invisible presence make use of images and symbols that incorporate a memory of violence and exploitation which, from the past has prolonged its effects onto the present. On the other hand, a historical-anthropological analysis of these accounts should not underestimate their political aims. Here, symbols and metaphors are not simply ways of expressing and making sense of the uncertainties and anxieties produced by globalized modernity (see Marshall 2009). These meanings act in the world. Hence, they are *active symbols* composing the weave of 'fantasies of agency' that mediate the (post- or neo-) colonial encounter with the extractive industries (Wardlow 2004: 50).

What I suggest is that occult mining narratives can be analysed as forms of social memory drawing from a kaleidoscopic local repertoire of the imaginary. By pointing to a particular history of violence, terror and uncertainties that are inscribed in the landscape and dwelling practices, these narratives are practical ways to do things and achieve tangible results; they are 'forms of political practice, modes of action on the world' (Marshall 2009: 28).

Mining, environments and the occult

In anthropology, when we speak of miners or mining populations entering into relationships with 'devils' or invisible local spirits, a refer-

ence to *The Devil and the Commodity Fetishism in South America* by Michael Taussig (1980) seems to be unavoidable (see Sanders 2008). Whether we are dealing with the gold, silver or tin mines in South America (e.g., Harris 1989; Sallnow 1989; Salazar-Soler 2006), the diamond and gold mines in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Bryceson et al. 2010; De Boeck 1998), those in Papua New Guinea (e.g., Clark 1993; Jorgensen 1998), or in the remote deposits of New Caledonia (e.g., Horowitz 2001), Taussig's analysis is an important reference point when considering the relationship between ideology and production processes (Gross 1983; Godoy 1985) and is a way to bridge the gap between interpretative and politico-economic analysis (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

One of the central theses in Taussig's book is that the devil with which the peasants in the Cauca Valley in Colombia and the Bolivian tin miners make a pact is a symbol of the alienation experienced by the proletarianized workers (Taussig 1980: xi). For Taussig, the proletarianized Colombian peasants and Bolivian miners act as symbolic mediators between two distinct and irreconcilable spheres of exchange: on the one hand, the values and organization of a pre-capitalist society and, on the other, the principles and values of a capitalist economy. The magic-religious rituals and beliefs hinging on the figure of the devil can be interpreted as an oblique criticism of modern forms of capitalist production (Taussig 1980: 10).

As Sanders notes (2008), *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* proposes a 'seductive anthropological analytic' which has the merit of showing that certain popular beliefs or folklore – apparently anachronistic and of little interest for an anthropology of contemporary societies – can be interpreted as sophisticated cultural forms of resistance to and criticism of industrial capitalism (Marcus and Fischer 1986) or of any other form of exploitation and violent oppression brought by colonialism and economic globalization. However, Taussig's arguments have been subjected to criticism of both a theoretical, methodological, and empirical nature (e.g., Austen 1993; Edelman 1994; Sanders 2008), which puts into question their applicability to the Sierra Leonean context. On the basis of my ethnographical experience in Sierra Leone (2007-2012), I consider that the *debul dem* are neither deceptive images of the true reality of economic exploitation underlying production relations, nor simply generalized metaphors for these same

relations of exploitation and oppression (cf. Masquelier 2000: 88; White 1993).

The approach recently put forward by the Comaroffs on occult economies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2000, 2003) to explain the dramatic increase 'in the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends' (Idem 1999: 279) is not a wholly convincing alternative (see Moore and Sanders 2001: 13; Ranger 2007; Marshall 2009). From the point of view of the occult economy approach, the reference to invisible beings or mysterious forces is a way to give meaning to what would otherwise remain inexplicable or meaningless to those who are excluded from the benefits (reserved for a few) of the neoliberal economy: the production and accumulation of wealth (apparently) created from nothing and without working. In line with this idea, Comaroffs' propose to endorse a comparative view which they define as 'on an awkward scale' – a view which is 'neither unambiguously "local" nor obviously "global" – but on a scale in between that, somehow, captures their mutual determinations. And their indeterminacies' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 282; 2003).

As inspiring as this view is, my aim is to pinpoint the historical and cultural *specificity* of the narratives on the *debul dem* widespread in Sierra Leone after the end of the civil war, and at the same time to show the possible 'family resemblances' (Wittgenstein 1953) between the various (but limited) cases examined here. Thus, in general, my approach does not misrecognize 'the global forces that (…) are besetting the "little guys"' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 155). Yet, it tries to personalize these same large impersonal forces by pointing to specific social actors – visible or invisible, present or past, individual or collective – that have the power to produce certain effects, to define what is 'religion' and 'superstition', what is 'legal and illegal', and so on. In other words, this approach does not give up to the anthropological comparative project; if anything, it has 'a serious regard (…) for contexts' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 12) and it poses once again the question of the relationship between ethnography, history, and imagination.

Central to the understanding of the relationship between history and ethnography is the concept of historical imagination, that is, 'the imagination (…) of both those who make history and those who write it' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: xi). Through the interstices and the

conjunctures of these imaginaries we can recover a kind of 'synoptic illusion' – to use an expression of Pierre Bourdieu's mentioned by the Comaroffs (1992: 6), – a consciously partial sense of wholeness or unity from an otherwise (so often) fragmented and (at times) alienated and contingent ethnographic experience.

While I was in Kono and Bo Districts, between 2007 and 2011, having limited access to mass media and being focused on my daily life routines, I was not fully aware of the possible connections between what was happening in my field and what was going on in other extractive areas of the country. My proximity to the field and my ethnographic myopic focus on very specific micro-local events, twisted my anthropological analysis. Consequently, I was not fully aware that episodes that seemed disconnected or unrelated to each other could instead be significantly linkable. Only in the following months and years, when I started to sort out the interviews recorded in the mines, did the incoherent fragments of speech caught in the streets and on local radio, the images, the silences and the sounds of the mining landscapes, as well as the many newspaper clippings collected as fetishes of my being there, only then, did these heterogeneous materials begin to display the contours of a living mosaic with different entangled scenes.

The first scene or case considered here is set in the Bonthe and Moyamba Districts, where rutile, a mineral from which titanium is obtained, is extracted. It involves an accident as well as several occult portends. This case of large-scale mining implicitly questions the idea that the occult idiom only emerges in situations of conflict between different spheres of exchange or production. The occult narratives are transversal to the modes of production as they are to the kind of minerals mined.

The second case does not concern a site where minerals are mined but where energy is 'extracted' by exploiting the water resources in the region. It focuses on the voices of a *debul* which was supposed to have impeded the completion of the Bumbuna hydroelectric station in the Tonkolili District. This case shows that the question of the *debul* is not a purely 'mining' one. The accounts of the *debul* seem instead to have to do with a complex game played around environmental exploitation and drastic landscape changes, the failure to compensate people, and their protests and discontent strategically and obliquely expressed by using the idiom of the occult.

As with the members of a family, in these two cases we note similarities, or rather, 'we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail' (Wittgenstein 1953: 32).

The Sierra Rutile incident

In January 2008, the Sierra Rutile mining company completed the production of a sophisticated dredge to sieve and extract minerals such as ilmenite, zircon, and rutile, in the Moyamba and Bonthe districts. The colossal machinery, worth 27 million dollars, was symbolically baptized with the name of Solondo, a powerful legendary warrior who lived around the second half of the nineteenth century (Alie 2001; cit. in Akiwumi 2012). In July of that year, however, the hugely expensive structure collapsed due to a technical fault, killing two and injuring several more employees (Koroma and Hill 2008).

From the newspaper accounts, it appears that the incident did not take the inhabitants of this mining region entirely by surprise. In the previous months, there had been signs of a growing tension between residents of Moyamba District and the management of the company to the point that, in late February 2008, a large number of residents were planning a demonstration (Life Herald 2008). The residents complained mainly about the environmental damage caused by the dredges, the massive consumption of palm oil (which was used by the company for its machinery), and the lack of adequate compensation paid to the land owners (Awareness Times 2008a; Life Herald 2008). This tension was also reflected in the escalation of rumours about occult activities in the region. The inhabitants' dreams began to be populated with spirits of their ancestors or invisible beings, generically described as *debul dem* demanding greater respect for their dwelling places. Through the medium of the inhabitants of the mining areas, these spirits warned the company directors to make sacrifices to compensate them for the trouble caused (Awareness Times 2008d).

When rumours of attacks by witches and ritual killings among the residents spread, fear and indignation also grew. One month before the accident, for example, the inhabitants of Moyamba District demanded the investigation of the suspected 'secret killing' of a local trader which – it was rumoured – involved some unspecified employees of the mining company (Awareness Times 2008c). The Paramount Chief of

Imperi (Bonthe District), Madam Hawa Kpanobom Sokan IV, also stated that the very day before the collapse of the dredge, the company's director was approached by a young woman predicting what was about to happen in the mine (Awareness Times 2008d; Massaquoi and Hill 2008). It was subsequently discovered that on the day of the disaster – in a coincidence described by the local newspapers as 'mysterious' – Sierra Rutile's head geologist, on vacation in Australia, had died of a heart attack (Awareness Times 2008d). Furthermore, a group of workers declared that they saw a 'strange giant viper snake' near the Solondo dredge few days after the accident, at the very place where the structure collapsed (Sierra Express 2008). This event also contributed to increasing the anxiety and mystery around what had happened because, in particular circumstances, the sighting of a snake (e.g., cobra) can be interpreted as a bad omen and its presence as an epitome of an angry *debul*. For all these reasons the Imperi Paramount Chief declared that the tragic event had been caused by the negligence of the Sierra Rutile directors, who had not allowed the carrying out of a traditional ceremony to placate the anger of the 'ancestor spirits' (Massaquoi and Hill 2008). Thus, in August 2008, about a month after the Solondo disaster, the Sierra Rutile Company decided to provide the communities of Imperi Chiefdom with 20 bags of rice, four bulls, and other ritual materials for preparing libations and sacrifices (Standard Times 2008).

It must be stressed that these 'occult phenomena' are not simply part of 'myths' or 'religious belief' (cf. Rahall 2008), that is, appendixes of something more 'real'. As Comaroffs note: 'it is never possible simply to prize apart the cultural from the material' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 235). Hence, we are not surprised that these concerns arose in the context of a subsistence farming economy with widespread poverty affecting 72 per cent (Moyamba District) and 85 per cent (Bonthe District) of the local population, a lack of asphalted roads, access to electricity, healthcare, and teaching materials in schools (NACE 2009: 24). In contrast, the roads linking the Sierra Rutile mines to the rest of the country are well maintained and the expatriates live in 'prefabricated enclosures' which, equipped with all the modern comforts, appear to the local people to be happy isles set in the middle of the savanna (cf. Ferme 2001: 39; Akiwumi 2012: 66).

Moreover, the company's mining activity has profoundly modified the biophysical and cultural order of the environment. The enormous

inconvenience created for the population at the environmental, economic and cultural level (Akiwumi 2012), does not, however, seem to have been adequately compensated. The loss of farming land and sacred places, the relocation of entire villages, and the poor compensation for the economic damage caused by the controlled flooding of vast mining areas, are but a few of the main concerns of the local population (Akiwumi 2006, 2012). Such concerns are not new for these communities, which have experienced the impact of rutile mining on local agricultural production, gender relationships, and family subsistence dating back to before the civil war (Williams Ntiri 1992). Although the company now maintains that it is working 'for a better Sierra Leone' and helping the communities in many different ways (Standard Times 2008), the National Advocacy Coalition on Extractives (NACE) analysts note that in this country: 'Companies are working in, and local communities are living in, a legal vacuum' in which the companies' obligations are not clear regarding what extent of reparation or compensation for the mining populations is voluntary, how much they earn and how much they must pay the government in taxes to enable the latter to construct infrastructure, refurnish the schools, create work and reduce poverty (NACE 2009: 23–30).

As was mentioned above, a few days after the accident on the Sierra Rutile premises, the Government of Sierra Leone announced that, in collaboration with the British Department for International Development (DFID), it had set up a task force to review the agreements with the main mining companies operating in the country and in particular with Koidu Holdings, African Minerals and Sierra Rutile (Kargbo 2008). The task force concluded its work in a few months. The consultations led to the drawing up of the Mines and Mineral Act 2009, replacing the previous 1994 Act.

The Bumbuna *debul*

In October 2007, the newly elected President Ernest Bai Koroma visited the Bumbuna dam for his first official visit outside the capital. On that occasion, before an international delegation made up of donors and exponents of civil society, he declared in the Krio language that he would eliminate 'the bad spiritual devil' which for several years had prevented the completion of the Bumbuna Hydroelectric Project (BHP): 'I made meself come see for meself de debul that holds this

project. We go kill am' (Manson 2007). As far as we know, this was the first time that the President had referred to this invisible being on an official occasion.

In any case, the President sought to keep his promise in March 2008 when he returned to the Bumbuna hydroelectric station and activated the device to flood the dam's reservoir with water from the River Seli. A large green area where, shortly before, homes, commercial trees, sacred places and agricultural land had existed, gradually turned blue. As a local Sierra Leonean journalist commented: 'The word on the lips of Tonkolili indigenes was that indeed the President and his team had overcome the mysterious Bumbuna Devil that had long inhibited the realization of the wonderful dream' (Awareness Times 2008b).

There are no ethnographic investigations into the Bumbuna *debul*. We do not know exactly how this rumour arose and spread. We only know that an invisible being, generically described as *debul*, had for years been opposing the construction of the Bumbuna hydroelectric station, and the flooding of its reservoir. It is clear that through the official speeches and local media the Bumbuna *debul* had become a reality, a social actor that was part of a complex game played between foreign construction companies, local and national politicians and the local populations. To avoid misunderstandings, whether the President and his team truly believe in the *debul*'s existence does not concern us here. The evidence points to the contrary. What count are the 'effects of truth' which the rumours about the *debul* produce on local political life. For this reason, it is interesting here to shed light on the recent historical context acting as a background to the rumours about the Bumbuna *debul*.

The BHP feasibility studies were financed by the UNDP in the early seventies when President Siaka Stevens was still in power and the APC was the only party in government. Out of 22 potential sites identified by the experts, the stretch of the River Seli near the village of Bumbuna was considered the most suitable for the construction of a hydroelectric power station to supply the capital and the north of the country with electricity. The first preparatory work on the dam, however, started only in the 1980s, after the World Bank consultants advised downsizing the initial project due to the country's precarious political and economic situation (Mazzei and Scuppa 2006).

Since then, various politicians and leaders alternating in power in Sierra Leone have in turn promised the rapid completion of the hydroelectric power station. The main construction work on the dam, however, started only in 1990, when the Italian government – among the main international donors of this project – decided to make a loan of 138 billion Italian liras (about 110 million dollars). This financial support was joined by that of the African Development Bank which in 1993 decided to co-finance the project. Despite the Civil War beginning in 1991, the Italian company in charge of the construction of the power station predicted the completion of the works by 1998. Between 1995 and 1997, however, the situation in the north of the country drastically deteriorated. The area around the dam was the centre of clashes between the various armed groups involved in the conflict. The village of Bumbuna was sacked by the combatants and the dam became a strategic target. The construction company's directors therefore decided to hire mercenary troops to protect their staff and prevent further theft and destruction of equipment and machinery. Despite these measures, the safety conditions did not improve. The constructors decided to suspend work in May 1997, when 85 per cent of the building had already been completed (Mazzei and Scuppa 2006). The site was abandoned and subsequently repeatedly pillaged. In particular, the pylons and precious copper cables which were to convey electricity to the capital began to disappear.

With the end of the war and the consolidation of peace, the completion of the Bumbuna power station once more became a national priority. At that point, the World Bank also decided to support the project financially. The power station was considered one of the necessary infrastructures to industrialize the country and reduce poverty, and to supply renewable, low cost energy to business and the citizens in general.

For all these reasons, in 2003 the representatives of the Italian government, the African Development Bank and the World Bank decided to finance the completion of the works, which therefore resumed in 2005, with completion forecast for the end of 2007 (Mazzei and Scuppa 2006). After trials and the solving of a few technical problems, the 50 MW turbines of the power station started up in November 2009. Since then, however, technical problems and polemics due to the frequent interruption of the station's supply have continued to

plague the dam. Despite this, the second phase of the project is planned to increase the supply from 50 MW to 350 MW by 2017.

As mentioned above, over the years the BHP construction work went on, accompanied by a series of promises made by the politicians in power: jobs for everyone and free electricity, tourism and economic prosperity, monetary compensation for the damage incurred by the flooding of the dam's reservoir and the expropriation of land, and so on. As we have seen, for a long time the Bumbuna dam risked remaining only a collective fantasy, at most an unfinished colossus exposed to the erosion of time. For the people of Sierra Leone, the word 'Bumbuna' thus became a synonym of 'a never-ending story' (cf. Mazzei and Scuppa 2006: 15). 'Bumbuna', sang the well-known Sierra Leonean singer Emerson Bockarie in the years immediately following the end of the war, 'will be finished only at the end of the world' (Awareness Times 2008b).

The disappointment over the actual benefits obtained from this project has become mixed with mistrust and suspicion. According to an enquiry undertaken by the World Bank, there was a widespread opinion among the inhabitants of the Tonkolili District that the works to complete the power station had been deliberately slowed down by the Italian constructors themselves (Mazzei and Scuppa 2006) in order to have more time to secretly mine and smuggle out the gold and diamonds found during the construction of the dam. Moreover, the local population was convinced that the dam belonged to the company constructing it. As Mazzei and Scuppa observe (2006), over the years the latter had sought to build up a relationship of 'good neighbourliness' with the inhabitants of the villages near the dam, making gifts of various kinds. However, this developed into a paternalistic relationship in which the local communities 'were begging the constructor instead of asking for their rights, of which they were not fully aware' (Mazzei and Scuppa 2006: 16). Tensions and suspicion also spread among the owners of lands and homes situated along the route where the high tension pylons had been built to connect the power station with the capital. In 2009, for example, word spread about some 176 homes to be demolished along this route. To gain support for this operation, the authorities explained that there was a high health risk. But a local satirical newspaper questioned the scientific grounds for this explanation, describing it as an urban myth. Since the owners of the houses

affected by the demolition order had obtained permission to build from the Ministry of Lands, the journalist wondered who was actually responsible for this problem. Hence, the doubt arose that the medical reason for demolishing the houses might only be an excuse to 'disturb, harry and terrorize other people' (Kamara 2009). Once again, the Bumbuna *debul* was recalled as a narrative used to deceive common people: 'There are those who seem determined to ensure that Bumbuna cannot be opened without a ritual sacrifice of some people's dwelling places. Such people should enter the twenty-first century. No devils or demons demand that we cannot have light unless our fellow citizens suffer' (Kamara 2009).

As in the previous case, however, a crucial issue raised by narratives of invisible entities is the moral relationship by which the local population seeks to construct forms of exchange and reciprocity with powerful local and international social actors.

Discussion

The memory of the past is not necessarily expressed through public monuments or explicit verbal forms. According to Rosalind Shaw (2002), in Sierra Leone the memory of the Atlantic slave trade has not been lost, as might appear when talking to ordinary people or seeking evident traces of that period in the landscape. There are objects, images and ritual processes which have incorporated the local memory of the transcontinental predatory flows of the past. There are, in short, various ways to remember (or forget) (Shaw 2002: 3–5).

Mariane Ferme enriches this perspective on the ethnographical level, analysing the material and immaterial culture of the Mende in Sierra Leone (Ferme 2001). In this cultural context, discourses, daily practices and social relations are contextual elements. Or rather, they are embodied in an environment: they make sense in relation to a landscape in which an ancient colonial history of violence, terror and exploitation is tacitly written. Analysing the traces of memory of the past disseminated in the forests (e.g., fruit trees, remains of homes, railway lines and abandoned roads), Ferme (2001) reminds us that landscapes are not neutral places. They bear the traces of their previous uses; they tell stories, using the environmental elements as words. In this way, holes in the ground bear witness to the mining past activity of illegal miners; fruit trees planted to a geometric plan point to the work of generations

of expert farmers producing for regional and transregional markets, and so on. Thus, modifying an environment means participating in a collective history of practices which has a language of its own, made up of specific metaphors, ways of doing, saying and confuting. Those who have the power to leave a mark or to modify this environmental grammar have the power to re-design and impress a new socio-cultural order. For this reason, mining sites are obvious places for economic and political, but also for symbolic dispute (Ballard and Banks 2003; Bridge 2004; Werthmann and Grätz 2012).

The textual metaphor of the environment or the landscape as written history has limitations, however. As the *debul dem*'s actions testify, the environment is not a passive element, a blank sheet of paper on which human activity traces its indelible drawings. It acts and interacts with the multiple social actors dwelling in it and who contend for its resources. The idiom on the occult is rich in images and narrations which lend themselves to iconizing the risks and the contradictory possibilities of extracting value from human labour and from the environment; it points to an 'agrarian order' that, as Peters and Richards remind us, 'emerged from the West African social world shaped by the Atlantic slave trade' (Peters and Richards 2011: 377; see also Richards 2012). With their invisible presence, the *debul dem* indicate the existence of a hidden world supporting the order of things and regulating access to the wealth.

It would be reductive to consider the *debul dem* as simple projections of individual or collective anxieties or personifications of features of the natural landscape enacting these same anxieties. It is true that these active symbols enter the individual imaginary, enacting personal worries, but they have above all a shared, that is, a collective political and social meaning. The *debul dem* accounts are, in fact, highly politicized moral discourses, able to reflect, and to cause reflection, on the responsibility of human actions as well as on the principles governing the distribution of resources. Moreover, they are not only moral commentaries or ways to give meaning to the world; they represent practical forms of politics, ways to act in the world.

What therefore do the *debul dem* do? A link which joins the stories and situations involving the *debul dem* mentioned in this paper is the sabotage or damage to the machinery of the miners or of those transforming the landscape to take possession of its wealth. The *debul dem*

also act as mediators for communities worried and angry about what is happening in the spaces they inhabit. The disturbances enacted by the *debul dem* thus seem inspired by a vengeful justice based on a criticism of the predatory extractive practices. These are predatory because they greedily enrich a few without respecting the principles of the distribution of the wealth which are clearly present in local ideology.

In short, it is the *debul dem*'s very action of invisible disturbance which reveals the occult nature of the forces governing the visible world. Paradoxically, the occult reveals what is occulted. In other words, the occult phenomena remind us that reality is not always what it seems. Only by questioning what is taken for granted can we overturn the ideological character of the reasons justifying human exploitation, unequal distribution and environmental degradation.

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Notes

[1] Amnesty International (2018) denounced several of these violent episodes.

[2] According to some journalists, the Lungi Airport and the Queen Elizabeth II Quay in Freetown were cleared by some ritual specialists who found several witch tools in these sites (Awareness Times 2010; Koroma 2011).

[3] During the inauguration ceremony of the Euros Bio Energy factory, in 2011, Koroma stated that: 'We had a terrible experience of people undermining investment programs within the community through sabotage, through connivance, through labour disturbance and through stealing of equipment (…). Anybody who destroys the property of an investor or undermines their activity is a criminal and will be sent to the cells that we have reserved for criminals' (Awoko 2011b).

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