TRUST-BUILDING IN POST-CONFLICT WEST AFRICA:

URBAN HUNTING SOCIETIES IN SIERRA LEONE AND THE GAMBIA

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Based on twenty-three months of ethnographic research, this dissertation examines trust and mistrust among Sierra Leoneans in two settings: Freetown, Sierra Leone, which has been torn by long-term warfare; and Serekunda, a suburb of Banjul, The Gambia, where conditions have remained relatively peaceful.

This dissertation draws on comparative case studies gathered through participant observation as an initiate in secret urban “Hunting societies,” on historical narratives recounting the journeys of Sierra Leonean migrants to The Gambia before and after the civil war (1991-2002), and on recorded audio and visual footage of diverse ritual experiences. It illustrates the ways members of urban Hunting societies build trust through reciprocal exchanges of shared secrecy and masquerades, and through participation in friendship networks based on a code of brotherhood. It contests the widely held view that diversity necessarily undermines trust and demonstrates instead that within the fragmented conditions of postwar Sierra Leone, participation in mixed Hunting societies can often promote trusting relationships.
The opening section explains the causes of the war, followed by a discussion of trust and mistrust among romantic couples and household members. It then examines a single long-term case study of trauma and of the vicissitudes of institutional trust (contract), followed by a comparison of trust among camp refugees in Guinea with trust among urban refugees in The Gambia. Next is an account of the history of Hunting, including a study of Ogun, the Yoruba Hunting deity, and of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that introduced Hunting to Freetown in the eighteenth century. Finally, the dissertation compares trust networks in Sierra Leone and The Gambia in the context of international and trans-Atlantic patterns of Creolization. The thesis demonstrates that for many Sierra Leoneans reliable relations of trust are built through voluntary self-help associations like urban Hunting societies rather than kin or contract.

This research contributes to the ethnographic literature on trust building in post-war and post-colonial countries and across cultures, where trust is scarce and precious. It also challenges preconceived notions about trust and closeness, demonstrates that diversity need not diminish trust building, and examines the complex relationship between trust and power.