



# Marginal Youths or Outlaws? Youth Street Gangs, Globalisation, and Violence in Contemporary Sierra Leone

Ibrahim Abdullah\*

## Abstract

Sierra Leoneans were shocked when video clips of the Central Correctional Centre gallows began circulating on social media after the Minister of Internal Affairs instructed the prison authorities to get ready to take life. The Minister's pronouncement came hot on the heels of a series of alleged gang-related murders that rocked Freetown in 2016. What are the complex linkages between street violence and youth marginalisation? How might violence among marginal youth relate to unplanned urbanisation, the retreat of the state, the neoliberal paradigm, and the wider political economy – all trappings of an exclusionary globalisation process that continues to exclude those at the periphery? This article describes the appropriation by marginal actors of global cultural influences and their transcription into deadly weapons of the weak in furtherance of a survivalist objective anchored in citizenship. The research is based on fieldwork conducted in five cities in Sierra Leone – group discussions and in-depth interviews with over 300 participants, all identifying themselves as gangsters belonging to one of the three dominant team/ set federations: *Crip, Blood, and Black (Black Hood or Black Game)*. Problematising their quotidian existence in contemporary Africa raises fundamental questions about globalisation and citizenship in the making of subaltern subjectivities.

**Keywords:** Gangs, Sierra Leone, subaltern subjectivities, neoliberalism, globalisation, citizenship

## Résumé

Les Sierra-Léonais ont été choqués lorsque des clips vidéos de la prison du Centre correctionnel central ont commencé à circuler sur les réseaux sociaux, à la suite de l'ordre donné par le ministre de l'Intérieur aux autorités

---

\* Department of History and African Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone.  
Email: Ibdullah@gmail.com

pénitentiaires de se préparer à prendre des vies. La déclaration du Ministre fait suite à une série de meurtres présumés liés à des gangs qui ont secoué Freetown en 2016. Quels sont les liens complexes entre violence dans la rue et marginalisation des jeunes? La violence chez les jeunes marginalisés pourrait-elle être liée à l'urbanisation sauvage, à la démission de l'État, au paradigme néolibéral et à l'économie politique en général, autant de pièges dans un processus de mondialisation de l'exclusion qui continue d'évincer ceux qui se trouvent à la périphérie? Cet article décrit l'appropriation par des acteurs marginaux des influences culturelles mondiales et leur transcription en armes mortelles des faibles dans la poursuite d'un objectif survivaliste ancré dans la citoyenneté. Il est basé sur une recherche de terrain menée dans cinq villes au Sierra Leone (discussions de groupe et entretiens approfondis avec plus de 300 participants, tous s'identifiant comme des gangsters appartenant à l'une des trois fédérations d'équipes/ensembles : *Crip*, *Blood et Black (Black Hood ou Black Game)*). La problématisation de leur existence quotidienne en Afrique contemporaine soulève des questions fondamentales sur la mondialisation et la citoyenneté dans la fabrication de subjectivités subalternes.

**Mots-clés :** gangs, Sierra Leone, subjectivités subalternes, néolibéralisme, mondialisation, citoyenneté

## Introduction

Sierra Leoneans were shocked and completely dumbfounded when a video clip of the Central Correctional Centre gallows began circulating on social media after the Minister of Internal Affairs instructed the prison authorities to get ready to take life.<sup>1</sup> The Minister's pronouncement came hot on the heels of a series of alleged gang-related murders that rocked the city of Freetown during a five-month period in 2016. 'An average of twenty-five murders is recorded in Sierra Leone every month' – was how the Attorney General and Minister of Justice (mis)informed the nation.<sup>2</sup> 'We will kill when the state demands it,' the Minister of Internal Affairs was quoted as saying.<sup>3</sup> 'Cleaning (the gallows) to kill' after more than two decades, amidst much publicity by a government claiming to have implemented a moratorium on the death penalty, got tongues wagging. Why would a spate of youth-related violence prompt state officials to return to a past nobody wants to remember? What does this tell us about marginal youth, justice, and human rights? What might the complex linkages be between street violence and youth marginalisation? And how does violence among marginal youth relate to unplanned urbanisation, the retreat of the state, the neoliberal paradigm, and the wider political economy – all trappings of an exclusionary globalisation that continues to exclude those at the proverbial periphery?

This article describes the appropriation of global cultural flows by marginal youths and their transcription into deadly weapons of the weak in furtherance of a survivalist objective anchored in citizenship. It is based on focus group discussions and in-depth interviews conducted with over 300 gangsters/ clique boys between May and December 2017 in five urban areas including the capital city of Freetown. All the participants identified themselves as gangsters belonging to one of the three dominant 'team' or 'set' federations – Crip, Blood and Black (Black Hood or Black Game) – who now claim to 'govern' specific locations in these areas.<sup>4</sup> Problematising their quotidian existence in contemporary Africa raises fundamental questions about citizenship and globalisation in the making of subaltern subjectivities.

### **Marginality, Globalisation and Violence**

Marginality, globalisation and violence are connected in complex and contradictory ways. Globalisation, a process that excludes as much as it includes, plays out differently in the post-colony as neoliberal packages dished out by the International Monetary Fund/ World Bank in the form of structural adjustment policies and concessionary loans/ grants. The dismantling of state structures in the name of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and productivity, coupled with the enthronement of the market principle as the defining marker of the economy, have ushered in an era of uncertainty about the collective futures of social groups that were dependent on state subsidies and employment. The cutbacks in state expenditure and privatisation – the keystones of the neoliberal project – had a particularly harsh impact on vulnerable groups in society. In Sierra Leone, these policies were undertaken as part of the post-conflict reconstruction programme. The result was the restoration of a semi-functional state dependent on donor funding and receipts from mining without employment for the increasing population of youths now bunched together in crowded urban areas. The lack of jobs for the youth is a defining feature of post-conflict reconstruction. This externally induced condition was exacerbated by unbridled corruption among state officials at all levels – a debilitating ritual that is clearly visible in every African country.

This article defines marginality as an imagined state of being; a product of structural violence inherent in concrete social relations that are constantly in flux. The marginalised, in this case disadvantaged youths, hold state officials accountable for their collective failure to provide the necessary wherewithal for their daily reproduction. Their painful narrative is replete with trenchant critique of the state in all spheres of life: from education to health to housing and the provision of employment for their daily reproduction.<sup>5</sup> Education

and employment – the two Es – are the key areas that have attracted their individual and collective anger against successive regimes. Education empowers and employment puts food on the table and accords the respect that guarantees independence and an escape from waithood – a prolonged period of unemployment (Honwana 2012). In a post-war context where the state is incapable of functioning as a state, this can neither satisfy the burgeoning demand for quality education nor guarantee the availability of a decent paying job for young citizens (Venkatesh and Kassimir 2007).

Having been denied education and employment opportunities, marginal youth seem to have no alternative but to withdraw from the state and seek self-made pathways to meaningful livelihood. It is in seeking that alternative self-made pathway and a meaningful livelihood that marginal youth stray away from acceptable norms, straddling the thin divide between legality and illegality – a divide that defines them as outlaws. Yet such tags amplified by sensationalised press reporting on youth street gang fails to take into account the conditions under which marginal youths must labour to make a daily living (Honwana 2012).

Occasionally branded as juveniles, marginal youths and street gangs have been part of the Freetown landscape since the turn of the twentieth century. A sustained conversation to make sense of their arrival as a ‘dangerous’ social category appeared in a series of articles published in the local newspapers from the second decade of the twentieth century right up to the Second World War.

Under the heading ‘Gang of Young Hooligans – A Grave Peril’, contributors to the popular *Sierra Leone Weekly News* of 10 March 1917 debated the proliferation of juvenile and youth gangs which had literally taken over the area in the city around Susan’s Bay and whose members were active as pimps, pickpockets and tricksters. One of these gangs was identified as Foot-A-Backers, a branch of *A-Burn-Am*, whose leader was a certain Generalissimo Yonkon. The increase in property crime during this period was attributed to those who had allegedly ‘come to town’ as a consequence of the war (*Sierra Leone Weekly News*, 22 September 1945). The tone in which the article described the ‘crime wave’ had all the hallmarks of a Victorian mindset alerting the nation to consequences of a dangerous class invading the abode of the civilised.

Youth marginality and gangsters were therefore not new phenomena in Freetown – their history dates back to the early twentieth century (Abdullah 2005). They were loosely organised and could be found in peri-urban areas far away from the prying eyes of officialdom. But these original groups of ‘*rarray* boys’ were dying out in the 1980s; they were quietly displaced during

the decades preceding the 1991–2002 war. By the end of the war and the beginning of the twenty-first century, gangsters had replaced *rarray* boys as the dominant marginal group.

Overwhelmingly concentrated in the informal sector/ underground economy, these young men who now identify themselves as gangsters (they are referred to as ‘clique boys’ in official discourse) survive by their wits: as dope pushers, pick pockets, petty thieves, commercial bike riders, hairdressers, tricksters, manicurists, and occasional musclemen. Put differently, they hustle, like the *rarray* boys before them, to make ends meet. And such hustling, or ‘survival’ tactics, to use a tired formulation, are unarguably anti-social and unacceptable because they infringe on the rights of others. The link between marginality and criminality constitutes the stuff of street knowledge/ sociology – a defining characteristic of street gang culture. As our informants continually reminded us in the field, the street is their home; their home is the street. The researcher’s responsibility then, is to quietly listen to their individual and collective voices and reflect deeply on what they mean when they proclaim as of ‘right’ that they ‘govern’ particular ‘hoods (local geographical communities) in the nation’s sprawling urban spaces.

Their claim to ‘govern’ presses home a language of rights, from the bottom up, implying a new kind of (dis)order and a newfound power that is in itself a clue to their collective consciousness as a group with defined interests laying claim to particular space/ territory they call their ‘own’. This space, which I refer to as gangdom, is arguably under their control – it is simply their own! And it is in privileging this projected group interest as against that of others – an us versus them divide – that puts gangsters in the realm of a rebellious group, outlaws on the fringe of mainstream society. This rebellious consciousness challenges established norms and practices by affirming their own alternative bottom-up norm in the name of the game – a coded word for hustling and illegally getting by.

### **Kicking the Game: From Social Clubs to Cliques/ Gangs**

What do young people, mostly men, do after school or work in their respective ‘hoods? They hang out on streets, street corners and intersections to shoot the breeze. They talk about everything: from football to politics, from fashion to women, and all the everyday happenings in their ‘hood. The use of public space – the street – as a meeting place for the young is central to understanding the evolution of social clubs and cliques in the late 1990s and early 2000s when these emerged as the key expression of recreation and leisure for young boys/ men and some girls.<sup>6</sup>

The collapse of the big cinema houses in the late 1970s and the demise of weekend discos in the city and schools in the 1980s turned attention to soccer as the pre-eminent form of leisure. In the late 1980s and 1990s, a proliferation of social clubs and cliques emerged in the context of structural adjustment and a major economic meltdown in the years preceding the civil war.

Young men and women wanting to have fun organised 'hood-based social clubs and cliques, and rented public spaces to do what they called 'shows'. These shows were a throwback to the discotheque culture dominant in the 1970s and early 1980s, but without live bands. Social clubs were in fierce competition to organise the best shows. Fierce rivalries occasionally led to shows being disrupted or cancelled.

Before long, every 'hood had its social club, and later clique, that organised periodic shows and dancing competitions, especially on weekends and public holidays. The movement of young men and women across the country led to these shows and dancing competitions quickly emerging in urban areas outside Freetown, the nerve centre of youth culture, particularly in Bo, Kenema, Makeni, and Koidu. Freetown culture was being reproduced and repackaged by youngsters who straddle the city and the hinterland, turning youth culture shows and dancing competitions into a national pastime and a central pillar in the evolution of youth culture. Some local inflections of what was originally Freetown culture appeared outside the capital, reflecting the communities within which they evolved.

Social clubs and cliques were friendly environments crafted by the young to simply 'chill' and 'enjoy'. A small group of five or eight individuals might decide to form a club after a long talk at their street corner, and then elect/ select officers to serve as executive members. They could also emerge from friendships formed in high school. The first agenda item would be to organise a show for an approaching public holiday at a public space they could afford to hire. When it was successful, such a show brought in money to be shared among members. Members used their share of the proceeds to purchase trendy and expensive sneakers, together with matching fashionable jeans and polo shirts to announce themselves as the guys to watch and look out for in the 'hood. Fashion and 'swag' were integral aspect of this new youth culture (fieldwork notes, May to December 2017).

Being fashionable and having 'swag' makes an individual popular among his cohort; girls get attracted to such individual; and fame (but not fortune) comes with a trendy outfit. This aspect of the new culture attracted youth from all socio-economic groups. Because social clubs were 'hood-specific or associated with particular high schools, these clubs/ cliques tended to cut across the class divide – drawing in youth both from the urban poor and

from the middle and upper middle classes. What brought them together in school and the 'hood was, first of all, street-corner bonding; camaraderie and friendship; fun and play. This bonding transcended class, ethnicity, and religion. Strictly speaking, this was friendship, and friendship alone.

But this invented masculine space, occupied and dominated by young men and boys, quickly began to morph into something different when youth became exposed to American music videos and gang culture – the cultural flows made possible by rampant and uncensored globalisation. All the research study informants were quick to single out the influence of global cultural flows in the form of electronic images of what young people did elsewhere (fieldwork notes, May to December 2017). This not-so-subtle evolution could be inferred from the names of social clubs and cliques that were popular during this era of shows. Some of these cliques still continue to use the names they had adopted when all they did was just music, rap, and dancing competitions. Others were completely transformed to reflect the new influences on popular youth culture.

Club names like Noble Squad, Comis Clique, Jambo Graduation, Amonic Billionaires, Scorpio Crew, Cash Mill, Self Made, and Friends and Fun Social Club do not really tell us what social clubs did, or were capable of doing. At one remove they appear innocent and faraway from any form of 'criminality' or social transgression. These names give away nothing about their clandestine or potentially 'criminal' activities. Yet the widespread use of the words 'crew' and 'squad' does suggest influence from the global 'gangsta' culture that was beginning to invade the local world of social club and cliques. Rap Homies, a neighbourhood rap group, existed side-by-side with May Park Gang, a school-based rap group. Both participated in the evolving hip-hop rap contest in Freetown that was the in-thing for youth at the time. These seemingly innocent nomenclatures soon gave way to new and fearsome invented names symbolising the valorisation of violence and the dawn of USA-style gangster culture.

Silver Bullet, Gun Clique, Terror Squad, Gun Killers, Crack Squad, Hard Row Squad, and Republic of Gangsta (ROG) entered the world of Sierra Leone youth culture as names for sets/ teams of youth in specific neighbourhoods and high schools. The change in nomenclature underlined a change in the modus operandi of youth social clubs. Initiation now became a singular feature of clubs in transition to gangs, and graphic tattoos, together with the adoption by members of fearsome monikers, became the norm –it was just the hip thing to do. Ice, Capone, Tupac, TI, Movado, Gaza, Wanted, Kill or be Killed are some examples of the monikers appropriated by the new 'governors' in town. These changes arguably came

with the proliferation of drug use, not marijuana, previously the drug of choice, but hard drugs like cocaine, and assorted alcoholic beverages. Drugs and alcohol came to feature prominently in initiation rituals marking the rite of passage into gangdom (fieldwork notes, May to December 2017).

It would be completely misleading to assume that social clubs and cliques did not engage in violence. The intense competition that came to characterise these shows – hip-hop rap contests, miming and dancing competitions – did lead to some inter-club/ clique violence. But this violence was localised, and situation-specific, mostly fist-fights among youth who knew each other. They would later degenerate into the use of weapons (knives and bottles) as the rivalry and competition extended to women, fashion, and turf wars in pursuit of superiority and claims over territory. That change came with the ‘flagging’ of the game; that is, the use of bandanas – first blue, then red, and eventually black. This ‘ragging’ of the game, to use a formulation out of Los Angeles, symbolised the arrival of ‘made in USA’ gangster culture.

These are the ways that ‘hood and school-based social clubs and cliques constructed across religious, ethnic and class divide gradually morphed into territorially based youth gangs, each ‘repping’ (representing) a particular USA gangster-style colour. This transformation into territoriality marked another unreferenced but fundamental change – the majority of those who now call themselves gangsters came from the lower classes and the urban poor. Why would a movement that originally cut across class lines come to assume a clear-cut class character with membership predominantly from the lower classes and the urban poor?

There is no universally accepted definition of gangs/ youth street gangs in the extant literature on the subject. The definition proffered by the pioneering Chicago School revolves around adaptation to immigration/ urbanisation in an industrial setting. Gangsters are certainly a product of modern cities, but they are not what the Chicago School claimed they were: transitory interstitial adolescent peer groups rebelling against weak institutions (Hagedorn 2007; 2008). Frederick Thrasher’s classical definition – an ‘interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict’ (Thrasher 1927:57) speaks to the reality of contemporary Sierra Leone. Gangs are:

characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory” (Thrasher 1927:57).

Contemporary gangsters are overwhelmingly young men between the ages of 16 and 30 who have mostly transitioned from being members of social



clubs/ cliques. This two-stage process of transition into a gangster seems to be at an end now. The social clubs of yore do not exist anymore or are dying; they are also no longer popular as an organising mechanism in high school or in the 'hood.

Teenagers and pre-teens now get recruited straight into gangster teams where they graduate into full-fledged gangsters. The fieldwork informants revealed that most gangs have team sets for young boys in schools who may later graduate or be promoted into the real team based on their 'performance'. These youngsters are allegedly attracted to the game because it is the only game in town. Even so, these gangs still carry with them some aspects of social club/ clique culture: they continue to organise carnivals, shows, and block parties, and invite other gangsters not repping their colours to attend.

### **'Repping' the Game: Gangster Culture, Territoriality and Violence**

The now dominant visible gang colours – blue (signifying the Crips), red (Bloods), and black (Black Hood/ Black Game) – hitherto innocent colours a young individual might choose to wear – are not so innocent after the arrival of youth gangs and gangsterism in contemporary Sierra Leone. When black sneakers, a red t-shirt, or even a pair of black jeans become a signifier, a badge of belonging to a group that is emblematic of group identity, boundaries inevitably emerge as warning signs that one should tread carefully and avoid particular 'hoods.

The gangs which claim to 'govern' the city through their individual and collective actions have left some residents feeling helpless against the imposition of gang rules and norms. The major cities, particularly Freetown, have been partitioned into blue, red and black 'hoods. These not-so-visible 'governors' can be found in every locality with the most visible physical sign being the wearing of a blue, red or black bandana ('muffler', in local parlance).

Young, unemployed, tattooed, with jeans sagging below the waistline, and not infrequently high on marijuana or hard drugs, topped with assorted cheap local spirit, they patrol their territory/ turf from sunup to sundown in the name of 'governing'. Their style of governance could be read as an importation of American gangster culture – a dubious dividend of globalisation? However, a closer reading reveals a homegrown movement that is frighteningly local as it is global. And gangsters, the central actors in this game, are always quick to remind anyone who cares to listen to them that they are different from the *narray* boys before them. When pushed to say what those differences are, the response is always the same: 'we are by far smarter and intelligent; and we are conscious of what we are about' (fieldwork notes, May to December 2017).

The 'beefing' culture in gangdom, that is, the space they claim to govern or control, which gets sensationalised in the media to evoke public panic, is mostly inter/intra-gang violence. The knifing of a team member by Blood 'niggers' is sure to call forth 'revenge' from the other team. 'Invading' an enemy territory, dating another gang member's girlfriend; and 'dissing' (disrespecting) a gangster either by 'desecrating' the colour he reps or stepping on his expensive sneakers in a night club, are serious transgressions that could lead to instant knifing followed by subsequent reprisals. Gangster culture is rough and tough. The indiscriminate use of drugs and alcohol; inter/intra-gang violence; the possession of dangerous weapons; and territoriality and imagined boundaries mark the seminal transition from social clubs and school-centred cliques to gangster culture and gangdom proper.

This transition to gangster culture has been accompanied by a silent, and not always so silent, battle for control. In the words of Goldscore, team leader of local team Blue Black Clique (BBC) and an emergent rapper:

No King-No Kingdom/ No head – No Wisdom/ Prove Yourself/ If you Know you are a big Don/ Call me the Hardest King/ Far from Fake and Fear/ Black and Blue the Team/ Never Second or Third/ Always First Indeed/ Rapping Strikes the Enemy like a Sword/ Show Yourself in the Street/ If you know you're Hard.<sup>7</sup>

This artist and gangster's open challenge to anyone and his claim to superiority captures the beefing culture – a do-or-die contest to assert superiority over others. Dissing and the quest for superiority are the central characteristic of the beefing culture of contemporary gangster culture as a global trope (Hagedorn 2007; 2008; Hazen and Rodgers 2007).

In the 'governance imaginary' of Freetown gangsters, the Crips team, gangsters with the blue bandanas, 'govern' parts of central Freetown and east end, their 'territory' extending from Mountain Cut in the east to some pockets in the west around Wilkinson Road, parts of Lumley, with some visible presence in Aberdeen and the Peninsula area – spaces hitherto considered to be outside their 'jurisdiction'. The Blood team, gangsters with the red bandanas, 'govern' the west coast, defined broadly as the West End of the city with pockets of red in the central area and the east. The Black team, unarguably the largest federation, otherwise known as Black Hood or Black Game (BG), gather in the traditionally rough east end; in gang parlance – they 'govern' the east 'hood' from Mount Aureol to Fourah Bay to Waterloo in the far east.<sup>8</sup>

This 'governance imaginary' division of the city from below into three 'hoods' evoke the ugly American that is at the heart of gangster culture in contemporary Freetown. The notion of east versus west coast is undoubtedly

a borrowed script from USA-style gangdom (Covey 2015). Similarly, referring to the hills overlooking Freetown and its coastline as Gaza and Gully is appropriated from the Jamaican gangster experience in Kingston.

If gangsters in the UK have repurposed the postal code to hawk their drugs in a divided and violent market, gangsters in Sierra Leone have imaginatively appropriated the numbered electoral constituency delimitations to assert their claim to specific areas. Thus, a particular Crip or Blood team might be designated as Crip 201 or Blood 109 indicating the area it 'governs'. And the boundaries of these two national electoral constituencies will be clearly marked by Crip and Blood graffiti indicating both who the 'governors' are, and to act as a warning sign – 'trespassers will be prosecuted'!

Some local sets and teams within the three main gangs use specific names to reflect their preference or locality, for example, the Foulah Town Crips (FTC); Murray Town Blood (MTB) and Thug Life Hood (THL) – a Black Hood team in Makeni. As former member of the Eight Tray Gangster Crips Sanyika Shakur also known as Monster Kody Scott remarked in his captivating autobiography about his own gangdom experience in Los Angeles, local teams could use individual colours 'outside the universally worn red and blue, to denote their particular chapters' (Shakur 1993:79). As was the case in Los Angeles, the important thing is that local chapters of the blue, red or black armies can be summoned any time to act as part of a single 'military' unit.

The sociological conditions that are conducive to gangsterism in Sierra Leone come from the specific lived experience of participants in response to the social reality; these have not been imported from the USA. Key characteristics of Sierra Leone's gangsters are similar to those of gangsters everywhere: illiterate or semi-literate; dropped out of school; unemployed; from broken homes and poor families; addicted to drugs; and suffering from chronic alcoholism. They drift in and out of prisons/ correctional centres; they are occasionally homeless, they subsist on the margins of society, and they operate with one foot inside the law, and one foot out.

USA-style gangsterism can be found practically everywhere: from Shanghai to New Delhi; from Accra to Cape Town; from Cairo to Lagos. If local sociological conditions produce gangsterism, the local political economy ensures its survival and continued reproduction. That political economy, constantly being shaped and re-shaped by neoliberalism, is at the centre of the evolving gangster culture that is now a dominant sub-culture amongst marginal youths globally (Hagedorn 2008).

Specific expressions of gangsterism may be drawn from the 'hoods in inner city America, but members of gangs are not necessarily Americans. Such gangsters may dream and act American, but they have been born and

raised in their own specific 'hoods. The 'game', that is, what they do and how they do what they do – hustling; drugs; petty theft; acting as hired hands – is all about surviving in the streets, the place they know and claim as home, and the space they claim to 'govern'. The game and governing are inseparable because life in the streets for them is about territoriality and violence.<sup>9</sup> The game of the street (hustling and surviving on the margins) and the governing of space vacated by an errant state is what define gangster existence not only in contemporary Sierra Leone, but elsewhere in the world too (Short and Hughes 2006).

The territorialisation of space and the creation of hoods belonging to different teams is not a Sierra Leonean thing. *Rarray* boys, the original marginal street youths that gangsters have completely displaced, did lay claim to turfs but in a very loose fashion precisely because what held them together was not brotherhood or youthful bonding but their occasional masquerades. Whereas *narray* boys were concentrated in peri-urban enclaves far away from the prying eyes of the law, gangsters are firmly ensconced in public spaces and the inner city. Every street in contemporary Freetown has a team or set representing one of the three gang federations. Territorialisation in the current phase appears to be an expected development in the institutionalisation of youth gangs; it can be found in every country where gangs have become institutionalised. The blue (Crip) red (Blood), and Black (East Hood) represent the three autonomous federations of gangs that currently 'govern' the cities in which this research was conducted. The rest of this section presents an outline of the history and the forces that have shaped the evolution and continued existence of the Black (East Hood) – the largest and most populous of the three teams.

East Hood came into being in 2008. It was specifically established to foster unity amongst the different cliques and gangs in the evolving gangdom of the East End of Freetown. It is the closest Sierra Leone has to a coalition of gangs and cliques; a federation and regulating body, specifically for those who rep the black bandana (Black Game). The sets/teams involved in the making of Black Hood or Black Game, as they are now nationally known, were Terror Squad, 88 Crackers, and Even Squad Hustlers. This merger gave birth to Kossuh Town (K Town) 104.

They choose black as their colour to distinguish themselves as separate from Blood and Crips who claim to govern the west end, portions of the mountainous east, and central Freetown. East Hood/Black Game claims to govern the east end of Freetown from the historic clock tower to Waterloo in the far east. There are also pockets of East Hood/Black Game in the west end; they are by far the biggest team in the five urban areas where

this research was conducted. One gangster reported how he dropped out of school because he foolishly spent his school fees to fund his 'chilling' propensity (fieldwork, May to December 2017).

All the Black Hood gangsters interviewed gave protection and brotherhood as the principal reasons why they were 'kicking' the game the East Hood way. They singled out the black flag; the quest for superiority, women, and territorial dominance as the drivers of the now deadly inter/intra-gang brawls. East Hood gangsters were confident enough to proclaim that they no longer recruit members; prospective members stream in precisely because kicking the game the Black Hood way is the only game in town for young men. They vehemently denied any wrongdoing in their communities but accepted the charge that they normally go west to cause havoc, snatching phones and purses en route to their territory whenever they are out attending any public events. Needless to say, such anti-social acts intensify the beefing culture and amplify the desire for revenge and reprisal from competing gangs.

While gangs are often portrayed by the media as dangerous and violent organisations, Black Hood gangsters were quick to point out that they serve as custodians of peace and act as vigilantes in their communities (fieldwork, May to December 2017). There is an Executive Committee which functions as a cabinet headed by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The other positions are Father; Chair; Adviser; Five Star (5 0); Four Star; and Beef King. Black Hood members claimed to have connections with other gangs and cliques in the hinterland; and a special alliance with the Crip federation.<sup>10</sup> They said they were sworn enemies of the Blood. All officials were prison 'graduates', having served time for offences ranging from possession of hard drugs to robbery with violence, wounding with intent, and even murder. Doing time and having 'heart' were identified as central promotion criteria in gangdom. The majority of these gangsters were unemployed or chronically unemployed with no skills to get them into the formal labour market. Some claimed to be drivers, others claimed to be electricians, but said nobody would contract their services.

In the other areas in which this research was conducted, Black Game gangsters could be found making a living as manicurists and pedicurists; others were roadside hairdressers. They vehemently denied the charge that they had petty thieves or robbers who prey on their community in their midst. Yet they claimed to live by their wits and to prey on peaceful citizens outside their own community. Gangsters label such acts outside their abode as 'disorder'; and they plead guilty to the charge. The establishment of the East Hood federation aimed to foster unity and end the intra-gang/ clique

violence in their 'hood – the in-fighting that took place mostly at nightclubs and soccer pitches had become endemic and intolerable.

They cited instances of the positive role they continued to play in defence of their community by referencing the attack on East Enders in the west end, particularly from the K912 and the Black Street team (West Coast). The establishment of East Hood had allegedly put a stop to such victimisation of East Enders outside their 'hood because they now provide protection in the form of armed escorts to members in their 'hood venturing westwards. Even so, East Hood continued to beef the Blood team, and occasionally the Crip. They were of the view that only employment will end the game. 'You can't be hanging out in the ghetto when you have a job to do', a prominent member of the team casually proclaimed (fieldwork, May to December 2017).

### **Profiling Gangsters**

The profiles of gangsters in contemporary Sierra Leone are similar to the profiles of gangsters in the USA and other western industrialised countries. Most are school dropouts and truants, heavily into hard drugs, marijuana and cheap locally manufactured beverages with high alcohol content. They are able to get high on less than a dollar. A stick of hash sells for SLL5,000 (US\$0.50) and a bottle of cheap vodka with 25 per cent alcohol goes for SLL2,000. The money to fund this habit comes from hustling, including working as dope pushers, hired muscle, manicurists/ pedicurists, bike riders, and day labourers. Gangsters share their earnings, however little, with members of their team/set. Their individual and collective existence is truly shaped by the proverbial and biblical 'brother's keeper' philosophy. Brotherhood is what unites the team.

**Table 1:** Profile of 80 gangsters based on in-depth interviews conducted in 2017<sup>11</sup>

Profile categories	Number	Percentage
Participated in theft	13	16.7
Poor family background/ broken home	30	38.5
Participated in violent criminal act	58	74.3
Used drugs and alcohol	76	97.4
Has been in prison	30	38.5
Dropped out of school	57	73
Born in the 1990s	44	56.4
Born in the 1980s	34	43.6
Completed West African Senior School Certificate Examination	19	24.4
No work experience or skill	34	43.6

An empirical reading of Table 1 might lend itself to a reductionist interpretation about gang participation that highlights the role of deviance and delinquency. Yet these categories, found in gangdom globally, can be read in multiple ways. In fact, they are global indicators referencing the lived reality of gangsters. However, the issue gets complicated as soon as the context within which deviants and delinquents are made/ remade is raised. We obviously need an explanation for the preponderance of gangsterism among those born in the 1990s. They never experienced the brutal civil war and their lifestyle cannot be reduced to post-war trauma. Even so, it might be useful to explore any linkages there might be between the war context within which they were born and their current lifestyle as gangsters.

A contextual reading of the above categories within the framework of political economy tells a different story. The narrative could then be reframed from the deviant/ delinquent prism of blaming the victim to a political economy perspective privileging agency and structure. The economic meltdown in the late 1980s continued throughout the war years, and arguably beyond those years. Even as the broken economy stabilised after the war, the modest growth generated under the post-war regimes did not produce jobs for the teeming youth population. Consequently, the informal economy ballooned, and became the place where marginal and mainstream youth unable to access formal employment became concentrated.

The Ernest Koroma administration's Agenda for Change and Agenda for Prosperity, two successive neoliberal packages anchored on a mining boom it had no control over, turned out to be anything but successful.<sup>12</sup> Whatever gains were made were quickly wiped out by the Ebola epidemic and the drastic fall in prices of iron ore (Abdullah and Rashid 2017). This is the context in which those who got drawn into gangster culture grew up in the period 2001 to 2017, and it is to those conditions that we must turn to make sense of their individual and collective experiences.

They did not choose to become gangsters; the prevailing economic conditions arguably presented gangsterism as a possible alternative to mass unemployment. It is therefore not coincidental that our data reveals that a sizeable number of the study sample came from poor family backgrounds. And even though children from the middle and upper classes were also players in the game of social clubs and cliques, they did not become fully-fledged gangsters. In fact, they opted out of the game! Extreme poverty and the structural violence that accompanies it limits individual choices. Here, structure tends to shape and condition agency in complex ways. Individuals and social groups do make their own history, but they always do so in complex and contradictory ways inherited from a past over which they had no control.

Continuous beefing and eventual death underscore the Moses law in gangster culture, Ice Gbombo, a gangster celebrity revealed in an interview. ‘You can injure a gangster today and it will take a year or more for him to “develop” and “build” a team for you’, he explained. ‘Gangsters don’t easily let go and that is why the beefing culture is like a pendulum – moving this way and that way.’ He truly believes he is a star but his family, especially his mother, is unhappy with his gangster lifestyle. Conscious of his fame and celebrity status and as a voice of the street, he wanted the government to know that:

we are the people; and opportunities for development is what we need... if job nor dae violence nor go don [violence will only end when we are gainfully employed]. Ghetto youths have conscious minds but they don’t make the moves. The drug and alcohol culture divert them from thinking positively (fieldwork notes, May to November 2017).<sup>13</sup>

### **By Way of Conclusion: Gangsters and Gangdom in Comparative Perspective**

The evolution of gangdom in contemporary Sierra Leone has reached a stage where it has unarguably dwarfed and surpassed the preceding marginal youth culture – *rarray* boy culture. And this has happened within a generation, in post-war Sierra Leone between 2002 and 2017. Indeed, it would not be far off the mark to postulate that the emergence of gangster culture has put paid to whatever was left of the original marginal youth culture, that is to say, *rarray* boy culture.

Unlike *rarray* boy culture that had no central organisation or norms binding members to each other, gangsters are organised with a clear central command and control structure. *Rarray* boy culture was held together not by any sense of brotherhood or oath to defend turf or flag. Rather, it simply hung together because of the commonality of their individual and collective experiences of marginality.<sup>14</sup> Later some form of bonding did emerge within the framework of masquerade societies, but these were hardly durable structures within which a lasting brotherhood could be constructed.

While *rarray* boy culture imitated hunting societies and fashioned their masquerade along modernist lines, gangster culture was constructed to mimic mainstream youth social clubs that existed in the 1960s and 1970s, but to do so in their own image.

While *rarray* boy culture staked a claim to territory and space as a defined marker of their arrival as a distinct group with defined cultural norms, gangster culture turned that space, that territory, into a no-go area controlled by specific sets/ crews/ cliques who owe allegiance only to themselves and their federation.



While *narray* boys infused the evolving Creole language with idiomatic expressions taken from their culture, gangsters have now appropriated that role by substituting themselves as the current maker of the national lingua franca. Essentially a product of post-war Sierra Leone, it is as if the new 'governors' in the gangdom are saying to the nation '*narray* boys were here before us but it's now time for them to go!'

This displacement/ replacement of one group of marginal youth by another in the transition to gangsterism is a familiar script in gangdom globally. In Cape Town, South Africa, skollies were displaced by the emergent gangsters in the 1960s. Similarly in Kingston, Jamaica, the rude boys were pushed aside by the rankings and the posse – the enforcers of the People's National Party and the Jamaica Labour Party who became druglords in the deadly marijuana-cocaine trade that was subsequently exported to the USA (Pinnock 1984; Gunst 2003; Jensen 2014).

In Sierra Leone, gangsters hang together because members of sets/ crews/ cliques/ are conceived of as soldiers ('*sojas*') belonging to an army with a specific territory to defend! It is part of gangster argot to hear them say in reference to another '*you nah me soja bo*' you are my soldier! Their dead comrades are referred to as 'fallen heroes'; when a rival gang member is knifed in a gang brawl he is celebrated as having 'fallen'. This military idiom and military gang modes of organisation are now normative and therefore accepted as the rules defining the game. And the oath/ initiation rituals bind every member to the unwritten rules of the game and the dangers of snitching. The act of snitching, real or imagined, is treasonable.

Yet this universal bonding that can be found everywhere amongst gangsters and gangsterism patterned on the USA model has not led to the construction of an alternative imaginary/ discourse independent of elite patronage politics. Perhaps, it is too early for that. Unlike Guinea-Conakry where youth street gangs control and even 'own' the streets in their respective neighbourhoods and every political event and demonstration must have their support for it to be successful, this has not been the case in Sierra Leone (Philipps 2013).

In Sierra Leone, politicians have long perfected the art of mobilising youth gangs as muscle men to intimidate opponents and steal ballot boxes during elections. Consequently, they have not been able to stand outside party politics to defend their own collective marginal group interests qua *narray* boys or even gangsters. Even when many of them claim to be neutral; or teams refuse to support any given party or politician, individual members take part in political rallies as members of their team/set.

What contemporary gangsters in Sierra Leone have succeeded in doing in less than a generation is to capture large swathes of territory where they sell all kinds of drugs and stolen goods in a not-so clandestine fashion. The demise of the large ghettos of the 1970s and 1980s – spaces where youth and older men would congregate to smoke marijuana – has opened the drug business to gangsters who have been able to muster the necessary capital to purchase in bulk and do brisk retail trade in the streets. There are thousands of young men who hawk drugs of all kinds in these enclaves and in public spaces in all the major cities.

This research reveals that gangsters make their living hawking drugs in public spaces they control/ ‘govern’. This development mirrors the situation in South Central Los Angeles and Chicago. What is palpably missing here is an expanding, profitable and captive market for drugs. The limited market has limited the potential for deadly turf wars and reduced competition for control of markets as is the case in other countries.

If and when it gets to that stage, violence, or which groups can muster the muscle power to exclude others from selling in the territory they claim to ‘govern’, will be the deciding factor. If enough is at stake, it is likely that firearms will be procured to defend illegal markets, with clandestine godfather figures lurking in the background.

Gangsters in Sierra Leone are not as local as most people would like to imagine; they could also be deadly global in their thinking and experience. The country’s gangsters are already beginning to advertise by placing photographs of themselves on websites. As gangs become more institutionalised and determined to defend their turf and livelihoods, they could potentially become a part of trans-national, even continent-wide networks.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to my research co-workers – Alie Tarwally, Sheku Gbao and Foday Kamara – for their invaluable intervention.

## **Notes**

1. CGTV Africa, 2016, ‘Sierra Leone to re-introduce death penalty due to increased crimes’, 18 September.
2. Sierra Leone Telegraph, 2016, ‘Death penalty will not reform disenfranchised youths in Sierra Leone’, 25 September. Twenty-five murders every month was an exaggeration.
3. CGTV Africa, 2016, ‘Sierra Leone to re-introduce death penalty due to increased crimes’.

4. State officials – from law enforcement to politicians – refer to them as cliques or clique boys.
5. This came out clearly in our conversations with youths who identified themselves as gangsters, and in popular lyrics put out by struggling musicians, some of whom are gangsters.
6. The street has always been the abode of marginal youth, but its meaning keeps changing with every social group that enters the historical stage to claim that space as of right. The original marginal youth who occupied that space, the *rarray* boys, are now dying out.
7. These lyrics are unedited and unpublished – from the rapper and BBC team leader Goldscore.
8. See Monster Cody for similar divisions in Los Angeles where the gang name Crip came from.
9. There are at least four poignant poems about the street in a recent collection of poetry by marginal youth in transition (Harding and Chandler 2018).
10. There are some local sets/teams who refer to themselves as Black and Blue; they owe allegiance to both the Crip and Black game.
11. The ethnographic survey on which this article is based was conducted in 2017. Since then more work has been done, and the incidence of theft and number of brushes with the law has increased.
12. There were two poverty reduction papers during President Koroma's tenure – in 2007 and in 2012.
13. David Kolleh Kamara, also known as Ice Gbombo, sadly passed away on November 2019. The funeral procession from Brookfields to the Kingtom Cemetery shut down business on the main road and brought vehicular traffic to a halt. The procession was a who's who of gangsters in Freetown.
14. For a discussion of *rarray* boy culture, see Abdullah 2005.

## References

- Abdullah, I., 2002, 'Space, Culture, and Agency in Contemporary Freetown: The Making and Remaking of a Postcolonial City', in O. Enwezor, ed., *Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*, Ostfildren, Germany: Hatje Cantz.
- Abdullah, I., 2005, 'I am a Rebel: Youth, Culture and Violence in Sierra Leone', in A. Honwana, and F. De Boeck, eds, *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, Oxford: James Currey.
- Abdullah, I. and Rashid, I., eds, 2017, *Understanding West Africa's Ebola Epidemic: Towards a Political Economy*, London: Zed Press.
- Brotherton, D.C., 2015, *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal*, London: Routledge.
- Covey, H.C., 2015, *Crips and Bloods: A Guide to an American Subculture*, New York: Greenwood Press.
- Gunst, L., 2003, *Born Fi Dead: A Journey Through the Yardie Underworld*, New York: Henry Holt and Company.

- Hagedorn, J.M., 2005, 'The Global Impact of Gangs' in J.F. Short and L.A. Hughes, eds, *Studying Youth Gangs*, Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Hagedorn, J.M., ed., 2007, *Gangs in the Global City: Alternatives to Traditional Criminology*, Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Hagedorn, J.M., 2008, *A World of Gangs: Armed Young men and Gangsta Culture*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hazen, J.M., and Rodgers, D. eds, 2014, *Global Gangs: Street Violence Across the World*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Harding, S. and Hazel Chandler, H. (eds), 2018. *Poems and Stories from the Streets of Sierra Leone*, London: Wayout Books.
- Honwana, A., 2012, *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*, Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press.
- Jensen, S., 2014, 'Intimate Connections: Gang and the Political Economy of Urbanisation in South Africa' in J.M. Hazen and D. Rodgers, eds, *Global Gangs: Street Violence across the World*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Philipps, J., 2013, *Youth Gangs and Urban Protest in Conakry, Guinea*, Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Pinnock, D., 1984, *The Brotherhoods: Street Gangs and State Control in Cape Town, Cape Town: David Philip*.
- Shakur, S. aka Monster Kody Scott, 1993, *Monster: The Autobiography of an LA Gang Member*, New York: Grove Press.
- Short, J.F., and Hughes, L.A. (eds), 2006. *Studying Youth Gangs*, Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Thrasher, F, 1927, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Venkatesh, S. and Kassimir. R. eds, 2007, *Youth, Globalisation, and the Law*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.