

ARTICLE

“We Know Who is Eating the Ebola Money!”: Corruption, the State, and the Ebola Response

Susan Shepler, *American University*

ABSTRACT

Sierra Leonean production of knowledge about Ebola was, in large part, production of knowledge about “who ate the Ebola money.” This paper traces people’s responses to the Ebola crisis through a number of different moments, at each point reflecting on how their concerns about how Ebola money was being spent illuminate their expectations of their state. It argues that the Ebola crisis reveals people’s contradictory relationships to their own states, wherein they simultaneously mistrust their politicians and look to their politicians in a moment of crisis. The paper also investigates Sierra Leone’s relationship to the international community, concluding that the state’s weakness is produced, in part, by its place in the international system. The research is based on three field visits to Sierra Leone and Liberia in April 2014, July 2014, and January 2015 and draws on interviews and focus groups in urban and rural settings. [Keywords: Sierra Leone, Ebola, weak states, corruption, money, state informality].

The goal of this paper is not to understand Ebola *per se*, but to acknowledge that the Ebola crisis reveals certain underlying power relations and creates a special ethnographic window on the structural fault lines in the society and the nation-state. Indeed, one UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) staffer told me that the Ebola crisis served as a kind of body scan that revealed "where the tumors are located." I have chosen to think through what is revealed by the Ebola crisis by focusing on money as one site among many possible sites for engagement. How money came into the country to address the Ebola crisis reveals facts about international priorities of course, but I am interested in what Ebola money—and Sierra Leoneans' beliefs about Ebola money—reveals about their relationship to the state, and about governance at multiple levels and scales (Bedford 2014). It may seem a little perverse to be focused on money when so many lives are on the line, but so much in the Ebola response turned on funding flows. Is food supply getting to the quarantined homes? Are the burial teams and swabbers being paid? Money, its flows and blockages, was a huge part of the story of the Ebola response and following that money was a key way that Sierra Leoneans created knowledge about Ebola and its impact in their country.

Probably the most common framework for news reporting about Ebola money is corruption. When the international and national media report on Ebola money in the region, their focus is quite often on how the money went astray, or on how international donors are required to put their own systems in place because of the lack of trustworthy (that is, uncorrupted) local systems. But this paper is not just a story that reinforces taken-for-granted assumptions about corruption. It is a story of how Sierra Leoneans interact with their state and in so doing construct their state and its sovereignty. In the sections to follow I will review some theories of state fragility, informality, and corruption. I will then trace people's responses to the Ebola crisis through a number of different moments, at each point reflecting on how their concerns about how the Ebola money was being spent illuminate their expectations of their state. I will argue that the Ebola crisis reveals people's contradictory relationships to their own states, wherein they simultaneously mistrust their politicians *and* look to their politicians for more, in the process reforging a unique social contract.¹ Finally, I will turn to Sierra Leone's relationship to the international community, and how the Ebola money flowed at that level, concluding that the state's "weakness" is produced, in part, by its place in an international system.

Critical Theories of Corruption and State Weakness

In the media and popular perception, corruption is often used to explain, in part, why Ebola was able to take hold and spread in the region (DePinto 2016, Pieterse and Lodge 2015). In addition to the slow response by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Kamradt-Scott 2016), blame is cast on the Guinean, Sierra Leonean, and Liberian Ministries of Health for downplaying the threat at the beginning of the outbreak—giving the virus a foothold—rather than honestly admitting the danger. In addition, the popular conception is that the weak or corrupt health systems were unable to deal with the crisis and so crumbled at the first serious challenge. This has certainly been a common way of thinking about the role of the three “weak states” as factors contributing to the spread of the disease and it is now common to posit state weakness or corruption as a contributing factor to the spread of Ebola.² This approach aligns with the assumptions of mainstream development economists and political scientists that African states are weak or corrupt and need to be helped to move towards the Western political ideal. To the governance and development experts of the international community, weak states are understood as both corrupt and lacking formality, without a clear separation between “private” and “public” realms as compared to the ideal Western state. It is important to contest this view, first through the simple observation that corruption is not unique to Africa, and is indeed omnipresent, including in Western contexts.³ And yet the international community’s general approach is to “other” African states and set up a false dichotomy between ideal Western states and their pale imitations in the global south.

While we need to guard against a powerful orthodoxy that sees Africa as the negative pole of a development dichotomy, it would also be a mistake to claim that all states are the same.⁴ Anthropological approaches to the state in Africa allow us to reject both developmentalism and universalism by focusing on specific political cultures. In contrast to the popular discourses of west African state weakness and corruption is a more anthropological body of literature,⁵ detailing complex African state formations influenced by pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial political practices. Among these are classic works like Bayart (1993) on “the politics of the belly” and *Africa Works* by Chabal and Daloz (1999), that demands African states be understood on their own terms rather than as always falling short of an ideal.⁶ That is, it is more important and interesting to describe how African states *actually function*, than to continuously talk about what they

are not. On corruption in particular, Blundo and de Sardan (2006:4–6) focus on the “generalized informal functioning” of the state, and conclude that, “the study of corruption enables us to penetrate to the actual heart of modern African states, their administrations and their public services, and a phenomenon that is apparently peripheral in nature provides the key to the very centre of things.” They summarize the pioneering work of William Reno (1995) on corruption and the state in Sierra Leone, saying, “the state is both ‘shadow’ and real: it does not constitute a pale copy or distortion of the Weberian state, but represents something radically different” (2006:22). Steven Pierce (2016), though mainly concerned with Nigeria, provides an excellent guide to this approach to studying corruption, reworking somewhat Olivier de Sardan’s (1999) notion of “corruption complex” to designate “the totality of phenomena encompassed by the term corruption: practices that may be termed ‘corrupt,’ the three registers in which corrupt practices subsist (material, discursive, and legal), *and* the various culturally embedded frames of reference through which this complex of practice and naming can be understood” (2016:8).⁷ He concludes that anthropological approaches effectively counter the popular corruption dichotomy, arguing that, “the adoption of a historical, nonteleological view ... demystifies ideas about the state and potentially deromanticizes Western state formation” (2016:23).

The goal of this article is not to pathologize African states or claim that African corruption was responsible for Ebola. Similarly, the goal is not to say whether the state was effective or ineffective in the face of Ebola. Instead, I seek to examine local understandings of sovereignty, in part by focusing on vernacular representations of state weakness and corruption in the face of Ebola.

Although Ebola primarily affected the three Mano River states, here I will mainly be focusing on the two post-war Anglophone countries, and especially Sierra Leone where I have had a decades-long ethnographic engagement. I had a rich sense of *déjà vu* when seeing schools of white NGO Land Rovers circling outside the National Ebola Response Centre (NERC) headquarters in Freetown, housed in the compound of the former Special Court for Sierra Leone. This *déjà vu* must have been shared by Sierra Leoneans who also experienced the post-war international funding boom. The post-war Sierra Leonean and Liberian states have very particular relationships to the international community because of the massive post-conflict interventions both received.⁸ This has affected ordinary

citizens' understandings and expectations about how donor money works. More than most people on the planet, Sierra Leoneans and Liberians are well acquainted with the networks of intergovernmental organizations, international NGOs, and their national and local governments and local NGO "partners"; and have some well-established views about how donor money works or does not work in their communities. Indeed, it is precisely the past decade of post-war international engagement that created the expectation among Sierra Leoneans and Liberians that government and NGO personnel were enriching themselves from international health related funds, or what I will call "Ebola money." This history has created both trust and mistrust, and has engendered very specific ideas about the nature and practice of African sovereignty.⁹ It is these very relations and expectations that Ebola revealed and tested.

An Ethnography of Ebola Response

As an ethnographer, I felt lucky to be in Sierra Leone and Liberia at three different points during the crisis. Conducting interviews and focus group discussions for an evaluation of a grassroots reconciliation NGO, I traveled across six Sierra Leonean districts in April 2014. At that time, Ebola was present in Guinea but had not yet spread to neighboring countries. I had heard about it on the BBC, but found most Sierra Leoneans I spoke with unaware or unconcerned about the threat at that time. In July and August 2014, I was in Freetown and Kambia in Sierra Leone and then in Monrovia and Gbarnga in Liberia. I was conducting interviews for yet another project, but just a few months later found people starting to take Ebola seriously. In fact, I had to cut my interview schedule short due to rapid changes on the ground related to Ebola, and was forced to stay in Freetown for a few weeks until my flight to the US. During that time, like many others, I spent most of my time at home, avoiding unnecessary public contact. However, I listened to the radio and talked with neighbors and family. Furthermore, we still needed to go out to the market to buy things to survive so some of my "data" from that time is made up of conversations at the bank or the bar. After leaving the region in August 2014, I stayed in touch through phone calls, e-mail, Facebook, and WhatsApp (see Benton, this issue). I followed the news exhaustively, and tried to figure out how I might be of use. In January 2015, together with Dr. Thespina Yamanis, a public health expert and colleague at my home university, I traveled to

Freetown for ten days. We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews about the Ebola response with 16 women and 14 men aged 18–56 years in public spaces in Freetown and Bo. Participants spoke Krio, the national *lingua franca*, and reported no recent contact with an Ebola-infected person. We also conducted interviews with people working in the response as well as heads of NGOs who were seeking to change their operational focus to Ebola work. We visited areas that were quarantined and followed a tracing team for a day.

Moments

My on-the-ground experiences at those three moments showed me that circumstances changed very quickly over the months of the Ebola crisis. The system put in place to respond to Ebola was built from scratch and was changing throughout in response to the spread of the disease and to other “lessons learned” about best practices. People’s reactions to Ebola were changing throughout as well, as they slowly came to believe it was a real threat. Therefore, to forward my goal of looking at the Ebola crisis with respect to money and the state, I will focus on a number of different moments, roughly corresponding to my periods “in the field.”

1. Early Days

In my very earliest interactions with Sierra Leoneans concerning Ebola, there was a great deal of doubt about whether it even existed. After all, they had mostly never heard about the disease before. Some of the earliest prevention messages were to avoid bush meat. While in a village conducting interviews, a hunter came to us to sell some freshly killed deer. I hesitated, but was told, “just rub enough pepper on it and you’ll be fine.” Money was a big part of the doubt from the very beginning. Many people assured me that Ebola was made up as a way for politicians and their allies to enrich themselves. I believe their certainty that elites would make up a story to fool international donors was a direct result of their experience during the post-war years. In Liberia I heard very specific stories about doctors infecting people in order to increase the number of cases they could report, as well as specific numbers of dollars the Ministry of Health official had already eaten. I argued in a blog post at the time that this disbelief was not based on ignorance, but rather on long experience of a government that traded on the people’s suffering to enrich themselves (Shepler 2014).

The rumors were plentiful and targeted different groups for blame.¹⁰ Some thought Ebola was a US bio-weapons program gone awry; others thought it was started by pharmaceutical companies in order to test new vaccines. There were also rumors with a spiritual dimension. Some said Ebola was God's punishment, and only praying and washing with salt water could protect the faithful. Some said Ebola was a new kind of witchcraft, and that a particular pocket of fatalities in Port Loko District in Sierra Leone was caused by the crash of a "witch plane." But you will notice that in all of these rumors, the putative motivation is greed, whether for worldly or other-worldly power or—most relevant to my argument here—money.¹¹

The fight against Ebola was politicized from the beginning. One of the early rumors in Sierra Leone was that, because of the upcoming national census, the ruling party had put Ebola in the heart of the opposition stronghold in order to reduce their population numbers. And indeed, the earliest government response to Ebola was somehow politicized. The government gave each Member of Parliament and each Paramount Chief a lump sum of money (around \$15,000 each) to "sensitize" their constituencies. In some cases buckets and soap were purchased, but in other cases the Ebola money was "eaten." This reinforced people's belief that "Ebola get moni" or that there was money to be made around Ebola. These stories were part of the first local media coverage of misused Ebola money. Facebook and WhatsApp messages shared through cell phones also became important ways by which stories of corruption spread. One widely shared image showed an ambulance driver allegedly siphoning gas from his assigned ambulance.

Those early days also made clear the informality of the state and its response. One day in August, I visited the Youyi Building in Freetown, the home of many important government ministries, including the Ministry of Health. I was accompanying a friend of mine, the director of an association of NGOs, who was trying to resolve an issue with the government's quarantine of Kenema district. One of her member NGOs ran a poultry farm just outside the city cordon, and needed permission to cross in order to feed a building-full of hungry chickens. If he could not get there, all the investment would be lost. At the time people were worried about food shortages in the face of Ebola lockdowns, so he was also arguing for the necessity of keeping up food production. Our visit around the building was like many other visits I have made there, frustratingly inefficient to an outsider, made up of long greetings and personal connections. We got

to the Ministry of Health section, but were told the Minister was in a very important meeting off site (hardly surprising at the time.) We asked about how we might go about getting a pass, and no one knew the answer. The system was brand new. Some of the secretaries complained to my friend that even with Ebola, the building was "dry." That is, they were expecting some of the Ebola money to trickle down to them, but it seemed to be going elsewhere. And they were right. Not long after this point, the Ministry of Health was removed from the task of coordinating and a military man was put in charge of the national Ebola response with headquarters elsewhere. Someone suggested that since our issue involved chickens, perhaps we could try at the Ministry of Agriculture. There, we were directed to a sub-minister for animal husbandry. Again, official rules for the cordon did not seem to be in evidence, so the informality of the state is perhaps not surprising in this moment. The resolution of the problem finally involved finding someone in the office who knew the army man running the checkpoint in Kenema. He had the army man's personal mobile phone number and was able to call and make the special request. In order to explain his connection, he said, "Remember me from that wedding. I was the uncle of the bride." I laughed to my friend how typical it seemed to me that this was how the Ebola quarantine was run, and she replied, "Well, *ya na Salone*" ("Well, this is Sierra Leone."). Afterwards, she was rightfully proud of her work resolving the issue for her member.

At this stage in the outbreak, the state ran in its usual manner. It was generally informal networks that helped solve problems and allowed things to run. Except for a few transparency campaigners, I believe most Sierra Leoneans understand that mode of operation as *the* mode of governance in the country. And though there is some frustration with corruption, especially when funds do not circulate properly, there is also a certain expectation that informality is how things are done. In the case of Ebola, that meant that some people would have to eat some of the Ebola money in order for the system to function.

2. At Peak—*"E don pasmak"* ("Now it's too much")

The Ebola crisis is an important juncture in people's relationship to their state and to their expectations of good governance. After the initial doubts about whether Ebola was real, at a certain point it became clear that people were dying in large numbers, and that their government was not up to the task of addressing Ebola on its own. After people realized the danger,

there was an interesting shift to a simultaneous distrust of the state and desire for the state to do more.

At the height of the crisis, resources were the primary need. People needed simple things like soap. They needed beds. They realized they needed international intervention. In order to keep the system working there was a need for hazard pay for health workers and burial teams. As more and more international money flooded in, there was an appreciation of the engagement of the “international community” and a debate about the proper role for national government.¹² Again, this was conditioned by the experience of the post-war.

During our visit in January 2015, we were allowed to follow a tracing team in its work. The (Tracing teams were meant to track every contact of an Ebola positive patient, put those contacts in quarantine, and conduct follow up visits over a twenty-one day period.) We understood that the system was working much better than it had just a few months earlier, but we were still collecting examples of frustrating and potentially lethal system failures. We arrived at a house where the body of a father had been lying in a small room with three children for over 24 hours. The neighbors rushed up to us with great concern as we arrived. They could not get close enough to help, but someone had to come and take away the body and someone had to do something for the children! We heard that the burial team would not come because they were on strike, having not been paid their hazard pay for months. The people who were supposed to come and take the children could not come because their vehicle was broken down. To me, this heartbreaking scene was also a very clear demonstration to the participants of the impact of broken funding flows. People in that neighborhood saw and felt the impact of money, and “corrupt” money flows, right in the middle of the outbreak. Of course they must have been used to things not functioning as they would have hoped, but this moment felt different. There was so much fear around Ebola: if you did the wrong thing you and your loved ones could die. People wanted someone to help and someone to tell them what to do. Despite their mistrust of their government usually, in a moment of crisis they somehow still looked to their government for answers. Despite doubts, in crisis, the state somehow came back in. This moment reveals the kind of love-hate relationship with the government that is citizenship in Sierra Leone.

People saw some evidence of Ebola money around town—freshly painted signboards and new hand washing stations, white land rovers—but

were never sure if it was really being spent correctly. We interviewed a group of women selling fruit on a main road of Freetown.¹³ We did not ask specifically about money, but one of them told us:

Response: Some people are using this Ebola to make money. Yes! Let us not forget that the higher the rate (of Ebola cases) the more income is coming into the country. It is very bad. Some deaths are not Ebola related but they are all counted as Ebola deaths to inflate the count in order to get funding. Some people don't want Ebola to go away because they don't want to lose their jobs as many workers are paid like Le200,000 per week. They inflate the number of cases so that the United Nations keep pouring money into the country but we don't see how the money is utilized, nothing, not even sanitizers or buckets.

Question: Who squanders the money?

Response: We don't know. We hear that thousands of dollars are sent to the country to fight Ebola but we don't see this money and don't know how the money is used. Those responsible are eating the money. Many nations are already here to help, for example, the Cubans, the British, Nigerians, and many others but the sickness has not been brought under control. The government of the day is responsible and they are accountable for all the funds that come into the country. It is the government that "eats" the Ebola money. The money doesn't come to me or to any ministry directly. All monies are sent directly to government and they are responsible for disbursing money but we don't see how this is done.

Question: But do you notice any increase in the number of ambulances?

Response: Yes, we see a lot of them.

Question: Were there many ambulances before this time? Maybe government used part of the money to get ambulances?

Response: At the beginning there was like only one ambulance available. But now we see a lot of ambulances that have been donated to government. Government makes a show of all ambulances donated to them but they don't show us any ambulance they have bought.

So, although these women saw some evidence of how the government was spending the money, there was doubt about whether it was being spent properly. Notice also that even though they had very little trust in

their government, they still looked to their government to control how international money would be spent.

In addition to the large-scale questions, we heard of a lot of small-scale corruption in the system. The contact tracer we followed one day told us that he had heard that for \$100 one could have the death certificate changed to say one's loved one died of something other than Ebola. He was upset at how this small-scale corruption stood in the way of controlling the spread of the disease, but he also seemed at a loss how to stop such corruption as long as Sierra Leoneans were in charge of the various parts of the system.

A pastor in the Sierra Leonean town Bo reported similar small-scale corruption with burial teams playing on people's fears in order to collect money:

“[[I]f the person dies, when the Ebola team arrives, if you don't have money, they will say it is an Ebola case. And if they say they will do the swab test, it might take four days while the corpse will still be in the compound. They will not take the corpse to the mortuary or any other area ... The fear to exist in the compound where that patient was living was enormous.”

Even during the height of the outbreak, the belief that there was corruption in the system led to doubts. A building contractor in Bo said,

“Even the test that they do I am not convinced that they follow the instructions. They do it in order to increase the number of Ebola patients but I do not really believe in the tests. It is a way of getting more money coming in. They can say Bo today has five cases of infected persons. But when you go out you will see no case at all. Where there is Ebola, you will see people [curious civilians] converging to see the infected persons. Where are they coming from? No one knows. ... They increase the number of infected cases so that funding can keep on coming into the country.”

In the West, when we think of the impact of corruption on fight against Ebola, we think about supplies gone missing and hospitals not built. But Sierra Leoneans expected corruption, and that expectation led them to

doubt a great deal about the response, yet at the same time yearn for the state in times of extreme duress and loss.

3. Red Pump—Where Was the Money Going?

There was also uncertainty about who was being given money to do what, and doubts about whether the state could handle the size of the response. Although there were signs and radio programs, people told us that they didn't see agents of the state involved. So in the absence of direct state interventions, volunteers set up checkpoints in their own communities. They would take people's temperatures and ask them to wash their hands, but they often grumbled that they had not had any support from their member of parliament.

For example, I interviewed a woman who was staffing a community-organized checkpoint in Freetown. She told me about how people sometimes refused to be stopped because they assumed the volunteers at the checkpoint were "eating Ebola money":

Shepler: ...Is there ever any tension here at the checkpoint? Like, someone says they don't want to stop?

Woman: (laughing) Yes, exactly what you're saying. Actually, we have one case right now. Look at the car's license plate number (points to writing on the brick wall behind us). This is the number Ma'am. When we said to wash his hands, the driver refused and said he wouldn't get out of the car. We said, "why?" He refused to explain, and caused a scene. He said, "When Ebola has come and you've got money out of it, you want to eat the Ebola money. You think we want to join you?"

Shepler: Did you ask him, "Which money are we eating?" (laughing)

Woman: Yeah, we asked him, "Which money? Where's the money that Ebola brought for us to eat? So if you know that Ebola brought money for us, come join us!" That's what we often tell them.

So, even though there were extensive volunteer efforts, there was still often the expectation that someone was getting rich off of Ebola somewhere. I believe this is due largely to the post-war experience, when corruption was hidden in plain sight, and people saw the many big new houses going up around the hills of Freetown in the decade after the war as proof that someone was getting rich off of donor money. Though corruption is not new in Sierra Leone—see, for example, the common Krio adage "Usai den tai cow,

na dae e dae eat” (a cow eats where it is tied)—the widespread expectation of *particular forms* of corruption was largely due to post-war experiences.

I am interested in these ideas about the extent of secret funding flows. People assumed there were hidden funds, misdirected funds, and this affected their response to the Ebola messaging. A young woman we interviewed in Freetown told us: “A good number of people still don’t believe that the sickness is real. They say the whole thing is money making. If they don’t stop sending plenty money into the country they will not end the Ebola.” She actually blamed the funding flows for the continued existence of Ebola.

4. Government of Sierra Leone

After all of these small-scale examples of how the money was going astray, finally there was an audit of how the government of Sierra Leone was spending the Ebola money it had to spend (Audit Service Committee 2015). I had heard that people noticed a number of “rotten” ambulances sitting in plain sight in the parking lot of the Youyi building, and wondered about procurement procedures. In March 2015, the auditor’s report came out and detailed problems with purchasing and other record keeping. According to the audit report, more than half of 18 million US dollars of treasury and public donation funds supposedly spent on fighting Ebola in Sierra Leone lacked complete paperwork and almost a third was officially “unaccounted for.” A 30 March 2015 article on the IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks) news service entitled “Sierra Leone’s Missing Ebola Millions”¹⁴ reported that,

The service found that between May and October 2014, \$3.7 million that was disbursed from the Emergency Health Response Account and the Ministry of Health Miscellaneous Account, intended for Ebola response activities, had no supporting documentation to show how the funds were used. ...An additional \$2.6 million was taken from the same accounts without “adequate” supporting documentation, such as receipts. The auditors also reported that \$3.9 million, which was supposedly used to purchase ambulances and help construct the Port Loko Ebola Treatment Center, is unaccounted for.

The day the report came out, I was contacted by the BBC to comment on the corruption charges. I realized that the story played right into the West’s

ideas about the weak West African states contributing to the size of the outbreak and the corresponding need for the international response to bypass local states. But my response to the report was maybe different from what they expected. To me, the lack of supporting documentation does not necessarily mean theft. Having worked in Sierra Leone for many years, I know that a lot of things are done there without proper documentation. (See, for example, the description above of how we worked through personal connections at the Ministry of Agriculture to help someone get through the cordon to feed his chickens.) One area the report focused on was bidding for who would build the Port Loko Ebola Treatment Centre (ETC). It is true that proper procedures were not followed, but in the emergency the ETC was still built. Perhaps I am more sympathetic because I too have struggled to get receipts for purchases. Some of the issues were caused by weaknesses in other sectors, not by stealing Ebola money. For example, the report stated that a number of checks written to the government as donations towards the Ebola effort had not been accepted for deposit by the Sierra Leone Commercial Bank. I too have had money go missing at the Sierra Leone Commercial Bank! This is not to excuse the government agents, but it is to say I sympathize with how difficult it can be for them to operate.

The report was quickly politicized by the opposition party and hearings were held in parliament to discuss the report. The committee that held the hearings—admittedly, the majority of whom are from the President's party—responded to the audit this way: "The Committee is of the opinion that nowhere in the world has the Leadership of any Economy called for real time audit in the midst of a national crisis more so in an emergency like this" (Bah 2015). I agree that it was remarkable for the sitting government to publicly reveal its faults.

The other point here is that corruption is not something a state or politicians can do alone, this enrichment is only possible in relation to an international system that sends the money. The African state particularly, is propped up by an international system of states, and by international donor funds.

5. International Community

The millions of dollars in the Sierra Leone government's Ebola budget pale in comparison to the billions in the budget of international community

actors. And here I want to turn to questions of “who ate the Ebola money” at a different scale.

In an article for Newsweek, and elsewhere, journalist Amy Maxmen reported that the Worldwide budget for the Ebola outbreak was \$3.3 billion USD. She found that the majority of that money went to international staff rather than to frontline health workers:

Relatively little money was set aside for local frontline staff within Sierra Leone’s health system in the first place. In fact, less than two percent of €2.9 billion (\$3.3 billion USD) in donations to fight Ebola in West Africa were earmarked for them. Instead, the vast majority of money, donated from the taxpayers of the UK, the US and two-dozen other countries, went directly to Western agencies, more than 100 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and to the UN. (Maxmen 2015)

So, in a way, the Sierra Leonean public was right to doubt where the Ebola money was going. Maxmen continues,

When I visited Kenema Hospital in February, graffiti on one wall of the Ebola isolation area read: “Please pay us.” By then, nurse Kabba had cared for more than 420 Ebola patients, and had lost several friends. She had not received most of the €80 (\$92 USD) weekly allowance she’d been promised since September.¹⁵ Nurses around the country were in similar positions. “We hear about money pouring in, but it is not getting to us,” Kabba said. “People are eating the money, people who do not come here. We are pleading nationwide, we have sacrificed our lives.” (Maxmen 2015)

Finally, Maxman concludes, “Instead of aiding the process, the world’s largest donors to the Ebola response gave their funds to NGOs, Western and UN agencies. After each organisation absorbed a piece, the remains trickled down to the local and international staff working with patients (generally outside of the national health system) and with communities affected by Ebola.” (Maxmen 2015)

The most diplomatic explanation for the flow of aid to Western organisations is that extremely poor countries like Sierra Leone do

not possess the infrastructure to implement programs and handle grants with accountability. Yet at a December hearing on funds for the Ebola response, the chair of the British public accounts committee, Margaret Hodge, noted that skirting the government’s system costs quite a lot. She cited one Ebola intervention in Liberia in which “only €3.4m out of a €53m EU program reached the frontline. That is less than 7 percent, and it is shocking.” (Maxmen 2015)

A week after the Maxmen article came out on May 27, 2015, the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) published an article entitled “UNDP helps Ebola Emergency Response Workers get paid” saying that they were using mobile technology to help the struggling governments. It is noteworthy that rather than trying to sort out the existing “struggling” systems, they chose to introduce a new, more technically advanced layer, on top:

To deliver the funds, UNDP invested seed resources in systems to manage information in all three countries to track payments, and sent a surge of staff and technical advisors. The agency also worked to strengthen existing payment mechanisms such as mobile banking, online transfers of cash, and helped provide protection for in-person cash transactions. With the World Bank and other partners covering recurrent costs, UNDP observed that the critical bottleneck lay in the delivery of payments to the ‘last mile.’ When no other option existed, UNDP staff delivered the payments themselves. By December 2014 more than 90 percent of the workers had been paid. (UNDP 2015)

Maxmen and others questioned the efficacy of this approach. She also reported on a move by Sierra Leone’s Minister of Health, Abubakarr Fofanah, “turning the accountability tables around” by requesting an audit of the international community’s claimed expenditures to West Africa during this tragedy (Massaquoi 2015). Simons and Abdulai (2015) report that, “The priorities of donors were not always the same as the people of the affected countries or their governments. The United Nations budgeted more to fly aid workers around West Africa than to pay Sierra Leonean health workers — \$96.3 million USD compared with \$23.7 million USD.” It was also reported that Save the Children spent \$12 million USD on ETCs that served 280 people, versus the state nurses who cared for the

vast majority of Ebola cases and who were desperate for their \$80 USD a week hazard pay.

The key point is that although there is more expectation of corruption for the West African governments, the international community's money is much bigger and actually faces less accountability in how it is spent.¹⁶ So, which do we call corruption, and why? The Sierra Leoneans I have met have a better understanding of the complexity here. The default Western casting of the situation is African governments are not to be trusted, international agencies are motivated by good, and their expertise includes knowing the right way to spend money. And yet African observers were often very critical of how Western agencies were spending their money, including complaining about white aid workers spending their danger allowances publicly enjoying themselves on the beaches (this, too, reminded me of the post-war period, when people complained about the public enjoyment of international peacekeepers in almost the same ways. Gberie (2005: 167) notes that the peacekeepers were called "Beach-keepers" since they spent so much time on the beaches of Sierra Leone.)

The issue of misdirected money flows does not stop with government funds. It was also argued to me that, despite the need for grassroots outreach around the Ebola outbreak, funding did not trickle down to local NGOs, instead staying with a handful of the big NGOs with international contacts. This discussion also makes up a large part of the "who is eating the Ebola money?" discourse on the ground. Furthermore, people complained to me that most of the money spent went for signboards in the big cities, something easy to achieve and measure, with very little going to smaller villages or working through already existing trusted local networks. These critiques are not new, and could be leveled against much of development work. I bring them up to point to the ways in which, despite the emergency context, the Ebola money flows were seen as business as usual, especially in post-war Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Health Sovereignty

At a daylong public Ebola event at Georgetown university in the Fall of 2014, I remember hearing Sharon Abramowitz, prominent now for her role in organizing anthropologists' response to Ebola, say that this event has called into question the "health sovereignty" of the affected nations. Arguing, I believe, that since the Liberian government was too weak to

provide health care to its people, and because Ebola could prove a threat to the wider world, that they in some sense forfeited their sovereignty over health. This sounded to me like a public health "responsibility to protect" (or R2P) argument. The argument is that the international community has a responsibility and a right to intervene, despite the alleged sovereignty of so-called "weak states."

I have argued so far about Ebola money flows, and in particular about how regular people in Sierra Leone saw and understood these flows in relation to their state. This discussion brings us finally to questions of *sovereignty*. Something is revealed about the nature of post-colonial, West African sovereignty (Ferme 2004). Will Reno (1995) argued that the sovereignty of "weak states" was created more by their position within a Westphalian international system than through any supposed contract between the state and the people. But I want to argue for another role for the Sierra Leonean weak state as revealed by the Ebola crisis. Based on many years of ethnographic research all over Sierra Leone, I believe Sierra Leoneans understand their state's relationship to the international system more than the international interveners do. They know that their state is defined by its relationship to richer more powerful states and donors, but they also realize the unique role their state can (and must) play as an intermediary. Indeed, I believe that—just as I have argued for local understandings of corruption as the way "Africa Works"—to Sierra Leoneans their state does not necessarily read (as it does for international observers) as something always less than the ideal, but rather as their version of what a state means. State-ness to them means that which serves as an intermediary to powerful and well-funded international groups.

In distinction to those looking at this issue from the top down (scholars of global governance, etc.), how do people on the ground pledge their allegiance? Where do they see sovereignty lie? An interview we did with a group of poor car washers in Freetown stands out in my memory. We asked how they thought the government was dealing with the crisis, and whether they now believed that the Ebola threat was real. They told us that "the Pa" had visited them personally, and they have to believe what he says about Ebola since "after God na Ernest" ("next most important after God is Ernest (Koroma, the president of Sierra Leone.)") This is evidence of the resilience of even the so-called weak state in the allegiances of the youth, who seemed to personalize their belief in the state and its focus on their best interests.

Conclusions

Looking at money flows from different perspectives and at different scales has revealed something about how Sierra Leoneans construct knowledge about their state and their place in the international system. The international community responded to Ebola primarily as a technical issue and African corruption as just another disease to be cured. International production of knowledge about Ebola was primarily biomedical, and when it did engage with the local, it was primarily to figure out how to translate the biomedical truth into local contexts they did not understand. Sierra Leoneans consumed outside knowledge about Ebola, primarily how to protect themselves. But Sierra Leonean *production* of knowledge about Ebola was, in large part, production of knowledge about where the Ebola money went. They ask the following questions: Who was enriched? Who ate the money? Who was “wicked?” Interestingly, Ebola itself is often understood to be part of that moral economy. For example, a WhatsApp video circulated at one point, warning those who were eating Ebola money and “building a house in London” that Ebola would catch them for their wickedness. A common phrase used was “Ebola moni nar blood moni!” (Ebola money is blood money), meaning that it is cursed and that those who engaged in corruption would be punished sooner or later.

Faith in government is created through good provision of services, yes, in part. But it is also created by expertly playing the internationalists’ game, e.g. what was reported in local media as the “masterful” presentation by the finance minister at the UN meeting on Ebola. There is a simultaneous pride in how their politicians are tricking constituencies on the outside, and an anger that the money is not properly circulating: “That’s our money too! They are using our suffering to enrich themselves.” Again, there are echoes of the immediate post-war period here, when the popular critique was also that the money stayed at the top levels and did not trickle down as it should.

I have tried to take you, the reader, through several layers of easy argument to get to the more complex argument underneath. The first easy reading is that of the international community, that corruption is a disease in West Africa, and that it has to be cured in order to build health systems (and other aspects of the state). In response to that belief, I have argued that there is an alternate reading that sees so-called corruption as definitive of the informal African state, and that Ebola has revealed this existing order (see Chabal and Daloz 1999).

There is another less-often-made argument that although African states may be corrupt, the international system is even *more* corrupt, and indeed, the international system is most corrupt when it claims to be doing good. That is an important critique, but I am going one step further, and arguing—a *la* Reno—that we cannot just think about weak states in isolation, weak states are constituted by the international system. One of the oft-repeated lessons of humanitarian work in the Ebola response (and in “development” generally) is the need to work within existing local systems. If it is important to work within existing local systems, that may also mean working with existing political systems, even if they seem corrupt to outsiders. As Pierce (2016) concludes, “for all the real and urgent pathologies the word ‘corruption’ designates, a careful attention to the corruption-complex’s historical, cultural, and conceptual career may ultimately point less toward bureaucratic regularity than towards democratic accountability” (23). ■

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Endnotes:

I am grateful to Malini Ranganathan for pointing out that this is very reminiscent of a substantial body of work on the post-colonial state (particularly in South Asia, but also in Latin America), including Anjaria (2011), Fuller and Bénéi (2000), and Joseph and Nugent (1994).

²At this point I need to distinguish between several concepts that are often conflated: these are state weakness, state informality, and state corruption. To me, state weakness describes a situation where the institutions of the state do not function as they are designed for any number of reasons. State informality means that the state functions, but it does so through informal rather than formal mechanisms. One could see this informality as weakness, or simply as a different mode of state functioning. State corruption is more morally charged than informality, and I use it here to describe when state functionaries knowingly break the laws in order to enrich themselves or their networks, or to keep themselves in power. Obviously, there is a great deal of overlap between and among these concepts, but they mean different things to different actors at different times (international or local actors, for example) and are the objects of moral discursive struggle (Pierce 2016).

³One anonymous reviewer gave several excellent US-based examples: informality at the Veterans Affairs Administration, military expense scandals, and the influence peddling of former governor Rod Blagojevich.

⁴For example, an anonymous reviewer argued that “attempts at ‘African difference’ should be reexamined and weeded out of new scholarship” and that “Informal networks are not exclusive to African societies ...

[and] they must be condemned, as disastrous for public policy, wherever they are found –African societies, European societies, Asian societies or in American society.” This is where I disagree. I think that condemnation of informality is a moral argument central to the “international technocratic paradigm of corruption” (Pierce 2016). Indeed, I think it is underpinned by the very idealized Western state and developmental telos I am rejecting.

⁵See Haller and Shore (2005) for a comprehensive introduction to the anthropological study of corruption.

⁶A related but different anthropological project has been to describe how Africans resist or evade their predatory states (e.g. Roitman 2005), but there has been much less work on how Africans use the state, or join the state, or believe in the state as a project.

⁷Pierce also nicely explains several other strands of corruption scholarship, from Nye’s (1967) technocratic approach in line with modernization theory, to political scientists who have put forward ideas about (so-called) modern states grafted onto traditional societies after independence, and the resulting specifically African neo-patrimonialism or prebendalism.

⁸Benton and Dionne (2015) look even further to the past and include the effects of the slave trade, colonialism, and structural adjustment policies in their analysis of the political economy of the Ebola response.

⁹See Hansen and Stepputat (2006) for an excellent review of anthropological literature on post-colonial sovereignties.

¹⁰I place all these narratives—interviews, rumors, observations—at the same level. I treat rumors as interesting even if they are not always strictly “true” because of what they reveal about what is thought to be *possible* truth. Similarly, individual accounts are not necessarily “true” but revealing about the kinds of things one can say.

¹¹What Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) call the “occult economy”: “a set of practices involving the (again, real or imagined) resort to magical means for material ends; or, more expansively, the conjuring of wealth by inherently mysterious techniques.”

¹²In addition to international funds, domestic government funds were allocated and wealthy business-people and the diaspora sent donations.

¹³I am not claiming that this response is representative of national opinion.

¹⁴Accessed from <http://www.irinnews.org/report/101293/sierra-leone-s-missing-ebola-millions> on May 27, 2015.

¹⁵Maxmen (2015) also reports that “The UN’s international staff earn \$1,600 USD (₦1,400) in danger pay every month on top of their significant annual salaries; country directors in Sierra Leone, for example, take home \$153,825 USD to \$187,904 USD (about ₦35,000 to ₦65,000) per year.”

¹⁶There are efforts to try to track global Ebola spending, e.g. the Ebola Fund. (Accessed from <http://www.mamaye.org/en/blog/ebola-fund-watch-tracking-funds-ebola-crisis-west-africa> on July 23, 2015).

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PROOF

