

War, social inequality and cultural causes. A discussion illustrated by the example of Sierra Leone

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In the independent nations which have arisen from colonies, so the argument goes, the connection of the elites to the colonial power has laid fertile ground for conflict-prone competition for control of the cash and commodity flows and the profits from them. Moreover, it has aroused opposition from a section of the population, which has often been brutally suppressed. According to this line of reasoning, it is therefore only logical that this section of the population then sought support from abroad, which it mostly received. All of this takes place in the context of the changing socio-cultural life of the population. Integration into the capitalist global market increases the search for greater profits in new markets. This in turn strengthens the elites and creates a growing mass of young people who are left out, adding to the potential for conflict.

The example of the civil war in Sierra Leone illustrates how such arguments are no longer in the foreground in Africa and are being replaced by a culturalist explanation of the conflicts. Research and scholarship itself is dominated by a 'methodological nationalism', whereby national societies are coupled with 'cultures' and tied to territories. In this paper I would like to demonstrate, by way of illustration, how these mechanisms play out in Sierra Leone, creating a strained relationship between social inequality and cultural difference.