

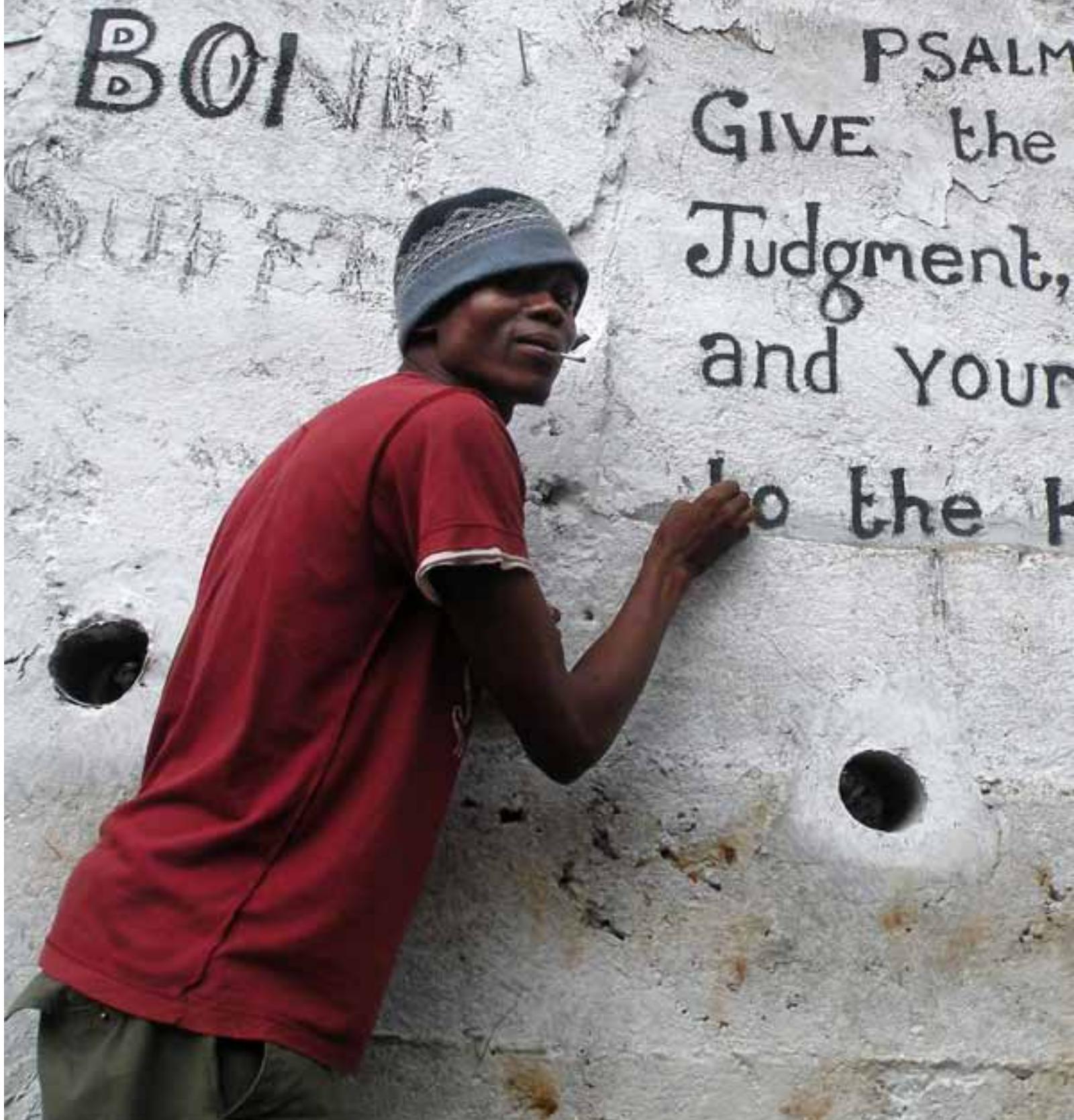


URBAN/MATS UTAS

Dr Mats Utas is a senior researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute and responsible for the research project "Youth and Marginality in Urban Sierra Leone".



MAKING JEW-MAN



BUSINESS

FILMING POST-WAR YOUTH IN SIERRA LEONE

The documentary *Jew-Man Business*, filmed in a rough neighbourhood of the Sierra Leonean capital Freetown, aims to steer clear of the common stereotypes of young African men. Mats Utas, who made the picture together with fellow researcher Maya Christensen and filmmaker Christian Vium, reflects on the difficulties of getting under the surface of street life and catching it on film.

ICE T IS A VERSATILE YOUNG ex-combatant with experience of the ten-year civil war that ravaged Sierra Leone. Junior and Bone Thugs are his friends. All of them do business in a downtown ghetto area of Freetown called Belgium. Their business is so-called jew-man business, buying and selling chiefly illegal goods or stolen items. Ice, Junior and Bone are part of a large street economy involving thousands of young men and women in the capital and larger towns of the country. The three of them are the main characters in a documentary film I recently produced with my research colleague Maya Christensen (University of Copenhagen) and filmmaker Christian Vium.

BETWEEN 2004 AND 2006, I spent my days hanging out on a street corner in downtown Freetown for the research project "Youth and marginality in urban Sierra Leone" I run at the Nordic Africa Institute. Two years is a long time, but if you want to try to unravel some of the complexities of war and the clandestine livelihoods of the predominantly ex-combatant communities, time is what it takes. Trust is vital for good research results. I marvelled at how much time it takes before mutual reliance is established, and even then with some individuals it frankly never happens. Often facts that at first appear clear and forthright are turned upside down and new light is shed only after months of intense contact. This naturally makes one question the value of short-term research and much of quantitative data collected about themes of participation in warfare. ▶▶



PHOTO: MAYA CHRISTENSEN

Local men playing bingo in the Freetown neighbourhood known as Belgium.

► It also raises questions about how accurate the commonplace documentary film of the street economy and rebel soldiering can be.

Hanging out on a downtown street corner in Freetown for those two years gave me a unique opportunity to get under the surface of street life and to really get to know the people. But what happens when you add a cameraman to the picture? Will people still be willing to tell their personal and often sensitive stories, knowing they might be shared with the entire world?

WHEN I PREVIOUSLY RESEARCHED a similar setting in Liberia, I brought my sister in to do some filming for a similar production, with a quite disheartening outcome. I had spent about six months gathering material on an ex-combatant community inhabiting an abandoned factory in downtown Monrovia.

After half a day of filming, members of the community began to question the project by saying that this woman was unlikely to be my sister. They suspected she was a journalist who would make a lot of money by portraying their precarious lives and leave them with nothing. They had all met or heard of Western journalists doing exactly that, and some had even seen the results on television: productions rife with violence and anarchy, but almost always lacking a human face.

In the end, they confiscated my sister's camera, smashed the tripod against the wall and held me hostage for about an hour. The fragile trust I had struggled hard to build was

thus destroyed by adding a camera and someone viewed as an international journalist. I could no longer continue my field research at this location and the relationship with my sources was forever damaged.

The example raises questions about how “real” ordinary documentaries based on short-term trust in settings like these can be. What is being acted?

A common problem with media portrayals of people's participation in civil wars or engagement in criminal activity is that the protagonists will either downplay or exaggerate their roles. They cannot really foresee the consequences of being filmed and might fear punishment or hope for benefits by making their story known.



PHOTO: CHRISTIAN VUIM

Ice T. Picture from the documentary *Jew-Man Business*.



Junior. Picture from the documentary *Jew-Man Business*.

SO IN PLANNING FOR the Sierra Leone project, to ensure closest possible contact we decided not to film on the street corner where I had done my field study (much to their dismay). Instead, we chose a setting where my colleague Maya was conducting research at the time. She was in a good position to prepare people in advance for their participation and select a trio who would discuss even sensitive issues on camera. She was present during the months before filming and thus on top of discussions within the community.

Maya and the community members had the opportunity to sit down and discuss outcomes and audiences in both Sierra Leone and in the larger world. Even so, some issues became clear only after we started shooting.

Jew Man Business is a film made possible by mutual trust. By establishing close relationships and previously gained insights into lives, survival and wartime participation, we were able in our film to steer clear of stereotypes of angry young men. The participants talk openly about their semi-criminal livelihoods of drug abuse and violence. Ice T, for instance, also tells of his clandestine life right after the war, when ex-rebel soldiers were hunted down, abused and at times killed.

»Yet what I believe is most weighty in the film is the portrayal of the three main characters as full human beings, far from the images of battle- or street-hardened criminals.«

The film also portrays the poor conduct of local police as the viewer gets to ride along with a police night patrol. The ex-combatant community in Belgium has established its own order in the form of informal police forces. They partly cooperate with the police and partly work against them in order to safeguard those not protected by the police.

THESE ARE ISSUES THAT SELDOM attract the attention of a rapidly passing journalist and of audiences in the West. Yet what I believe is most weighty in the film is the portrayal of the three main characters as full human beings, far from the images of battle- or street-hardened criminals. In sequences with Ice T and Junior, we see them talking about the hardships of life with tears in their eyes. They speak of love and the importance of caring partners, about loss of kin and regret, and they raise expectations for a better future. In the end, despite their proneness to violence, their rebel livelihoods and their involvement in illegal economies, Ice, Bone and Junior come across as very human. This is one of the main lessons that research in this kind of environment has taught me. Using one of many Bob Marley-isms from the Freetown street “One blood, one love” – we are all the same. ■

Jew Man Business is a new 37 minute research-based documentary film. It was sponsored by Sida and the Nordic Africa Institute.

For more information on the film, see www.jewmanbusiness.com or contact the author at mats.utas@nai.uu.se

4 Questions for MATS UTAS

Q: What advantages do you as a researcher see in the film medium?

A: It is a fantastic format for portraying a social environment or a single human being. You can give the viewer an immediate understanding of something that you might not be able to convey in a research report. For example, how the people in Belgium had a close, yet ambivalent, relationship with the police. It is hard to convey this in writing, but it becomes very clear when you see the guys riding with the night patrol in the film and simultaneously hear the stories of the main characters in the film.

Q: Weren't you afraid when you went into one of the worst ghettos of Freetown?

A: From a distance the area looks pretty dangerous, and even many aid workers based in Sierra Leone are scared to go down into the main bowl of Belgium. But once you become part of a group of street-hardened roughnecks, you get accepted and also taken care of. People were generally happy because we had travelled so far just to learn about them.

Q: Having worked for several years on the backstreets of Freetown you have experienced violence from close range. You once had to defend yourself with a broken bottle. What happened?

A: On the streets of Freetown you have to be a lot more aggressive than you would in Stockholm, for example. Among street youths, you cannot earn respect only by being good. You also have to show that you will not put up with any nonsense. When I was attacked by a guy in a group of people I worked with, I picked up a bottle, broke it and started threatening him. You need to take that sort of stand in order to keep the acceptance of the group.

Q: You hung out with ex-combatants, many of whom had committed horrible acts of war. How was that?

A: I don't think I've ever been in an environment where moral issues were discussed so intensely. Interestingly enough, the individuals who had committed abuses had no difficulty in blaming other people for having perpetrated immoral acts. Many saw themselves as “legal hustlers” who had committed evil acts because they were forced to do so by an immoral political elite, not because they themselves lacked morality.