AMBITION AND ATROCITY
IN AFRICA'S LONE STAR STATE

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Zed Books
LONDON | NEW YORK

To Cynthia

ABBREVIATIONS

ACDL	Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia
ACS	American Colonization Society
AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia
AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (Sierra Leone)
ATU	Anti Terrorist Unit
AU	African Union
BTC	Barclay Training Centre
CRC	Central Revolutionary Command, 1994 breakaway faction of NPFL
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ICC	International Criminal Court
IGNU	Interim Government of National Unity
INPFL	Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia
LNTG	Liberian National Transitional Government
LPC	Liberian Peace Council
LUDF	Liberian United Defence Force
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MDM	Movement for the Redemption of Liberian Muslims
MOJA	Movement for Justice in Africa
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NPP	National Patriotic Party

NPRAG	National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government
OAU	Organization of African Unity
PAE	Pacific Architects and Engineers, US private security firm
PAL	Progressive Alliance of Liberia
PRC	People's Redemption Council
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (Sierra Leone)
SCSL	Special Court for Sierra Leone
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia
TWP	True Whig Party
ULAA	Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia
ULIMO–K	ULIMO–Alhaji Kromah, post-1994 ULIMO splinter
ULIMO–J	ULIMO– Roosevelt Johnson, post-1994 ULIMO splinter
UN	United Nations
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia (previously UNOMIL)
UNOMIL	United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia
UP	Unity Party

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While much of the research for this book was carried out between early 2009 and late 2010, the experiences and contacts which provided the inspiration to undertake the project date from the mid-1990s. Across that span of time I received ideas and information from a wide range of Liberians and other West Africans, both professionals and ordinary people, living and working in their home countries, in the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Those who were in the region during the period of the Liberian Civil War and the Charles Taylor presidency provided particularly useful contemporary accounts, commentary and insights.

During recent visits to Liberia for research I have been grateful for the support of Joseph Varney in planning and logistics, which ensured smooth movement around the countryside; in the United States, past and current members of the ULAA provided background, contacts and guidance, while some of Charles Taylor's former administration and family as well as peers cooperated with interviews. The International Committee of the Red Cross and the US embassy in Liberia also lent assistance.

In Ghana the comments and critique provided by Akyaaba Addai-Sebo greatly improved the quality and accuracy of the manuscript,

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INTRODUCTION

This is a story about Liberia during the times of the man who, for people outside that country, has become its best known former president, Charles McArthur Ghankay Taylor. It is equally the story of how Charles Taylor first served, then used and abused his country. It is a story of intrigue, of escape and of survival in times of war. It is about the quest for power and enrichment for the few, among whom Taylor was the master. But it is only the beginning of the story of the many ordinary Liberians, whose suffering and sacrifice started before Taylor came to power and did not end after his departure. For a brief moment he represented hope for many of them, but for a much longer time he represented a pain and anguish much greater than those they had known before.

As a visitor spending many months working and travelling in the late 1990s and early 2000s in three of Liberia's neighbours, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, the impact of the country's conflict was all too visible. The presence of large Liberian refugee populations in the cities and inside the borders of these countries helped demonstrate why their governments' concern for bringing the conflict under control was so urgent. That was an issue of interest for those in my host countries but not an immediate involvement for me. Why a book about Liberia in the time of Charles Taylor, when

in fact of all the countries affected Liberia was, until then, the one
that I had set foot in the least?

I gained an interest in the story of Charles Taylor and Liberia
at first through a personal relationship, and through contact over
several years with young Liberians, during extended working as-
signments in both Ghana and Sierra Leone. Living in exile among
their peers, these young refugees had fled by land, by sea and
occasionally by air to a handful of neighbouring countries, part of
a whole segment of society dispersed across the region during the
civil war years of the 1990s and again during the renewed warfare
and violence at the close of the Taylor era in 2002–03. Some who
fled Liberia at first for Sierra Leone were forced to move again as
the war in that country erupted and re-erupted, displacing them to
Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana or further afield.

The Taylor enigma

When working in the region in 1997 I was fascinated by the ap-
parent willing acceptance, if not overwhelming embrace, by those
recent exiles and the Liberian electorate at home of the candidacy
of Charles Ghankay Taylor for president. As informed as any, ini-
tially at least, the expatriate Liberians welcomed his rule in the full
knowledge that he was largely responsible for their plight and the
suffering of many others who had stayed at home.

Charles Taylor was an ambitious and intelligent Liberian from a
modest background who succeeded in gaining an overseas education
and used it to enter politics. He started well, and had a natural
charm and a determination which produced results and gained him a
following. But he had a ruthless side to his character and an appetite
for strong-arm tactics; in the context of Samuel Doe's Liberia where
democratic methods were suppressed, this quickly translated into
violence, and the ability to deploy violence translated into power.

Despite promising beginnings in his career Charles Taylor fin-
ished badly, and his failure as a leader had tragic consequences for
Liberia. His early efforts to bring about change in his homeland were
soon eclipsed by ambition for material gain, with scant regard for the

development of Liberia and the welfare of the majority of Liberian people. He was a shrewd and effective political campaigner but when elected president he proved to be a poor manager both of his deputies and of his country. Soon after he assumed the presidency, those whom he had antagonized on his path to power conspired against him and, with the help of the most powerful international allies, closed in on Charles Taylor's Liberia.

Taylor was a revolutionary, a freedom fighter who went on to become the head of a gangster government. At a time when only gangsters held power in his country, he was the strongest and most successful among them. The forces he commanded were responsible for many despicable acts against society and humanity, and for their acts Taylor is ultimately accountable. He was a patriot who in the end became an international pariah, when he was singled out by a selective application of international justice to stand trial for his role in wartime Sierra Leone.

The Taylor story puzzled me as an intriguing phenomenon, a political enigma. But also, as the young Liberians displaced abroad went about their new lives, I was impressed by their universal refusal to be downtrodden and dispirited by the conditions in which they found themselves. The other side of that positive impression was the observation of their frequent unwillingness to show either gratitude or deference to the inhabitants of their host countries, to whom after all they owed their survival. That was perplexing to me at first – but again it prompted an exploration into a different aspect of the background to the conflict, one which drew on the history of Liberia and its wider position in the economics and society of the West African region.

A further, more pleasurable, stimulus for this project was the usually enjoyable opportunity to interact with Liberians at work, socially or in the course of random encounters around the region. It was hard not to be drawn to the friendly, boisterous nature of Liberians at play and to marvel at their embrace of the opportunity for the special kind of decadence afforded by refugee life, as well as straining to follow their bantering usage of Liberian English, which to the outsider of the mother tongue is at first an almost

incomprehensible form of speech. For a linguistic challenge, give me Amharic, Kinyarwanda or Shangana any time. Nevertheless, many of its users proudly referred to it as 'Standard English' rather than what is in fact Liberia's very own variant of coastal West African pidgin, a corrupted hybrid dish of raw Atlantic African English with a thick Krio base, with just a hint of French garnish on the side.

Context of the war and definitions

The years between the initial attack by Charles Taylor's rebel forces, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), in late 1989 and the formal ending of hostilities with the staging of democratic elections in July 1997 are what is most usually referred to as the period of the Liberian Civil War. However, widespread civil conflict in Liberia began well before 1989, with the launching of the Samuel Doe regime's ethnically motivated massacres of its own population to some degree before the elections of 1985 but unquestionably thereafter.

For many living in the country at the time, the true beginning of Liberia's civil conflict was the unsuccessful post-election coup led by Thomas Quiwonkpa, who more than anyone can be considered the 'father' of the NPFL before the movement became so overwhelmingly dominated by Charles Taylor after mid-1990. From 1985 onwards, the Samuel Doe administration effectively began a systematic purge of targeted non-Krahn actors in government and society, while giving its army free rein to kill Nimba County citizens and loot their properties in periodic flare-ups of persecution. It also signalled the end of any pretence that Doe's 1980 'revolution' had been the beginning of a period of opportunity for all Liberians and the end of ethnically biased government in Monrovia.

The reality of the overthrow of a century and a half of settler-dominated rule in Liberia was that a repressive and elitist group represented by the True Whig Party (TWP) had been replaced by an even more ethnically motivated, more violent and more tyrannical regime, whose foreign backers, the United States, were willing to turn a blind eye to almost every atrocity that its African puppet committed.

Equally, when war came to a temporary halt in late 1990, although there were to be over a dozen broken or ignored ceasefires and peace agreements during the following five years, there were also long stretches between hostilities when fighting ceased totally. Even when the battles raged, the fighting was mostly confined either to relatively limited regions of the countryside, or to assaults on the capital, Monrovia. Much of the 1990–94 conflict period was characterized by a stalemate regarding control of the capital, while other regions remained under the relatively stable occupation of the NPFL, and latterly also by regional West African peacekeeping forces and the other armed factions in the struggle. Thus, to characterize the period as one of seven years of constant fighting in Liberia would not give an accurate portrayal of events.

Liberia's civil conflict flared again, however, between 1999 and 2003, this time while Charles Taylor was president of the country and it was he who was defending the capital against mostly Guinean-backed rebels of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) in an increasingly desperate struggle to remain in power. When Liberians talk of the various 'Battles of Monrovia', they refer to the first battle as the 1990 assault on the capital, followed by Taylor's 'Operation Octopus' in October 1992 and then the Easter 1996 uprising sparked by the attempted arrest of the prominent factional leader and Taylor rival, Roosevelt Johnson. Again, Liberians often make references to 'World War Three' when referring to the battles which took place in and around the capital during the final assaults by LURD in June 2003.

In colloquial speech Monrovians are often given to dark humour and deep irony when lamenting aspects of their plight, using phrases such as the 'Imported Government of No Use' to describe the puppet regime (Interim Government of National Unity – IGNU) foisted upon Monrovians from 1990 to 1994, or the phrase 'Every Car or Moving Object Gone' when talking about the troops of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the peacekeeping-cum-looting force imposed upon them by Nigeria and other regional neighbours during the same period.

The Liberian Civil War in its popular, narrower definition was started by Charles Taylor and a group of his close supporters at the head of the NPFL; as such he can rightly be held responsible for the death, trauma and destruction which followed. But from another point of view and certainly in the minds of those Liberians who were already being persecuted over a period of years, the actions of the NPFL in 1989 were seen as an intervention on their behalf to prevent a creeping genocide being carried out by the Liberian government against a significant segment of its own population.

In this sense, there were similarities at the outset between the intervention of the NPFL in Liberia in 1989 and other African resistance movements which succeeded against oppressive dictatorships. Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement in Uganda blossomed against the backdrop of Milton Obote's rigged elections and ethnically based brutality. The invasion of Rwanda by Paul Kagame's Revolutionary Patriotic Front during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 overcame a regime bent on ethnic slaughter in an even more extreme set of circumstances.[1] However, in Liberia, despite early similarities with these conflicts, once the nature and methods of Charles Taylor's fighting forces became evident to the world, and once he proved unable to win the lightening military victory over the people's oppressor which Paul Kagame did in Rwanda in mid-1994, the similarity quickly ended.

The assertion was often made by the NPFL leader in the early days that the sole objective of his campaign was (he hoped) a short, sharp, effective war leading to the removal of a murderous tyrant, after which the Liberian people could choose their own leader. Initially, this seemed credible enough, although it was also clear to many from Taylor's actions and utterances in his early years that winning the presidency of Liberia for himself was his true goal. Whatever Taylor's ultimate aim, his objective of waging a brief and decisive campaign, followed by the restoration of civilian order, turned out to be far from the reality.

That is the first major difference from the 1994 Rwandan Civil War, which lasted little more than a hundred days and after which there was a clear victor and a fresh start for the country, no matter

how bitter the fallout for the losers and the survivors. In Liberia, intermittent conflict and temporary administrative arrangements in lieu of elected government were the lot of the Liberian people for a further seven years following Charles Taylor's armed return. But even after Taylor's election, and even to no small extent after his departure from office, the Liberian people continued to suffer under a political elite more bent on personal power and enrichment than willing to learn from the mistakes of the past and work for their country's future.

The other major difference in the Liberian conflict was that, with the exception of the defending troops of Samuel Doe, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), throughout the period, the struggle was not between conventional armies, but for the most part between informal brigades of untrained fighters, many of them teenagers or children and only a minority of whom had any exposure to professional military training. After the initial period of rapid territorial gains in 1990, with the exception of the breakaway Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), almost none of the combatant groups displayed any discipline or respect for humanity in their treatment of civilian populations. None was paid wages, instead being given 'looting rights' by their leaders, an aspect which in itself helped contribute to prolonging the conflict. In Rwanda, by contrast, while there were massive wartime atrocities on both sides, the conquering RPF army maintained a degree of internal order and discipline throughout, which was never in evidence among any of the major warring parties, government or rebel, during Liberia's war.

The United States and its foreign policy play a prominent part in this story. First, because the USA was at the heart of Liberia's creation and remained intrinsically involved with it for the first century and a half of the country's existence; second, because of geopolitics, when Liberia came to be the strongest African ally of the USA during the Cold War years; third, because Charles Taylor was so in awe of America and spent the bulk of his young adult years there in education, work and activism, only returning to play a role in his own country's political affairs for the first time after the age of 30; fourth, because, when the country was plunged into

a decade and a half of conflict, and when most Liberians as well as many foreigners expected the USA to intervene directly, it stood on the sidelines offering only occasional half-hearted covert initiatives and humanitarian assistance; and lastly because, when Taylor had finally overcome all the obstacles to taking power in his own right, legally and democratically as well as militarily, it was the USA that ultimately ensured that he would not be allowed to remain in that office. Nor would he be allowed to remain at liberty, because his transgressions were deemed to have become too great for his country and the world to bear.

In the Samuel Doe era, with an abundance of ignorance, alternative priorities and an abject lack of interest in the plight of its orphaned African grandchild, the USA first ignored Liberia, then condoned and ultimately financed its tyrant's takeover, later leading to humanitarian catastrophe in the continent's oldest republic. The geopolitical priorities of the United States and the need for loyal African proxies to help stem the spread of communism on the continent were the imperatives of the dramatically changing Liberian political environment in which Taylor came to maturity – and through which he planned to manoeuvre himself towards power. Ronald Reagan and Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Chester Crocker became the main supporting actors in an unfolding drama in which Charles Taylor already planned to write himself a leading role.

A country destroyed and a region torn

The story of Liberia is unique, as is the story of its former president who is the subject of this book. Liberians both believed in him and then despised him for who he was and what he did to their country. He brought it inspiration and powerful leadership; he consistently charmed his people and first seduced them into following him, then turned their lives into a living hell. With Taylor's impact on Liberia and West Africa, the country's story has acquired a new and compelling aspect that has to be told; but even before his time and without his huge importance, Liberia itself is worthy of the many