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The MODEL social structure of an armed group: from Liberian refugees to heroes of Côte d’Ivoire and liberators of the homeland

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) through a revised Weberian framework that focuses on legitimacy and offers a thick description of the different phases of this armed group. The article argues that the key to fostering cohesion is the harmonization of the micro, meso, and macro levels. This proved a difficult undertaking for the MODEL. Not only did the MODEL lack material resources but it also relied on different and evolving kinds of legitimacy on these levels. With its sources of legitimacy exhausted after the war, the MODEL ceased to exist.

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Introduction: the social structure of armed groups

According to Charles Kirke’s anthropological definition, social structure equals to ‘a shared body of ideas, rules, and conventions of behavior, providing resources with which groups of people or individuals organize and conduct themselves vis-à-vis each other, thus giving common form and predictability to normal daily events’. Such institutions are central for understanding conflict dynamics from onset to long after they have ended. This should not be surprising, considering that war is often defined as (and assumed to be) a continuation of politics by other means. Even if understood in this manner as a political instrument, comprehending a conflict requires understanding of the historical, social, and cultural context where the politics arise. Each war is thus unique. This implies that grasping the specifics and the dynamics of these wars requires the understanding of belligerents, including their norms, values, and motivations. This was also recognized by Carl von Clausewitz, who wrote that different actors ‘all carry on War in their own way, carry it on differently, with
different means, and for a different object'. Understanding the local context and the nature of the belligerents thus becomes the necessary first step in understanding any particular war.

Much literature on war has been able to bypass these questions by focusing on belligerents who have organized themselves in similar ways and share similar conventions of war and warfare, and hence employ more or less the same ways and means. Clausewitz too described an arch of development, which led to the formation of states and the separation of governments from their people. This allowed instrumentalization of war, but also led to its limitation into something that Clausewitz admits was beneficial, but not the pure form of war. The French revolution changed this. As war again became the business of the people in the form of a strong nation-state, it became perfected. For Clausewitz it was clear that each period would lead to a specific kind of war, described by its own theory.

The subsequent waning of interstate war and the shifting of focus to intrastate conflicts illustrates the difficulties of putting Clausewitz’s view into practice. States have become the central units of analysis. Competing actors are viewed as suspicious and illegitimate, and delegated to their own category of belligerents. This helps explain the lamentation of the renowned military historian John Keegan over the early 1990s Yugoslavian ‘pattern of local hatreds… unfamiliar to anyone but the professional anthropologists who take the warfare of tribal and marginal peoples as their subject of study’. Although later research has explained the horrors of even this war as the result of rational strategy, this required thorough understanding of the prevailing context. The wars in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar belligerents employing unfamiliar means (and, perhaps, attempting to achieve unfamiliar goals) – have since underlined the importance of understanding context in all wars, but especially those deemed irregular.

Yet this seemingly simple binary of regular state and irregular non-state unhelpfully overshadows the more fundamental issue of conventions, and hence the cultural dimension of social structure. As argued elsewhere, the most obvious difference between insurgencies and their opponents is relationship with state, which comes with coercive power and legitimacy. Considering that insurgent movements are political actors that often engage in governance of controlled territories and frequently possess political wings that correspond to government bodies and military wings that echo armed forces, especially in older literature they were understood as nothing less than states-in-waiting. This especially concerned anti-colonial liberation movements with Western-educated leaders, often ascribed with more legitimacy than the colonial projects they sought to topple. More recent rebels have not enjoyed similar support. Structural factors such, as these actors’ non-state nature, cannot alone explain this difference. The fact that they ascribe to different conventions offers a more plausible explanation.
As discussed in the introduction to this special issue, most literature that has investigated armed groups has adopted a macro or a micro perspective. Either armed groups are explained by structural issues as in historical sociology, or as constellations of primary groups, or other kinds of militarized networks. What remains unclear is how the macro-level structural factors and micro-level groupings meet in meso-level armed groups, whose cohesion depends on the harmonization of the micro, meso, and macro levels. Three factors have exacerbated the end result, where these two perspectives have contributed limitedly to the development of broader theories that encompass all armed groups: there have been few attempts to cross-fertilize between literature on state militaries and other armed groups; the literature on state militaries has taken many sociological factors for granted and typically focused on the micro-level; and attempts to study non-state armed groups faces inherent methodological difficulties.

In order to combine the investigation of social structure on these three levels, this article departs from previous literature that has highlighted the importance of legitimacy for armed groups, and the framework presented by Peter Haldén that focuses on armed groups as ruling organizations that contain their own legitimacy. Building on Weberian historical sociology, the framework focuses on answering the question why people obey, and seeks to explain this through Weber’s three ideal types of legitimacy that makes organizations just: rational-legal, traditional and charismatic. This framework has four major benefits for the study of social structure. First, and as Haldén discusses in some length, previous investigations of group cohesion (and hence social structures of armed groups) have assumed that they essentially consist of free agents in an open market. This is a very problematic notion, as this assumption negates many social relations and structural factors. Many such factors – such as state and society – have been taken for granted in the study of Western armed groups in a manner that cannot be done elsewhere. Second, and as highlighted in the introduction to this special issue, considering that war itself becomes a central factor in all related phenomena, the model allows a more dynamic approach than static models often used in previous works. Third, as many armed groups are nested in other social organizations (such as states) it often becomes difficult to neatly separate these from each other. Focusing on sources of legitimacy allows doing this without normative assumptions (for instance regarding their conventions and relationship with states) and in a manner that inevitably adds social structure into the analysis. Finally, the thick description required by the framework also allows – if not outright necessitates – the consideration of culture. Often overshadowed by structural factors, culture is important for ‘armed actors’ self-understanding (‘who we are’) and placement into a wider historical perspective and socio-cultural context. While this framework based on a largely descriptive concept of
legitimacy admittedly results in a descriptive account of armed groups, it is good to keep in mind the intimately linked nature of theoretical and empirical knowledge. If nothing else, cultural sociology of war adds the necessary context required to understand the deeper historical, social, and cultural factors inherent in social structure of armed groups, and legitimacy on the three levels.

What follows is a chronological narrative based on historical ethnography, which focuses on the different stages of the conflict. The second section focuses on case selection and the conflict ethnography which underlies this study. The third section describes the background events that resulted in thousands of Liberians massing in the Nicla refugee camp – also ironically called Peace camp – close to Guiglo. The fourth section focuses on late 2002 when many of these refugees turned into a militia after the invasion of Côte d’Ivoire by Liberian-supported rebels. The fifth section in turn looks at the events that took place after March 2003 when most of these militias crossed over to Liberia, thus becoming a rebel group. The sixth section focuses on the way the rebels turned into civilians following the end of the war in August 2003, and how the MODEL as an organization failed to transition from war to peace. The final section summarizes the theoretical implications of this study for the investigation of social structures of armed groups.

**Studying MODEL**

This article continues the path laid out by Paul Richards’ seminal ethnographic work on Sierra Leone, which highlighted the need to understand armed conflict within its own context. The same goes for wartime dynamics and armed groups. There are several reasons why the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) – the smaller rebel group in the Second Liberian Civil War (1999–2003) – offers an interesting case to study. Theoretically, it highlights the tension of viewing insurgents as a separate and static category: many in the MODEL leadership served in the Liberian military under President Samuel K. Doe (killed in 1990). Before becoming rebels, the movement fought as a pro-government militia in Côte d’Ivoire. The case thus illustrates the dangers of isolating armed groups from the broader historical, social, and cultural context, but also of investigating them through static models. The MODEL’s past alone shows that understanding its social system requires understanding Liberian history from decades earlier, as well as the international relations between Mano River countries in West Africa, if not beyond. In this sense, the case offers a model social structure, which offers many lessons for future studies. Considering that the group has to date been little studied, this article also makes an empirical contribution to the existing literature on the region.
As Keegan’s lamentation above already suggests, shedding light into the black boxes of armed groups’ inner dynamics is a difficult undertaking. This becomes even more difficult in places like Liberia, where few primary sources, such as written eyewitness accounts or internal documents, exist. Working together with people who constituted these groups thus becomes the only feasible way forward. Because the many methodological difficulties associated with researching armed conflict and raising the veil before these black boxes, long-term and open-ended ethnographic studies have especially contributed to our knowledge in such cases. The present study builds on 15 months of ethnographic work conducted in 2012–2017 which included interactions with over 300 former combatants who fought on all three sides of the war. Discovered through snowballing and chain-referrals, the author has collected narratives of the war through participant-observation and interviews, often interacting with the same informants over several years. Six months of this work focused on Grand Gedeh County – the Krahn heartland – where interviewees varied from top MODEL politicians and commanders to former combatants, as well as Ivorian refugees and a dozen former militia fighters. Many interviewees have roots in both countries and were thus able to offer interesting comparisons. During these months the author lived with informants, many of them former combatants, in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. After the last trip to Liberia, contact has been maintained through social media. The resulting anonymized narratives are in turn combined with archival research and other existing literature into a thick description.

**Inception of the MODEL**

As noted, the MODEL offers a case of an armed group in constant change: the group emerged from Liberian refugees who became a pro-Ivorian militia before crossing over the border to Liberia and turning into a rebel movement. Each stage saw significant changes in its social and organizational structure. Yet it remains difficult to understand these developments without understanding the context where they took place.

Three events are pivotal to understanding the rise of the MODEL. The first one is the military coup of 1980, which (perhaps accidentally) elevated Samuel K. Doe, a lanky master sergeant from the remote southeastern Grand Gedeh County, to the presidential mansion. Doe’s presidency elevated the peripheral Grand Gedeh to national limelight. The resulting ethnification of politics helped to unite the around a dozen related dialect groups which consisted of a larger number of patrilineages in the county under the label used in previous censuses, Krahn. As noted by one study from 1972, before ‘Doetime’ Krahn referred to a group ‘composed of smaller individual tribes which are culturally and linguistically related.’ As Doe recruited from his county to the state administration and after tripling the
defence budget, especially to the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), many Krahn migrated to the capital. For most this constituted social advancement, which furthermore tied together the constitutional state with substantially narrower Krahn interests.

Subsequent polarization during the 1980’s between the Krahn and especially Gio politicians further cemented these ethnic labels, as well as hostility between them. Doe’s stealing of presidential elections in 1985, the following unsuccessful coup attempt and the army’s punishment raids in Gio areas in Nimba County especially contributed to these dynamics. When the Libyan-trained Charles Taylor began the First Liberian Civil War (1989–1996) on Christmas Eve 1989 by crossing from Côte d’Ivoire to Nimba, he had plenty of supporters out for revenge. The association of all Krahn and the mostly Muslim Mandingo with the government risked turning every one of them into a rebel target, further exacerbating the polarization. This also added an ethnic label to the conflict, still commonly used today in Liberia. Yet just like the relationship between war and nationalism, even in Liberia the war influenced not only ethnic relations between groups, but also within them. This factor alone makes static models of armed groups problematic.

The ethnification of politics and state power also meant that the AFL suffered many desertions and defections, as those from other ethnic groups saw little point in dying for the benefit of the Krahn. The pre-war 6,000 soldiers – not all of them trained – were hence reinforced with 2,500 ‘old soldiers’ and over a thousand untrained civilians, many politically reliable university students, most of them Krahn and Mandingo. At this stage, the AFL could draw on constitutional rational-legal legitimacy of the state, tightly intertwined with Krahn (and to lesser extent Mandingo) interests. With some justification, the AFL was subsequently viewed as a faction of ‘Doe’s remnant soldiers’, dominated by Krahn.

As the civil war raged on, the second important event took place in 1994 in the form of the split of the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO). Having its roots in a pro-government militia that fought the Taylor-supported Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, it was formed in 1991 as an uneasy alliance between groups of Krahn and Mandingo exiled in neighbouring Sierra Leone and Guinea. In 1994, the group violently divided into two groups: the Krahn into the ULIMO-J[ohnson] and the Mandingo into the ULIMO-K[romah], with the latter letters deriving from their political leaders. The year 1994 also saw the rise of another rebel group opposed to Taylor, the Liberian Peace Council (LPC). The LPC was supported by the regional peacekeeping forces led by Nigeria, and consisted predominantly of former soldiers of the Sarpo ethnic group, related to Krahn. The LPC soon captured the southeast, including Grand Gedeh. Yet its raid across the border inflamed relations between Ivoirians and Liberian refugees from the southeast, who had hitherto lived in local communities.
Ivoirians killed many of the refugees, and many more were only saved by seeking shelter at the newly established Nicla refugee camp. Their concentration made their later mobilization much easier.

The first war ended in a power-sharing peace agreement in 1996 and the electoral victory of Charles Taylor a year later. Many of Taylor’s opponents however expected victor’s justice and a witch hunt, and left the country. Taylor struggled to establish peace, which led to the third important event that contributed to the formation of the MODEL, or the Camp Johnson Road incident. This incident was the result of Taylor’s failure to co-opt Roosevelt Johnson, the former leader of the ULIMO-J, but possibly also the latter’s hijacking of a rather fantastic plan hatched in Nigeria to assassinate Taylor, despite having few arms or other means to actually execute it. Whether Taylor knew of the plan remains uncertain, but on 18 September 1998 his forces nevertheless attacked the area of the capital held by his former rival. Those who survived the onslaught fled the country. While the leadership was taken to Ghana after seeking refuge at the United States (US) embassy, many more were helped to Sierra Leone by Nigerian peacekeepers and joined the so-called Special Forces that fought against the RUF. Others and especially those originating from the southeast of the country left to that area, with many continuing to Nicla – somewhat inappropriately called Peace camp – and even further to Ghana.

The attack against Camp Johnson Road helped to convince many that there would be no peace in Liberia as long as Taylor remained in the country. Taylor’s decision to retire and demobilize 2,585 soldiers – mostly Krahn – only encouraged the view that he had to go. The insurgency against Taylor initially began in late 1998 in northern Liberia, but soon escalated into a more widespread rebellion. First, a number of small groups joined to fight Taylor under the name of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). As Taylor’s forces attacked Guinea in order to deny the group safe havens across the border, the Guinean president Lansana Conté began to support the group. The LURD helped to repel the invaders, and soon established itself in north-western Liberia, from which it began to fight southward toward the capital. Even many of the Krahn leadership that had fled to Special Forces and exile migrated to Guinea to fight Taylor.

As the war escalated in the northwest, Taylor’s forces became increasingly aggressive even in Grand Gedeh County, correctly perceived to be a bastion of anti-Taylor sentiment. Attempts to press former combatants to join Taylor’s forces made many of them to seek refuge in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, where limited recruitment to the LURD took place. Taylor-supported forces invaded Côte d’Ivoire after the failed coup d’état of 19 September 2002. At the outset, this attack seems irrational. With Taylor’s government of Liberia (GoL) forces facing increased pressure and loss of territory to the LURD, opening a new front
to the east hardly sounds wise. The most plausible explanation is that Taylor was simply looking for a way out. After all, the GoL was not simply facing an advancing rebel group, but perhaps more importantly one that was receiving arms, ammunition, and logistic support from Guinea (and hence from its international partners). Simultaneously, a UN weapons embargo made it increasingly difficult for Taylor to supply his own forces. Taylor’s strategy initially built on securing the capital as a way to remain the head of state with all the benefits this brought. With the looming defeat, he saw that he could return to the bush if Côte d’Ivoire was led by an ally. He had no alternative but to look east. The war in Sierra Leone had already ended (and the international peacekeeping force made victory there untenable) and Guinea was against him. The attack to Côte d’Ivoire was thus a result of desperation, with regime change there the only realistic way for him to remain in power.

This high-stake gamble only hastened Taylor’s fall as the Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo turned against Taylor. Aiming to defeat Taylor, Gbagbo followed the strategy used widely in the region (and beyond), and mobilized Liberian refugees to fight as a pro-government militia. This also illustrates how external supporters were vital for all armed groups in the region. There was little chance of success without arms, finances, and safe havens – best provided by state actors across international borders.

**From refugees to militia**

Taylor’s decision profoundly changed the political context and turned a new leaf in the relationship between Liberian refugees and Ivoirians. This enabled the mobilization of the pro-government militia through two interlinked processes. The more elite-led process saw nothing less than the shopping for alternatives to invest in rebellion in Liberia. As testified by the MODEL spokesman Boi Bleaju Boi in front of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the chairman Thomas Yaya Nimely came from the US ‘to Africa to seek means how to get Taylor out of this country.’

Yaya had previously visited Sierra Leone (where he was jailed for 10 days) and Guinea, where he managed to join LURD’s executive council. While the LURD was based on a power-sharing agreement that saw Mandingo and Krahn sharing power, in reality the Mandingo dominated thanks to their closer connection to Conté. This allowed them to control supplies, and hence forces. Because of this and the perception that the war stalled, Yaya and the former ULIMO-J commander Arthur Baygboe (the brother of Boi) continued their migration to Côte d’Ivoire.

The organization behind MODEL was called New Horizons, which was also the name of the prospective government of Charles Julu, the former Krahn AFL general who executed a failed military coup in Monrovia in 1994. Little is known of the New Horizons, but Yaya reportedly supported Julu’s plan to attack
Monrovia by boat to avoid guerrilla fighting. Other LURD figures thought this suicidal, and the plans came to naught. The notions about New Horizon having roots in the US are supported by Yaya’s openness about receiving funding from the Liberian diaspora there. Even the first chairman of the MODEL was a Massachusetts-based lawyer originating from Nimba County. He only stepped down after a failed incursion into this county in an attempt to open a second front against Taylor, allowing Yaya to replace him. After his unsuccessful quest for opportunities to play a significant role in ousting Taylor, the invasion of Côte d’Ivoire in 2002 finally provided this opportunity. Yet there was already a group of Krahn who had, according to one testimony at the International Criminal Court, already organized themselves before Gbagbo took over in October 2000. With the Ivorian government trying to limit Liberians from joining the LURD forces in Guinea, there was no support that allowed the refugees to mobilize.

Without the war this support would never have materialized. Early on, the events were thus played closer to the frontlines, which at the time were closing in on Nicla. The descriptions of the life in the camp are typically filled with monotonous poverty, but also with problems with the nearby Ivorian communities. This last bit is perhaps surprising, as it is essentially the same ethnic groups that extend from eastern Liberia to western Côte d’Ivoire. While kinship provided connections between the groups, the relations were far from harmonious. As mentioned earlier, Peace camp was established in 1995 as a refuge for Liberians targeted by Ivorians retaliating after a rebel incursion. Relations had remained tense since.

According to a contemporary source, there were around 32,000 refugees and internally displaced persons in Côte d’Ivoire in March 2003, the vast majority of them Liberians concentrated around Nicla. According to a UN official the ‘camp is no longer a civilian camp’, suggesting that it was the center of mobilization. While it is difficult to find information about the refugee population 6 months earlier, it is safe to say that there were thousands of refugees in Nicla when the war started in September 2002. The rebels advanced rapidly from the last week of November onward, reaching Toulepleu on the 30th of November and capturing it on the 2nd of December. Five days later Bloléquin, located halfway between Toulepleu and Guiglo, was captured.

As stated by Boi,

what we’re concerned about is Taylor attack when we were seeking refuge. And as Taylor continue to attack them, we were between two scissors. The Ivorians identify us as Liberians, we were no more trusted, many of us was killed, and we were not also safe. We were not also safe to run to Liberia. The only authority was to militarily form ourselves.

With the Taylor-supported rebels mere 60 km away, refugees were essentially left in a difficult situation. Startled by rumors of rebels’ genocidal intent, refugees were stopped from fleeing by Ivorian security forces, who
told them that ‘it is your brothers that are coming’. Those who tried to flee eastward were removed from vehicles on checkpoints as soon as they produced Liberian identification. While the Ivorian rationale was likely to prevent infiltration of rebels toward the capital, this amounted to collective punishment of all Liberian refugees for the rebels’ actions. As a result, they were left between ‘two scissors’. This became especially clear when the United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations withdrew their staff and families from Peace Camp. Even the international community thus appeared to abandon the refugees to fend for themselves.

After some Liberian leaders – former combatants residing in Peace camp – were arrested by Ivorian security, dozens of other refugees too offered themselves as prisoners. One of the militia fighters noted that it was ‘better to die in battle than to sit and be collected’. Another said that ‘the refugees arm[ed] themselves to defend themselves’. The mayor of Guiglo, Denis Maho Glofiéhi, who organized Ivorian militias that also supported Gbagbo reportedly played a major role in the arming of the Liberians. This was done through Captain Doumbia, the head of the local barracks, who later suffered a traffic accident and was replaced by the better-known Colonel Yedess. According to these sources, the first Liberian military leader was Colonel Dagbeson, who had come from the US to allow the Krahn to return home. It is reasonable to assume that Glofiéhi – alongside several military officers who too were Guéré (Ivorian Krahn) and Liberians including Baygboe – advocated for the refugees when the government forces were in retreat. Finally a helicopter landed, bringing arms and uniforms for the refugees under the arrangement described as ‘I help you to brush [clear] your farm, you help me to brush my farm’. In other words, the Liberians would receive a semi-official status that provided legal-rational legitimacy for their efforts to fend off the rebels in exchange for continued support that would allow them to get rid of Taylor and to return home.

While the name LIMA likely derives from international military alphabet denoting L and Liberians, it was known as ‘Liberians Mobilized in Action’ by many of its members. While it appears that the mobilization of the refugees was opposed by the Forces Armées Nationales de Côte D’Ivoire (FANCI), it was approved by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), which after mid-October was led by Gbagbo himself. In what betrays Gbagbo’s pan-African ambitions, the MoD also printed ID-cards with the grand name of Force Spéciale pour la Libération du Monde Africain (LIMA) for the purpose of identification. As virtually all LIMA fighters emphasize, the FANCI had early on proven that it could neither be trusted, nor resist the rebels.

The decision to mobilize the Liberian refugees was not taken lightly. In order to stop Ivorians from joining, the ambition was to arm only those who could speak English. Even further, the LIMA was only provided small arms and limited supplies before they prove themselves in combat. As noted by many Liberians, soldiers could not fight rebels. Only ‘steel cut steel’, which necessitated the
mobilization of those who knew guerrilla warfare, which was perceived supreme. One Ivorian politician who acted as an intermediary between the Ivorian military and the Liberian militias, explained that arming the Liberians was a safer choice as they had no political interests in Côte d’Ivoire apart from supporting Gbagbo. They would return home at the end of the war, thus ceasing to pose any danger to him. This way Gbagbo managed to avoid the problem of what to do with former combatants after the war, which both Taylor and Gbagbo’s successor Alassane Ouattara suffered from. In comparison with other foreign mercenaries who included Ukrainian helicopter pilots, white South Africans with armoured vehicles or ‘wartanks’, and a few dozen Angolans who assumed command roles, returning Liberians could furthermore be used to exact revenge on Taylor for supporting the rebellion. They were also cheaper. Another long-term consequence of Gbagbo’s decision was the cementing of the positive relationship between the Krahn and Guéré on both sides of the border despite the fair amount of coercion involved.

The very first operation of the LIMA was the counterattack against Bloléquin during the second week of December. In what betrays the small size of the force, Colonel Dagbeson was ambushed on the road and replaced by Arthur ‘Miracle’ Baygboe. Baygboe was one of those mobilized by the AFL in 1990 (the so-called Ida-90) whose father had served President Tubman, and who was and killed by the coup makers in 1980 when he refused to support it. Baygboe arrived from Abidjan after LIMA had been armed, which lends support to the idea of higher-level negotiations there. Dagbeson’s unexpected death also started the numerous suspicions of foul play that pitted military commanders against each other.

Aside from coercion, ethnic ties and Ivorian material support discussed above, there are two other factors that had great influence in the LIMA social structure: its ethnic composition and the military experience of virtually all its commanders. While the LIMA contained members of virtually all Liberian and several Ivorian ethnic groups, it was always dominated by Krahn and Sarpo. The first Chief of Staff Philip Pardia belonged to the latter group and had previously fought in the LPC. In early January 2003, three buses filled with Liberian refugees from the Bumjubura refugee camp in Ghana led by the former ULIMO-J Chief of Staff Amos Chayee arrived. With greater reputation, more fighters and backed by Yaya, Chayee soon challenged Pardia’s leadership. This caused rising tensions and a mediation attempt by some elders in the refugee camp who explained that the most important thing was to get rid of Taylor. Pardia conceded, and assumed the position of Deputy Chief of Staff. The subsequent owning of supply by Krahn groups added insult to injury. When the Ivorian Chief of Staff Mathias Doue asked Pardia to liberate his home area, Pardia mobilized many of the Sarpo to split to ‘another branch, with another place but same name’.
On March 7, French peacekeepers captured and jailed over a 100 fighters of this group, accusing them of a massacre in the town of Bangolo. Many believe that the LIMA leadership indicated that the Liberians captured were rebels. The political connections of the Pardia group to the Gbagbo government became obvious when one Gbagbo loyalist, ‘the general of the streets’ and later Minister of youth and sports Blé Goudé, led a large group of youth to secure their release. Nevertheless, they remained side-lined until the rest of the war, strengthening the Krahn composition in the LIMA to the point that it was ‘almost one tribe, the Krahn tribe’. The subsequent ousting of Chayee after his unsuccessful bid to support Roosevelt Johnson’s leadership only increased the authority of Baygboe and Yaya. Yaya’s lack of relationship with other military commanders nevertheless meant that he was largely dependent on Baygboe.

The increasingly homogenous social structure made Krahn cultural practices, such as the dodi, more prominent. Dodi refers to a conflict resolution method historically employed to restore and maintain order between Krahn groups, more recently increasingly perceived to concern relations between individual Krahn. The dodi limited violence as Krahn should not see each other’s blood, but also reduced the risk of conflict by making one’s possessions available to others. Advocated by elders – one of whom noted that it was the only thing that brought unity in LIMA – as something that had always been done, this kind of order thus drew from traditional legitimacy.

Considering the way Krahn were invited to the AFL by President Doe and the targeting of Krahn during the civil war it is not surprising that virtually all LIMA commanders possessed previous experience, mainly in the AFL but even in past rebel factions. This influenced the LIMA military structure, which at least on the surface corresponds to that used in Western militaries, but which in reality was ad-hoc and ‘done in a hurry mode’. The aftermath of the 1980 coup had hollowed military hierarchy and bureaucracy of the AFL. This reflected even to the LIMA. While individual commanders continued to exercise authority based on their charisma rather than military regulations, shared norms nevertheless helped to achieve discipline. These regulations were also used to justify replacing commanders when they were not performing adequately in a manner unforeseen in other Liberian armed groups. As the LIMA was divided into ‘platoons’ (later upgraded to ‘companies’ and then ‘battalions’), the new commanders had all proven themselves on the battlefront. Later on, several commanders concentrated on selling cocoa from abandoned farms, and were replaced by others more interested in fighting. Merits thus played a role in the establishment of hierarchy and authority.

That the core of the LIMA mobilized from the refugee camp also meant that they had close relations to the population there through family relations alone. These relations and the resulting legitimacy as protectors of the
refugees in general and Krahn in particular also imposed some limitations on the behaviour of the LIMA. For instance, having heard that her sons had taken to arms, a mother begged LIMA commanders to refuse them. The uniform was taken from one of the boys and he returned home, but the other was stubborn and stayed. It is clear that the legitimacy and the initial recruitment pool of the group depended on community support. Nevertheless, from narratives it is equally clear that it was difficult for the Liberian refugees in local communities to say no when groups of armed militias for instance demanded a cow to eat. Many supported, if not joined the militias just to avoid harassment. Shopkeepers and other people of means were especially targeted, as were ‘Burkinabe’ ‘Mossi’ farmers, or foreigners perceived to have stolen Guéré forest. Violence against these groups and liberation of Guéré communities were rewarded with rituals where community and secret society elders blessed the group with supernatural protection against bullets. In comparison to Sierra Leone, for instance, the vast majority of these kinds of rituals concerned individuals and not groups. In some cases supernatural events took place in dreams, which made their control by elders even more difficult.

While many refugees mobilized to protect themselves and their families after feeling abandoned by the international community, some still clung to the hopes of being evacuated to a third country. After an Ivorian working for the UN declared that this would not happen these hopes were crushed and many more took to arms. Another encouragement came after the first fighters returned from the frontline with money and food, as parents and girlfriends drew on notions of masculine responsibility to encourage their menfolk to mobilize: ‘go and make money – don’t be scared’. A 17-year-old fighter remembers how he woke up while on leave in the camp, and found people waiting outside for ‘a small thing’, feeling ‘like president coming’. These kinds of narratives suggest that the war was also perceived as an opportunity to ‘hustle’. In contemporary Liberia, hustling is the opportunistic opposite of having a job and steady income. While clearly an inferior and less secure undertaking, hustling is nevertheless the norm, and hence not perceived as negatively as the word itself suggests. Such opportunities are welcome and necessary especially during wartime. In many narratives, those who mobilized first were ‘true fighters’ ‘for freedom’, whereas those that joined later were more opportunistic ‘criminals’ and ‘rogues’.

Hustling was at the core of how the impoverished Liberian refugees understood warfare: war equalled to breaking down of order, a ‘complete freedom’ to ‘do anything’. Capturing territory thus enabled hustling in the form of looting property and abandoned farm produce, as well as erecting checkpoints to tax passing civilians. Yet to claim that war was fought for rents alone is an exaggeration. Doing so would not only disregard the fact that economic incentives merely facilitate other motivations, but also diminish the importance
of coercive and normative dimensions present in all wartime situations, and hence the relevance of the investigation of social structure in the first place. In contrast to especially government militias and foreign fighters in general, \(^{59}\) LIMA fighters emphasize not material benefits, but protecting families in Peace camp and returning home to Liberia. Facing violence and with other options closing in front of their eyes, there were hardly any good alternatives to taking to arms.

While crucial for the formation of the MODEL, the LIMA period was brief: considering that the first LIMA operation was in mid-December and the main forces crossed over to Liberia as the MODEL on 23 March 2003 in the so-called battle in sawmill, the militia only lasted for about 100 days. The size of the militia too was limited. According to Yaya Nimely, 500 AFL veterans crossed to Liberia, where the rest who joined were less serious ‘karate soldiers’. \(^{60}\) By then the LIMA had ceased to exist and the MODEL was fighting greater challenges.

**From militia to rebels**

According to Boi, ‘the aim and objectives of the MODEL was to fight Taylor until he see reason to resign or leave Liberia but not to take power’. \(^{61}\) Seeing Taylor as an obstacle for peace, he had to go. Unwilling to go, he had to be forced. The refugees could only return home with arms, and this is what the arrangement with Gbagbo facilitated. Yet there were many who fought in Côte d’Ivoire who never fought in Liberia. The Pardia group has already been mentioned, but others saw that the war would be of different nature across the border. Not only would the militia become a rebel group and thus lose the legitimacy provided by the connection with the Ivorian government. They would also battle hardened GoL militias and the elite Anti-Terrorist Unit, thus making the prospect riskier. Social relations too played a role. As one LIMA fighter who decided to stay in Côte d’Ivoire explained, he could not fire in his ‘family area’ because ‘the bullet I will be firing will touch my brother or my sister’. As a result, many stayed put. To solve this free rider problem common in violent collective action, those crossing disarmed and ‘disrobed’ those who sought to continue ‘hustling’ without taking any of the risks involved.

Even at the time of the TRC, the MODEL spokesman refrained from any comments about the Ivorian support and the events that led to the formation of the rebel group, and was curiously never pressed of these links by the TRC commissioners. \(^{62}\) When interviewed in Grand Gedeh County in 2013, Yaya admitted that the MODEL received support from the Ivorian government, but claimed that he had no relationship with the LIMA. \(^{63}\) Crossing the border and changing from a militia to a rebel movement meant decreased Ivorian control, but even politicization and empowering of the movement. The war in Côte d’Ivoire was quieting down after the
ceasefire agreement of 26th of January 2003 that resulted in a demarcation line monitored by first French and later UN peacekeepers. Action subsequently shifted across the border. This was the time when the Liberian leaders stepped into the limelight with their own agendas, but also sources of legitimacy. For the fighters the Liberian politicians and their scheming continued to have little importance.

Like in Côte d’Ivoire, fighting in Liberia focused on the control of population centers, and was often waged on the poorly maintained roads that snaked through the bush between them. While the LIMA fought during the dry season, the MODEL was racing against the rains, which would complicate logistical efforts as well as control of forces. With GoL in retreat toward the capital because of the LURD, the MODEL faced limited resistance. It soon captured half of the country. Taking territory also necessitated leaving forces behind to establish control. While actual governance was likely limited and often drew on draconian LPC ‘laws’ that mostly focused on witchcraft accusations, this nevertheless led to the mobilization of what Yaya’s ‘karate soldiers’, many who never partook in fighting. One fighter remembers how all the youth in some Krahn areas wanted to join, even resorting to bribing the fighters and refusing to let go of the rebel vehicles until beaten with sticks. In Nimba the situation was reversed, as the MODEL leadership saw that Nimbaians should suffer until they admitted that they had lost the war.

The MODEL leadership soon positioned themselves even to some extent against the LURD. While the prospects of the MODEL of taking over the country were slim due to the unpopularity of Krahn and the small size of their armed group, it sought to make sure that Mandingo would not do so either. The LURD was told in no unclear terms that if they dared to capture the Executive Mansion they would face the MODEL forces. Despite the continued support of the Ivorian government, the MODEL thus began to play a largely independent political role within the Liberian civil war. The leadership however had no rush to join forces with the LURD: they could lose if the fighters could choose to join the LURD, or the big Krahn commanders in the LURD challenge the less famous MODEL commanders.

After the split of many Sarpo, the MODEL became an openly Krahn organization. Its name closely resembled that of the ULIMO-J and its insignia similarly portrayed the Gedeh mountain that remains in the flag of the Grand Gedeh County. Liberation of Liberia and the Krahn homelands was the MODEL’s ultimate aim, even if described in national terms. International humanitarian norms too had made their mark, and not just in rhetoric. For instance, one old commander who went by the ominous alias ‘General kill and go’ was deemed ‘too quick to kill’ and refused by the organization. Many MODEL fighters also note that they followed international conventions and released some captured GoL fighters to the international community
after the war (more common narratives however tell of summary executions). Another thing that stood out in the MODEL’s political communiques (as evident years later in the testimony of Boi at the TRC) was the restructuring of the AFL. Considering the domination of the AFL veterans among the Krahn in general and the MODEL in particular, this was hardly surprising: the interests of veterans clearly coalesced with those of the Krahn. In post-war narratives Krahn interests also to some extent went against Mandingo interests, in part because the latter were perceived to align with those of Gbagbo’s main political opponent, Ouattara.

The decreased Ivorian control did not translate into stronger internal cohesion, which now became threatened by capture of supplies and sources of revenue in Liberia. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that Baygboe spent most of his time in Côte d’Ivoire, leaving significant autonomy for commanders (today collectively called ‘generals’ regardless of their wartime rank) in Liberia. While the structure of the MODEL is described in familiar Western military terms, in reality its units were formed around charismatic commanders able to perform. ‘Battalions’ travelled by pickups and trucks with ‘men hanging from the door’. Commanders led from the front and followed the principle of ‘I have to show what made me a commander, I need to prove it’. Despite their mystical protection, several became casualties.

These two factors alone limited the effective unit size to low dozens of ‘special forces’ close to the commanders – and even these ‘people can go and come after a few months’. Larger ‘general attacks’ required the massing of several units to one location. Otherwise it was easiest and safest for commanders to assume control areas that they answered for than to coordinate with each other. While radios allowed communication between commanders and the leadership, there was limited oversight to these commanders’ activities on local level, where they exercised significant autonomy. Their self-interest required continued cooperation, but only up to a point.

Despite the professional background of most commanders, one event is enough to illustrate this autonomy and the MODEL’s limited domination over its members: when Baygboe publicly confronted ‘John Garang’ – one of the strongest frontline commanders – of looting both civilians and fellow MODEL fighters, Garang slapped him in the face. Facing no consequences proves the lack of coercive power and the weak domination of the MODEL. It was simply impossible to use coercion in a situation where hierarchies failed to overpower egalitarianism. Historically, Krahn not only lacked a distinct class structure, but also possessed several means to resist leaders’ authority. This feeble domination suggests that rational bureaucracy alone is insufficient in explaining the command dynamics. As discussed by Judith Verweijen in a different context, the formal structures coexisted with patrimonial relations both within units,
and as the presence of Baygboe’s family members proves, within the organization. While patrimonialism no doubt provided more legitimacy to the organization and hence enabled it in the first place, it also made the formal structures brittle.

This helps to explain the fate of the MODEL, which never recovered from the decimation of its military leadership in the 3-day battle of the port city of Buchanan. Buchanan was strategic for Taylor because of its logistical significance in supplying his war. Seven MODEL generals died in battle, including Baygboe. The military command and authority was in tatters. This provided more opportunities for local commanders to assume control, but their authority also made it more difficult for the political leadership to capitalize on the main strength of the MODEL – its control of half of Liberia’s 15 counties. All along the MODEL strategy had emphasized capture of territory as a way to increase its strength at the expected peace talks.

By the time the MODEL entered Buchanan, the LURD had reached Monrovia, where it was laying siege on the city center. MODEL combatants saw no need to join the fight, perceiving that ‘the civilians were already crying because of LURD and GoL’. With no way out militarily, the war-crimes court indicted Taylor opted to offer himself as a ‘sacrificial lamb’ for the sake of peace and to accept asylum in Nigeria. Considering how centered the war was on Taylor, other issues that had contributed to the war were soon forgotten amidst war weariness on all sides. While fighting in Nimba only ceased after Yaya attended a 10-day meeting with elders in Saklepea that ended in the eating of two cows and armed groups continued to occupy territory, many began to demobilize at their own initiative. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the resulting Interim Government shifted the locus from tactical level combat to the level of politics, where those who had stood behind the MODEL expected their rewards.

From rebels to civilians

The fate of the MODEL proves that it was a local-based movement aimed on ousting Taylor. After Taylor’s departure and the ceasefire that promised to allow the Krahn to return, the main narrative of the MODEL disappeared. While the local legitimacy of the MODEL was clear and greatly helped it to further the perceived interests of the Krahn, it was nevertheless unable to bridge the inherent divisions of the fragmented ethnic group, which saw its different sections (in the narratives after the war especially the three administrative districts of Gbarzon, Tchien, and Konobo) as competing. Another division that became apparent was that between the politicians and the remnants of the military leadership, with fighters soon forgotten as every so often. The politicians were widely perceived to reward the initial US-based ‘investors’ by granting them positions in the Interim Government based on power-sharing between the GoL, the LURD, and the MODEL, whereas several
military commanders returned to Grand Gedeh, with limited means of communication with the capital. That a number of commanders had to put Yaya in house arrest to receive positions serves as proof of this conflict. While Yaya became the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the MODEL did not transform into a political party and disappeared during 2004.

After the war the MODEL leaders who pursued political careers relied on their kin in their places of origin rather than their former combatants. This said, Grandgedehian informants emphasize that as protectors of their people, a few former rebel elites could rely on some support immediately after the war. One who came from the same district as Yaya lamented that he had not done so when it was still possible. Yaya’s 2014 Special Senatorial Election poster portrayed him in a dress he had received from Ghana during his term as a minister, evoking national and international status rather than wartime legitimacy. This did not help him to win.

While the fact that military leaders wielded most power in the MODEL was beneficial for keeping the organization together, their decimation in Buchanan also shows the risks involved. While the MODEL was almost certainly the smallest and weakest of the three parties involved in the war, it nominally controlled about as much territory as the GoL forces and the LURD together. Perhaps as a surprise to everyone and in a way that helped to bring peace to Liberia, it received equal status in the peace negotiations. While the MODEL politicians succeeded in negotiating peace on its behalf, the organization itself was broken beyond repair. With Taylor gone, there was no reason for it to exist any longer.

Contributing to the end of the MODEL was the fact that the US had begun to grant asylum to Liberian refugees – an opportunity unmatched by anything the MODEL leadership or the planned disarmament process could offer. This provided an incentive to return to Peace camp, and later to Abidjan. Any proof of participating in the war was deemed to disqualify from this process, which led to the destruction of evidence. This fear was later proven as one refugee provided information regarding the movement, thus ensuring his own asylum after the understandably angry reactions by those rejected. The time spent with the process however meant that many fighters remained in Côte d’Ivoire immediately after the war, thus removed from Liberia and the political developments there. This, and the poor communication means in general, further contributed to the disintegration of the organizational structures formed during the war. While officially 13,148 MODEL fighters demobilized, this number says little about the actual numbers of fighters. While many demobilized as AFL soldiers to get better benefits and pension, many more had never been fighters in the first place.

Arthur Baygboe’s fate is important for understanding the social structure of MODEL. While generally described as someone who had already earned his status during the first war, he remained a big man who had at least once
before appeared on battlefront when odds turned against his fighters, and miraculously managed to turn the tide of battle. A hero and the head of the MODEL, his corpse became the target of intense fighting in Buchanan. Losing it to the opponent would have been a disgrace to his comrades, and an immediate moral boost to their enemies. Several died when trying to retrieve his mortal remains in what proves the charismatic backbone of the military hierarchy.

While those who died in the bush were often left there, a convoy of fighters took Baygboe’s corpse from Buchanan to Guiglo and then to Abidjan, before it was returned to Liberia and buried in his hometown in Grand Gedeh. In what can be taken as emphasizing both the close links between the MODEL and the Ivorian government but also the Krahn in the two countries, the biggest wake for him was probably held in the Yopougon suburb of Abidjan, where many Liberians live. This underlines the importance of the struggle on both sides of the border among the Krahn, where he was deemed to play a major role. While those Ivorians who supported Gbagbo initially lauded Liberians as heroes of Côte d’Ivoire, as soon as the war started they too began to wonder whether the Liberians should return home.

That few Grandgedehians by 2012 had heard of the commanding general, or knew much about the liberation of their homeland, must be taken as proof of the transitory influence of the MODEL. The end of violent politics meant that most military commanders lost their influence to civilian politicians. The Krahn civilian politicians in turn first squandered their opportunities by infighting during the Interim Government era before being pushed to the opposition by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in 2006. After this Grand Gedeh largely returned to its pre-1980 status as a periphery of limited importance. With refugees returning and the strengthening of the state in education and securing the border alike, even links with Ivorians diminished.

**Conclusion: the MODEL social structure of an armed group**

This article has offered a thick description of the mainly Krahn refugees who fought their way from Côte d’Ivoire to liberate their homelands in Liberia. This empirical contribution has several theoretical implications for the study of the social structure of armed groups and the broader sociology of war. Above all, MODEL illustrates how difficult it is to harmonize cohesion on the micro, meso, and macro levels. While some nation-states have had remarkable success in this harmonization, the ad hoc MODEL could not afford to dedicate many resources to this harmonization process. Not only did it possess different kinds of legitimacy on the three levels that to some extent went against each other, but even its sources of legitimacy evolved during the war.
Much of this change had to do with war itself, which influenced social processes within. War polarizes and helps to construct us and them – in this case a threat and subsequently the Krahn, and the armed groups dominated by them. Polarization helped to bring together the Krahn, who as noted are far from as united as the term ‘tribe’ (commonly used in contemporary Liberia) suggests. While the internal divisions of the various dialect groups – or, due to the influence of the Liberian state, increasingly the administrative districts – were present even during the war, the war helped to form a shared narrative that continues at the time of writing. Yet it is also clear that all the armed groups in Liberia depended on external sponsors. Yaya and Baygboe were only two of the actors who went around looking for opportunities to lead groups that would take on Taylor. No armed groups in the region emerged without these kinds of brokers with access to arms and financial means, and their control of supply remained a powerful instrument of control. Yet even they depended on state backing, as this provided legitimacy and security. The indispensable material support in turn understandably came with strings attached, and with different priorities.

These macro-level sources of legitimacy did not sit well with those on the meso and micro level. Both the LIMA and the MODEL consisted of units formed around individual commanders, who received their rank from the organization based in part on their merits. While commanders were able to foster cohesion through AFL norms and draw legitimacy from their formal military training and military expertise that resembled rational-legal legitimacy, they mostly relied on patronage and charismatic ‘unofficial authority’. Charisma however remained a personal quality difficult to institutionalize and threatened the authority of political leaders. The decimation of the military leadership in Buchanan illustrates this important weakness, as the losses questioned the commanders’ charismatic legitimacy. While replacements were promptly nominated from Baygboe’s family and lesser commanders, the remaining structures found little use after the war. Military commanders – many of them considered uneducated – were ill-equipped to play the non-violent political game, whereas the distant political leaders had always lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the fighters. The loyalties of these politicians were rather to the US-based financiers than to those who had fought, killed, and died, and who were largely abandoned.

Existing sociological literature suggests that top-down coercive power and ideology play important roles in keeping groups together. Coercion was however difficult to employ among the largely egalitarian Krahn, where the dialect groups were organized in different ways. The one thing that brought unity to these groups, the dodi, explicitly forbade violence between Krahn. Discipline thus remained weak. The armed groups were ad hoc inventions, as were their military and political structures. These structures in turn largely relied on macro-level traditional legitimacy and ideological justifications, which narrowly centered on...
removing Taylor and issues related to Krahn ethno-nationalism and the southeast. Aside from the question of salaries owed by the government to AFL veterans, these justifications ended with Taylor’s departure, which returned the internal divisions within the Krahn group to the fore. As a result, the armed group soon faded away.

In comparison, reproducing pre-existing structures – often those which emulate nation-states – may offer more legitimacy. In fact, state armed forces are best understood as a continuation of these states, and many seemingly ‘irregular’ armed groups largely follow similar conventions. This nevertheless gives rise to new demands. As discussed by Michael Mann, this also cages them into a particular framework through norms and laws, and thus limits freedom of action. While nationalism had little purchasing power during the Liberian civil wars, the national caging was also unwanted if it resulted in any limitations to guerrilla warfare, perceived supreme. The Krahn ethno-nationalism can at best be described as a weak cage. It had some limiting effect, but it equally helped little in the efforts to harmonize legitimacy. Ultimately, the LIMA formed to enable the MODEL to allow Krahn to return home. After getting rid of Taylor these armed groups had largely exhausted their sources of legitimacy.

Notes

2. Clausewitz, On War, 650.
3. Ibid., 660.
8. Käihkö, Bush Generals; and “Broadening the perspective.”
10. Tilly, Coercion, Capital; and Malešević, The Sociology of War.
11. Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration.”
12. Hoffman, The War Machines, 131–4; and Staniland, Networks of Rebellion.
18. For instance, see the insightful Sinno, Organizations at War.
20. Joas and Knöbl, Social Theory.
22. To date little has been written about the war itself in Liberia. The best work on the first war remains Ellis, The Mask of Anarchy. The best overall account on
the second war can be found in Gerdes, *Civil War*, 161–190. On the MODEL, see the brief Lidow, *Violent Order*, 203–11.


29. Hutchinson, *Nationalism and War*.


31. On these actors, see Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*.


33. Käihkö, “‘Taylor Must Go’”, 254.

34. Ibid., 252–5.


36. Käihkö, “‘Taylor Must Go’”, 255.


42. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, *Boi Bleaju Boi Part 4*.


45. These relations were reportedly formalized in a meeting in Abidjan in late 2002 or early 2003. International Crisis Group, *Tackling Liberia*, 22.


47. See note 37 above.

48. It is these events that explain much the social structure of Liberian participation to later conflicts in Côte d’Ivoire. Released after an intervention by Ivorian government, many of the captured Liberians stayed in Côte d’Ivoire, or at least maintained close contacts with the Gbagbo government until its end in 2011.


52. Käihkö, “‘No Die, No Rest’”, 18–19.

53. As was the case with the RUF. Peters, *War and the Crisis*, 95.


56. Several interviewees noted that few women overall held arms, and that there were no female commanders in either LIMA or MODEL. Even those known to have backed these group were all men. For female combatants in Liberia, see Vastapuu, *Hope is not Gone*.


58. Käihkö, “Constructing War.”

60. See note 39 above.
62. Ibid.
63. See note 39 above.
64. Ferme and Hoffman, “Hunter militias.”
65. On Liberian veterans more generally, see Kaufmann, Social Imaginaries.
69. Lidow, Violent Order, 208.
70. Gerdes, Civil War, 187.
72. Haldén, "Organized Armed Groups"; and Hutchinson, Nationalism and War.
73. Malešević, The Sociology of War.
74. Mann, The Sources of.

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