FORMER WARLORD and Liberian president Charles Taylor was certainly at least as much myth as man. While not as famous as Taylor, there are many rumours about Mr Thompson. It is almost certain that he has been involved in most Liberian conflicts since 1990. Many believe that he was an elephant hunter who could become invisible and shoot elephants from the middle of the herd. Others say he was the right-hand man of Captain Yonbu Tailey, a former street youth accused of killing hundreds of civilians and put down by his own comrades.

A FEW YEARS LATER Mr Thompson is said to have caused a short but intense “war” between the Ivorian military and the rebel group he had joined, a conflict that resulted in multiple casualties among Liberian refugees trying to escape. After the presidential elections of 1996, Mr Thompson hunted elephants in Côte d’Ivoire and sold the tusks in Monrovia for $500 a piece. When fighting against Taylor intensified in 2002, he reappears, although it is unclear whether he really fought against Taylor’s forces as is usually claimed.

In June 2012, Mr Thompson was obviously doing well, as he had just got a large plot of land cleared for planting the rubber plants that were waiting in his nursery. The next thing, he was accused of organising a crossborder attack that killed a number of UN peacekeepers. After the government declared him a wanted man, he immediately left town without trace. A week later, security forces reached his house, kicked in the door, stole whatever valuables they could find and tossed everything else outside.

The door to Mr Thompson’s house was still half open when I arrived a few weeks later. A wall of silence surrounded his absence: no-one talked about him or about anything connected to the rebellion in Côte d’Ivoire. Thirty minutes after my arrival, a dozen heavily armed soldiers came and picked me up for questioning. The atmosphere was very tense and unpleasant. Only after many days did I hear the first news about Mr Thompson. I have never heard anybody talk as respectfully – and fearfully – about someone else. “That man is different,” was the endlessly repeated refrain. This went along well with my previous observations of how people acted in his presence, some almost assuming military attention. Others cautioned me not to make him angry, lest he uses his mystical powers on me.

It took about a month before Mr Thompson was finally captured by security forces, sold out by his own comrades. This time he could not turn invisible, and he will possibly sit behind bars for the rest of his life. Perhaps this is a fitting end for a man of such violent character, but at the same time a pitiful finale for a man of such obvious authority.

MR THOMPSON WAS NOT simply a criminal, an insurgent or a powerful man of “tradition.” He was all of this, and more. I came to grasp something about the aura around him as understood by others. He had become much more than a mere mortal – he was a myth whose perceived history condensed two decades of regional conflict.

Some time passed before I saw a newspaper picture of a shackled Mr Thompson being escorted out of a Monrovian courtroom. At this point this was not Mr Thompson anymore, nor do I believe it would be for many of those who know him. Just as in the case of his fellow inmate Charles Taylor, the myth of Mr Thompson had taken on a life of its own.

Between March and October 2012, Ilmari Käihkö conducted fieldwork in Liberia for a NAI project that seeks to shed light on how the networks of ex-commanders are sustained.