A funeral for a friend: contested citizenship in the Liberian civil war*

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Introduction

During the period from 1980 to 2003 Liberia became synonymous with war, chaos and destruction. Fragmented by different militias that seemingly fought each other for no better reason than plunder and theft the country was presented as a primary example of a ‘new war’.¹ There is little doubt that economic motives were important for the war and the establishment of many of the militias involved. However, militia formation was also a consequence of issues and tensions deeply entrenched in Liberian history. The Liberian conflict was not just one war. It was a series of local conflicts tangled up in each other, as Taylor's rebellion against Samuel Doe's dictatorship pushed the Liberian state over the edge and into the abyss. This ‘nationalisation’ of local conflict created a ‘logic of war’ that dramatically affected the course of the war, the decision making of the individuals involved, and the subsequent militia formation.²

The Liberian war was therefore a national conflict constituted by a series of local conflicts. This is vividly illustrated by the conflict between the Loma and the Mandingo in Lofa County. However, as this local conflict is closely linked both to similar controversies in neighbouring counties as well as to the instability in Guinea, the conflict pattern in Lofa will also be briefly contrasted to the tense situation in Nimba County between the Mandingo and the Gio and the Mano.³ Charles Taylor's ability to tap into pre-existing conflicts, first in Nimba and later in Lofa triggered the war, but these local conflicts were the combined outcome of conflict patterns preceding the Americo-Liberians and the administrative practices of their state.

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The Liberian civil war is hardly ever mentioned without reference to former president Charles Taylor. Both media and international organisations (governmental and nongovernmental) have contributed to a personalisation of the Liberian war through the emphasis they place on Taylor, in fuelling the war as well as in the making of the Mano River Basin warzone. There is no doubt that Taylor murdered, plundered and treated the presidency as his personal bank account. However, this does not mean that we can assume that the Liberian conflict was the consequence of only one man's criminal behaviour. Such an approach is a best misleading, and in this case clearly wrong.

In order to illustrate the weakness of such an approach, this paper will revisit the Liberian civil war through the lenses of autochthony. The argument made is that viewed in this manner, the warlords, the grand plans, the elites and the international connections become less important and what we are left with is the intertwining of a series of local conflicts into a larger pattern. A war zone that evolves and develops as local communities – dazzled and confused by the events unfolding in their midst – tries to protect what they believe belongs to them. This process is illustrated by the ethnogenesis between the Loma and the Mandingo that formally assigns firstcomer status and control of land rights to the Loma. The outcome has been an unstable system of political subordination that the Mandingo often could escape as they represented economic power through their trade networks. Thus, making the Liberian civil war the latest manifestation of a long history of co-operation but also prolonged spells of conflict between these two communities. The conflicting claims concerning citizenship and land rights is not a novelty created by a ‘new’ war, but an enduring part of the history of this area that is better seen along the lines of la longue durée than as a direct outcome of a crisis of modernity. Thus, the current conflict has a history that proceeds the Liberian nation state and the making of the modern state system in West Africa. However, we must also recognise how the ‘rules of engagement’ changed with the imposition of statehood that depicted citizenship to a specific territorially-defined politics of place.

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Lofa – a violent frontier zone?

Lofa is the northernmost Liberian county, and Voinjama the largest city and county capital. Although Kissi, Kpelle and Mano communities also live in Lofa, the two main ethnic groups are the Loma and the Mandingo. The cultivation of upland rice is the most important agricultural product for both the Loma and the Mandingo. Rice is their staple food and the mode of production is swidden agriculture, in which fallow periods vary from four to twelve years depending on factors such as population density, land availability and soil fertility, suggesting that each household need access to large areas of land.\(^5\) Parts of Lofa may seem sparsely populated and land therefore abundant, but this is not necessarily the case. Land may at time be a scarce commodity, and we have to keep in mind that land also is the most essential element of rural life. Land is everything, as it is the belonging to the land that guarantees the rights of present as well as future generations, and whereas citizenship does not in itself guarantee the right to land, at the very least, it allows those who are citizens to enter the political economy of land and land rights questions.\(^6\) Thus, there is a direct link between contested citizenship and land rights issues.

The political affairs of Lofa have always been a world apart from Monrovia and Central Liberia, but nonetheless, the county was swiftly integrated into the Liberian civil war. This was partly due to the dynamic of the war, but also due to pre-existing tensions between the Loma – who consider themselves autochthonous to the area and the Mandingo who generally are seen as latecomers and immigrants.\(^7\) They are not considered proper Liberians,\(^8\) but as a people of foreign origin. The implication is that their very right to be considered proper Liberian citizens is often questioned when conflicts occur between people of Mandingo origin and those belonging to other ethnic groups. Thus, ‘the other indigenous ethnic groups put them in essentially the same "foreigners category" as the Settlers; that is, the Mandingo are viewed as "foreigners" from Guinea – not real Liberians’.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) In 1909 when most non-Americo-Liberians were granted full citizenship, the Mandingo continued to be classified as an ‘ethnic minority’. See A. Konneh, *Religion, Commerce and the Integration of the Mandingo in Liberia*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1996.


Consequently, the relationship between the two main ethnic groups in Lofa has been tense and hostile, particularly since the beginning of the civil war in 1989-90. The Mandingo accuse the Loma of supporting Taylor’s forces when they reached this part of Liberia in the autumn of 1990, whereas the Loma believe that the attacks in 1992 on their towns by the Mandingo militia, United Liberian Movement for Democracy (ULIMO), were unjustified and mainly carried out to take their land and steal their belongings. Similar views emerged when the Liberians for Democracy and Reconciliation (LURD) crossed over the border from Guinea in 1998-99; the Loma claim that LURD forces – also a Mandingo dominated movement – attacked their villages indiscriminately.

The same conflict pattern also came to the forefront during the elections in October and November 2005. In the first round of the presidential elections, the Mandingo voted for their candidate, the former warlord, Alhaji Kromah, and his All Liberian Coalition (ALCOP). In the Mandingo towns along the border to Guinea, Kromah received over 95 percent of the votes. However, as the Mandingo only constitutes a majority in a few places in Lofa, mainly along the border, Kromah only received 18 percent of the total votes in the county, taking him to second place in the first presidential round in Lofa. The main reason for the Mandingo support for Kromah is that they see the former warlord as a hero; a friend of the Mandingo nation who defended them not only against Taylor’s forces, but also against the Loma.

In the collective memory of the Mandingo, massacres like the one in Bakiedou in 1990 and the wartime destruction of their mosques are very much alive. Their dual sense of ethnic solidarity and uncertainty – given the fact that their overall position in the Liberian polity is contested – is an integral part of their daily discourse. The war, in the form of physical destruction as well as in terms of memory and identity is still present in Lofa. This is vividly illustrated by the death and burial in the spring of 2007.

10 Former members of Samuel Doe’s fragmented army and Liberian refugees established ULIMO in Sierra Leone. Most of the original ULIMO fighters were of Krahn and Mandingo origin. Under the leadership of Alhaji Kromah, a Mandingo and former Doe official, ULIMO first fought in southeastern Sierra Leone before it battled its way back to Liberia and Lofa County. See also L. Gberie, A Dirty War in West Africa: the RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005; and W. Reno, ‘Liberia: the LURDs of the new church’, in M. Boås and K.C. Dunn (eds) African Guerrillas: Raging Against the Machine, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2007, p. 69-80.


12 M. Boås and A. Hatløy, ‘Getting in, getting out’.
of Philip Kamara and Aliyu Sheriff, two leading LURD commanders. They died of natural causes, but in their death they were praised as true Mandingo warriors: the defenders of the Mandingo nation in Liberia. Receiving the highest honour the Mandingo of Liberia can give to its deceased sons, they were buried in the heart of their respective towns together with the founding fathers of the Mandingo nation. Philip Kamara's grave in Sakomedu is next to the grave of the legendary Chief Bongo and Aliyu Sheriff's grave next to those of the founding fathers of Bakiedou, the oldest Mandingo settlement in Lofa. Nobody else have been found worthy of being buried next to Chief Bongo, and according to Sheriff's father this was the first time in more than 80 years that a new grave had been made at the heart of Bakiedou.

The massive turnout at their burials, not only suggest that the LURD network is still intact, but more significantly, the position that these two former warlords have in the Mandingo imaginary. They were not putting a feared warlord into his shallow grave; they were conducting a funeral for a friend. During the night of their burials, tales of the plight of the Mandingo were retold once more as female relatives were weeping over the loss of a beloved son. In Monrovia or in the Loma communities in Lofa few felt anything but relief when the news broke that Sheriff, the man who had sent waves after waves of grenades into Monrovia during the LURD offensive in the summer of 2003, had died. Outside their community, both Kamara and Sheriff were seen as hard and dangerous men that one would cross at one's own peril. One man's friend is another man's enemy, and as elsewhere the reason for this is embedded in history and the tales of origin than cleavage societies.

**Lofa – tales of origin**

The origin of the Loma and Mandingo of Lofa is, if not lost in history, at least uncertain. What we do know is that this area of Liberia, far from being an isolated tribal setting, has been a dynamic theatre of continuous flux of heterogeneous people over the past four or five hundred centuries. It's a history of warfare, shifting alliances, and competition for control over trade routes. It has historically been a multicultural and politically diverse region that suggests that in objective terms the current ethnic groups are more a consequence of ‘state-building’ than historically coherent groups with a common distant past. Be that as it may, what is important for

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our purpose is not what is historically correct (if anybody actually can tell), but the meta-narratives based on which current groups in conflict imagine their collective memory.

According to Loma folklore, the place of origin of their founding ancestors is the savannah area in the Beyla region in Guinea. From this place, an invading enemy gradually pushed them into the Guinean-Liberian forest zone. This may have been the Mande invasion in the 16th century. Be that as it may, more noteworthy is the fact that most of the Loma founding narratives place the origin of the Loma in connection with the Konianké, the Guinean version of the Liberian Mandingo. According to this history, they were initially the same. The story centres on Fala Wubo – here presented as the original ancestor of the Loma. When faced with the overwhelming force of an invading army in the Beyla region, Fala Wubo and his sons trekked to the area between Macenta and Voinjama (the current border area between Liberia and Guinea) defeated the people who lived there and established a chiefdom and the predecessor of the Loma version of the Poro society.¹⁴

Fala Wubo also had a brother, named Seimavileh who refused to join the Poro society Fala Wubo established. According to the tale of the Loma, this man is the forefather of the Mandingo of Lofa. The Mandingo does tell a similar story, but in their version their ancestor's name is Foningama (or sometimes Feren Kamara). The Mandingo story is therefore both similar and slightly different to one told by the Loma. However, for both the Loma and the Mandingo, this tale of conflict between ancestors is also seen as the beginning of a long history of co-operation as well as conflict – a history firmly tied to the ‘stranger-father’ institution elaborated in the next section of the paper that is supposed to regulate local land politics between ‘first-comers’ and ‘late-comers’ in this part of Liberia.

Albeit the Mandingo generally accepts the Loma as the autochthonous firstcomers, this is not the end of the debate as their relationship is also affected by the coming of the modern state system. Liberian state control of Lofa was only effected a

¹⁴ The Poro society is the secret society of the men. It has political, religious and educational responsibilities, and all young men in a community will be initiated into it. As a social organisation it is hierarchically organised and only those initiated into the top circles wield much influence. As such, its political power is best understood as control through ritual hierarchies that re-enforce the ability of high-ranking individuals and lineages to command labour and resources. See also K. Little, ‘The political functions of the Poro: part 1’, Africa, vol. 35, 1965, p. 349-365; K. Little, ‘The political functions of the Poro, part 2’, Africa, vol. 36, 1966, p. 62-72; and M.H. Moran, Liberia: the Violence of Democracy, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
long time after the Mandingo moved into this area. It was only as late as 1911, that the Liberian army was sent to Lofa to establish state control, and it was first in the 1920s that the area was considered safe for travel. The issue of demarcating the border between Liberia and the French colony of Guinea was not settled until 1928. In the Mandingo narrative of the making of the Liberian state, it is their legendary Chief Bongo who settles the border issue, by deciding that his people should belong to Liberia and not to French Guinea. In this way, the Mandingo connect their claim to Liberian citizenship and autochthony to the very construction of the Liberian state, arguing that if it had not been for their powerful chief, this part of Lofa would have been ruled from Conakry. This story was basically ignored at that time and it is still contested: most Loma refuse to believe that Chief Bongo was as powerful as the Mandingo claims. However, Bongo was most likely a powerful chief and warrior, and as French colonial control of the Region Forestière in Guinea was weak, his actions and decisions may have had an impact on these events. However, this did not improve the position of the Mandingo. It was not until the beginning of the 1940s that they were granted full citizenship in Liberia, mainly in order to prove the effectiveness of the Liberian state's control of the border area.15

Autochthonous ‘stranger-father’ relations16

The Loma and the Mandingo, may or may not, share a mutual origin, but this is only partly useful for understanding their current ethnogenesis. They have lived together for a considerable amount of time, but their relationship is also conflictual and their co-existence segmented. When the Loma and the Mandingo inhabit the same town or village, they almost always live in distinct quarters of the town. In a majority Loma town with a Mandingo minority population, there will be a separate Mandingo section of the town, which is clearly demarcated from the rest of it. The Mandingo section will have a Mandingo chief who rules his section, but who in town affairs will be subordinate to the Loma chief. This is, however, not unique to the relationship

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16 Please note that the institution of ‘stranger-father’ relations is not unique to Lofa, but a common institution in most forest societies in the Mano River Basin and in Côte d'Ivoire. It goes under many names and some parts may also be different, but in essence it is the same.
between the Loma and the Mandingo. What it shows is how immensely hierarchical these societies are.\footnote{See also W. Murphy, ‘Secret knowledge as property and power in Kpelle society: elder versus youth’, \textit{Africa}, vol. 50, 1980, p. 193-207.}

Even in homogenous Loma and Mandingo villages, there are always some lineages that are more autochthonous than others. There is always a narrative about a forefather, the ancestor; the man and the family who originally established the village. And those that can trace their belonging back to this forefather will have certain inalienable rights that others do not necessarily have. This will be the ruling lineage. In the case of the original Mandingo villages in Lofa, in Voinjama District along the Guinea border (such as Bakiedou, Sakomedu and Tusso), the ruling lineages are those that can trace their belonging back to the village founding fathers buried in the heart (e.g. the middle) of the town. This hierarchical stratification of rights is further extended in villages also harbouring residents from other ethnic groups such as the mixed towns in Lofa with a Mandingo minority in majority Loma.

It is precisely at this point that the institution of ‘stranger-father’ relations enters into the equation. When the Mandingo first arrived in Lofa it was most often as individual traders conducting long-distance commerce between the forest areas of Liberia and the savannah regions further inland. Bringing with them both much needed goods as well as important skills such as blacksmithing. In many ways, the first Mandingo settlers must have had access to larger economic resources that the original Loma inhabitants. However, in order to settle permanently and gain access to land, the Mandingo had to enter into subordinate alliances through the ‘stranger-father’ institution. In basic terms this means that a ‘stranger’ who seek settlement in a village or community needs to be adopted by an autochthonous ‘father’: the ‘stranger’ must have a ‘father’ – a figure of authority that takes upon himself the responsibility to make certain that the ‘stranger’ behaves in accordance with the rules and regulations of the community.

For example, when a Mandingo first moved into Loma towns, he also entered into a subordinate position with a ‘stranger-father’; locking him and his lineage forever into a subordinate political position with regard to decisions about land and land use. The product of this interaction was relatively fixed notions of political alignment in local everyday politics, creating a hierarchical political system that was supposed to regulate titles to land.
However, with the making of the Liberian state land tenure became a complex cocktail of socially and politically embedded rights that were negotiated in dynamic relationships between and among different groups of people and the Liberian state. What was established in Liberia (and still exists) was a dual land tenure system, where the government recognised both deeded ownership as well as customary users' rights. All undeeded land is also public land, including land held under the customary system. However, both individuals as well as groups of people that live under customary law can apply to have their land surveyed and protected by a deed through the Government Land Commissioner that operates in each county.

In practice, what this means is that the right to land is closely connected to membership in specific groups, be it the nuclear or extended family, the larger decent group, the ethnic group and their various relationships to modern property regimes.

Land rights are therefore often contested, always negotiable, and they change over time. The only thing that is constant is that membership to a group and recognised ‘citizenship’ to a geographical area is essential in these processes. Land rights issues are therefore particularly vulnerable to the politics of identity and belonging, and one important asset in such situations is the ability to stake your claim to land from the position of being autochthonous, e.g. as the ‘son of the soil’, whereas your counterpart is presented as a ‘newcomer’, an ‘immigrant’ or ‘stranger’. In such cases, claiming citizenship to the community, area or nation is of primary importance because, although it does not entitle you to resources, it at least entitles you to enter the struggle for them.18

In Lofa, as in most other places in Liberia, everybody who is allowed to stay in a village is allocated some land for food crop production (albeit the size of the plots and their number may vary a lot), but only those defined as autochthonous as ‘sons of the soil’ where originally allowed to cultivate so-called life crops (e.g. tree crops such as rubber, cocoa, coffee, banana etc.) as one by cultivating tree crops also embed oneself in the soil and make a permanent connection to it. In order to be considered autochthonous, being the firstcomer is a necessary, but not sufficient condition: one must also transform the landscape permanently from wilderness to a field of one's livelihood. This can only be achieved by planting the life-crops.

18 M. Mamdani, ‘African states, citizenship and war’
Part of the ‘bad blood’ between the Loma and the Mandingo in Lofa, which Taylor's forces so cunningly used to their advantage during the war, was that some Mandingo either had taken or been given the right to cultivate life crops through their position as providers of rural credit in towns where they constitute a minority. Please note that even if the Mandingo where politically marginalised through the ‘stranger-father’ institution, they represented economic muscle through their access to Mandingo trade networks.

The contested practice of marriage and marriage alliances also revolve around similar issues. Formally the Mandingo are politically subordinate, but as already suggested formal subordination can easily be offset by economic might. Alliance by marriage is an important aspect of local land politics in Lofa, and the Mandingo have undoubtedly used their economic position to build alliances by marrying Loma women from land-ruling lineages. However, as they also seek to protect their group identity (for trading as well as religious purposes), they effective discourage, if not openly refuse, their daughters to marry into Loma lineages. The outcome is that they are perceived as seeking the permanent position of ‘wife-receivers’ in the system of asymmetric marriage alliances that dominates in Lofa County. These tensions are not a creation of the war. Rather a controversial issue deeply embedded in history, but made much worse by the war and the massive levels of displacement that followed in its footsteps.

The consequence was that in the immediate pre-war situation in Lofa, part of the local Loma discourse on the Mandingo centred on how the latter had upset the balance, disturbed certain rights seen as inalienable. Indeed, in one community nearby Voinjama, a group of Mandingo was accused of having used unpaid credit to force through an arrangement that implied that they established a farm in a ‘forbidden forest’ reserved for the Sande (the female variant of the male Poro). Thus, when the war came to Lofa, parts of the autochthonous population used it to reclaim what they believed was their natural rights. Viewed in this manner; the warlords, the grand plans, the elites, and the international connections become less important, and what we are left with is the intertwining of a series of local conflicts into a larger pattern of warfare as local communities – dazzled and confused by these very same events –

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tried to protect as well as reclaim what they believed belonged to them. The outcome is not a pretty picture, and it also creates a pattern of war that is not easily broken. This was the context that propelled men like Philip Kamara and Aliyu Sheriff into the positions that they come to occupy during the war.

**Post-war challenges**

As we already have seen, in the 2005 presidential elections, the Mandingo voted for their candidate, the former warlord, Alhaji Kromah and his ALCOP. The key point is that the Mandingo does not see Kromah and his commanders such as Kamara and Sheriff as criminal warlords, but as those who defended them, not only against Taylor's forces, but also against his allies among the Loma.20 Kromah is one of their own, a true friend and a ‘son of the soil’, whereas this segment of the Liberian electorate, see Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as a former ally of Taylor. In the beginning of the war, Johnson-Sirleaf supported Taylor for a short while, and as the Mandingo understand their recent history she therefore also share some blame for their suffering. In the Mandingo meta-narrative, the massacres at Bakiedou and other places and the burning of their mosques and villages are still very much alive.21 Their sense of ethnic solidarity, based on mutual uncertainty as their position in Liberia is questioned and contested may yet once more turn parts of Liberia into conflict zones.

The return process also complicated the situation. As we see from Figure 1, the Mandingo were the first to return after the war, more than 70 percent went back to Lofa in 2004, whereas only 34 percent of the Loma and only 14 percent of the Kpelle returned that year.

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20 As a consequence of the nature of the war in Lofa, the Loma also formed their own militia, Lofa Defence Force. It was established in 1993-94 with the support of the Poro society. Its political leader was Francois Massaquoi. See also S. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*.

21 A. Konneh, *Religion, Commerce and Integration*, op. cit., p. 22, points to oral sources that tell stories about the burning of Mandingo mosques as early as the 1840s. This date may in itself not be very trustworthy, but at least these narratives shows us how deeply embedded in the collective historical memory this conflict is.
The reason for this is very simple. Lofa County and in particularly Voinjama District, was controlled by LURD when the war ended. LURD was by and large a Mandingo insurgency, thus making people belonging to this group the majority among the early returnees. These settled on their original land, for instance in the old Mandingo towns along the Guinean border (i.e. Bakiedou, Sakomedu and Tusso), but also in houses and on land that once, sometimes for nearly 15 years ago, belonged to the Loma. This happened in some of the mixed villages (i.e. Kugbemai and Vonema) where the Mandingo constituted a minority population before the war started, but also in Voinjama town itself. The early return of the Mandingo clearly complicated the post-war situation in Lofa, and many of these land rights conflicts still remains unsolved. However, its repercussions has been less violent than in the Ganta area in Nimba County. The main reason for this is the population pattern. Lofa is divided into an eastern and a western part by the highway from Gbargna to Voinjama that also passes through Zorzor. The Mandingo predominantly lives on the eastern side of Voinjama District, while the towns on the northwestern side by and large are Loma settlements. The main exceptions are the mixed towns of Kugbemai and Vonema that lie directly north of Voinjama City. The same is the case for a few towns in Zorzor District that lies close to the before-mentioned highway.

In the post-war period, this population pattern has been a blessing for Lofa. The fact that the two main groups do not live too close to each other may have spared Lofa from the high tension that characterise the situation between the Mandingo and

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22 Figure 1 is based on data from M. Bøås and A. Hatløy, After the Storm: Economic Activities Among Returning Youths – the Case of Voinjama, Oslo, Fafo (Fafo-report 523), 2006.
the Gio and Mano in Ganta. The danger, however, is if the situation in Ganta should escalate out of control. This may cause so much concern among the Mandingo in Lofa that they start to interpret the Ganta situation as a direct threat to their right to be regarded as Liberian citizens. This could constitute the vantage point of a new Mandingo insurgency.

Just like Voinjama, Ganta is an important border town, a centre for trade and commerce with Guinea. Ganta was also occupied by LURD, but only briefly. As LURD continued towards Gbargna and Monrovia, the town was recaptured by pro-Taylor militias (consisting mainly of Gio and Mano youths). The first to return were therefore Gio and Mano who took advantage of the absence of the Mandingo to occupy not only their land, but also taking control of the trade between Guinea, Ganta and Monrovia. What is happening in Ganta is therefore not only a land rights conflict, but also an attempt by Gio and Mano groups to break what they perceive as a Mandingo trade monopoly. These new gains are protected by youth militias whose objective and sole purpose is to keep the Mandingo away from their property and ‘convince’ them that they should remain in Guinea.

However, also these events are deeply embedded in history. In Lofa, the Loma still tell tales about the keele-keele koi, the ‘rolling war’, which for them is a story of Mandingo intrusion and conquest of Loma territory. An invasion not linked to the spread of Islam as some evangelical churches argue today, but to the control of the trade routes linking the coastal areas with the interior cutting across Lofa in a North-South direction.

These trade routes are older than Liberia and the coming of the Americo-Liberians, but the foundation of Monrovia in 1820 certainly added to their importance and therefore also the urge to control them. This was the backbone of the establishment of an economic alliance between the Mandingo and the Liberian state first represented by Americo-Liberian rule and later by Samuel Doe's regime. As a

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23 The distance between Ganta and the Mandingo towns in Lofa is substantial, but people are remarkably well informed about these events through oral sources. Both the Mandingo in Ganta and the one's in Lofa trade with Guinea and through their excursions in the Region Forestière not only goods, but also news are exchanged through their trade networks. It is quite fascinating to sit in an isolated Mandingo town such as Tusso and listen to people's informed opinions and discussions about the situation in Ganta.

24 For further information concerning the historical foundation of Mandingo dominance in trade in Ganta see A. Konneh, *Religion, Commerce and Integration*. 
minority group this must have increased the sense of security among the Mandingo, but it also made them a likely target if a revolt against state power should take place.

This is precisely what happened in 1990. Taylor's war and rule brought an end to this alliance and Gio and Mano groups in Ganta are struggling to keep it this way. The return of the Mandingo is unwanted because they fear that this will once more give the Mandingo control over these trading routes. As such, the problem in Ganta is a local one, without any direct connection to the situation in Lofa. However, if it gets out of hand, the combined power of Mandingo solidarity and uncertainty may lead the people of Mandingo towns in Lofa (e.g. Bakiedou, Sakomedu, Tusso and others) who stood in the frontline of the ULIMO/LURD struggle to once more question their position in Liberia, and rearm. If this happens yet another chapter may have to be written in the history of the Liberian civil war.

This is further exacerbated by the fact that renewed tension in these hinterland parts of Liberia easily could get tangled up with similar issues in Guinea's Region Forestiér as well as the evolving crisis of Conte's regime. Some former LURD fighters have already drifted back into Guinea. Their exact number is unknown, but among this group there are people with a well-developed sense of history and purpose. They know very well that just as Samory Touré's empire, LURD also emerged from the forest-savannah frontier in Macenta Prefecture in the Region Forestier. Part of their meta-narrative is not only Mandingo insecurity in Liberia, but also the similar plight of their brethren, the Konianké in Guinea, and how the reconstitution of the ‘glorious’ Mandingo empire could redeem them from these insecurities.

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25 Former LURD fighters have already been (re)mobilised to protect Conte's rule. In crushing the violent street demonstrations in Conakry in January and February 2007, the security forces where assisted by ex-LURD combatants controlled by Aysha Conneh, the former wife of the ex-LURD leader Sekou Conneh.

26 After Samory Touré's defeat in 1898, bands of these former warriors, known as sofa from the Mandingo word for horse (as many of these were cavalrymen), roamed the Region Forestiér and further into Kpelle territories in what is currently Bong County in Liberia. These young men spread death and destruction, but they also promoted trade and economic opportunities that led other people of Mandingo origin to follow in their footsteps. See Y. Person, ‘Les ancetres de Samori’, Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines, vol. 4, 1963, p. 123-156; and A. Konneh, Religion, Commerce and Integration.
A funeral for a friend – some concluding comments

Even if, the word autochthony is not part of the Liberian discourse, the same debate that we find in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and D.R. Congo is also an integral aspect of daily life and politics in Liberia. This should be obvious once we recognise that autochthony is just a word for a certain way of framing political debates. We should then see striking similarities: commonalities that best can be described as ‘tales of origin as political cleavage’. In this case, competing tales of origin that challenge and oppose ‘first-comer/late-comer’ categories. The Mandingo story of Chief Bongo clearly establishes a counter-narrative to Loma claim to the status of autochthonous, and suggests that the struggle between ‘first-comer’ and ‘late-comers’ was substantially affected and even altered by the making of the modern state system in this part of Africa. This conflict is not new, it has an long and enduring history that is best grasped along the line of la longue durée. However, it is also important to understand how this history takes new turns as it is influence by other events such as the imposition of the modern state system, and the latter economic alliance between the Mandingo and successive series of Liberian government.

These events altered some of the basis of the relationship, but the basics also remained strikingly similar. At the heart of the matter is ‘citizenship’ and thereby also the right to land. The belonging to the land is in essence what guarantees the rights of present generations as well as future generations. In a places such as Lofa protection of this right is most effectively sought in tales of origin. Story-telling about a collective ‘we’. A unit - the nuclear family, the lineage, the community, the ethnic group or several ethnic groups – facing a perceived stranger, an other, an intruder, an enemy: somebody threatening certain rights seen as a heritage belonging to the ‘sons of the soil’. In this kind of social drama, people as Philip Kamara and Aliyu Sheriff will be given a ‘funeral for a friend’ when they are put to rest by their kin. In what other people saw as criminal warlords, the Mandingo of Bakiedou and Sekomedu read the current manifestation of the ‘glorious’ warrior tradition of the Mandingo, where the soldier is both a keeper of the community and an expander of trade and other economic opportunities.