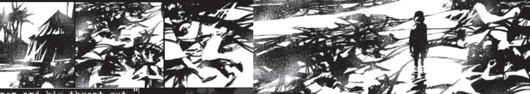
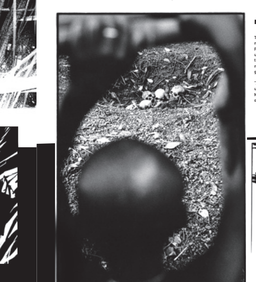
Morie – Prince of the Dead

In the insanity of killing, the ultimate refinement of horror can be to refrain from killing. Morie was the victim of such an act of cruelty. His entire village was killed to the last man, and he, he alone, was left alive. "They showed me the dead people and made me chief of the village, threatening to kill me if I ever crossed their path again." Morie's mother, before the attack, had put him to sleep. In mid-slaughter, gunshots woke the boy to the nightmare of living. "When the rebels found me inside the house, they grabbed my hand and took me to the village, till I identified my father." There lay his father, in the middle of the apocalypse, still identifiable, "with his belly open and his throat cut."



Morie was five the day they interrupted his life. Today, "ten, almost eleven," according to the uncle who teaches him the Koran in a modest madrassa in Pujehun, in the southern part of Sierra Leone. Maybe he's still only ten, maybe he's already twelve. Morie was born somewhere, in 1992 or 1993, and the attack on Bendu Malen, his village, in a remote part of that remote district, occurred in 1997. A five-year-old child doesn't know how long ago it was or how long it lasted; he remembers only that the Bendu Malen massacre took place, he says, "at the beginning of the rains."

The facts as known: a group of kamajors, Civil Defense units (CDF), expelled from Bendu Malen rebels of the United Revolutionary Front (RUF). The next day, the rebels, bypassing the kamajors, returned and surrounded the village. Vengeance followed. Between morning and evening, the rebels methodically decimated the population. Perhaps as many as twelve hundred victims, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that visited the location in may 2003. To date, no one has been accused of the massacre. One version points to the responsibility of soldiers from the SLA, the regular Leonese army, which at different times and in different regions was allied with RUF rebels.

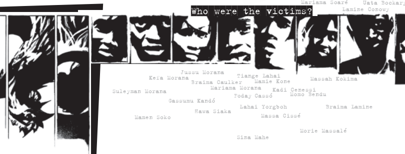


No living thing

The orgy obeyed the criterion of No Living Thing, the code name for the brutal RUF assault on the country's capital, Freetown, on January 6, 1999. Its meaning: death was unleashed on men, women, and children and anything else that moved. Morie remembers this absurd detail of the massacre: "In the middle of the people, chickens, dogs, goats, all dead ... ."

"As the massacre was in the rainy season, many bodies were unrecognizable when, some time later, we arrived in Bendu Malen," Jiba Soko relates. "Some were beaten to death, others had their throats cut, some were shot, others were killed with their hands tied." The old man stretches out his thin arms as his gaze surveys a palisade of sharpened stakes that form a circle in one corner of the village. "I was the first to enter here after the attack," from another part of the district, "over thirty kilometers away. There were corpses everywhere and the houses were destroyed."

"Here, in the middle of these stakes, were about 150 bodies," the old man explains. "Shall we dig?" It isn't necessary. "There were more than twenty of us, and it took over a week to clear away the corpses. During that week we always left the pit open." At the opposite entrance to Bendu Malen, in the shade of enormous trees, is another "pit," where Jiba Soko's group buried 275 bodies. "Afterwards, we finally brought more remains, as we would find them." The task is still not finished. It goes on intermittently. Who were the victims? Jiba knew some of them, like Morie's father, Bockarie Manssaré, the imam of Bendu Malen. Other people approach Jiba Soko and the common grave, offering additional names against the anonymity of the tombstone: "Tiange Lahai"; "Kefa Morana, Jussu Morana, Suleyman Morana, Mariama Morana"; "Massa Cissé"; "Momo Bendu"; "write there: Hawa Siaka, Lucy Lansana, Mariama Soaré"; "Uata Bockarye"; "Baby Cenci"; "Kadi Cenessi"...



Morie, without raising his eyes, tells how he wandered for two days through the horror, unable to decide what to do. "It was raining. I drank water." That's all. He remembered, finally, taking the road to the vegetable garden where the family worked. "I thought about finding my mother," since she wasn't among the cadavers.

Bendu Malen was razed a second time, but new men – including relatives of those who died – arrived to inhabitant the same ground. It is a strange conjunction of the living and the dead. The entire village is, literally, a common grave, as Jiba Soko recognizes. "Whenever we dug, whether to build a house or farm the land, we find mortal remains, bones, clothes, on all sides... We gathered the bones and are going to place them in one of the gravesites." It is a frequent gesture.

"Over there, in that swamp, there's a common grave. Fifty bodies," says the soba of Sahn Malen, Moyneh Moictyah. "There, beyond the bridge, there's another. There were sixty young people of Sahn Malen, all of them under twenty. They ordered us to open the pit before they killed them... Further on, at that cross, there's another collective gravesite..." En route to Bendu Malen, the road seems empty.

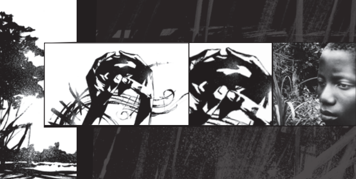
On the way back, with Moictyah as guide, the crossing is infernal: ghosts in no man's land. "There, next to the tree, they also buried people. 'They' buried where the victims fell. Do you want to stop?" No.

Exhumieren der Gräber

The graves of Bendu Malen, like all those that dot the forests and swamps of Pujehun, on the Liberian border, were never exhumed. At the height of the conflict, "there were eighty-five RUF camps in this region," according to the priest John Garrick, of the Catholic mission in Pujehun. "Each camp had at least one common grave." The peace process in Sierra Leone, which put the TRC mechanism in place, did not include forensic analysis and funeral ceremonies. "Its point of departure was that the Leonese don't need to bury their dead. That's a lie. They do need to," comments John Caulker, coordinator of the civic organizations that make up the Work Group of the TRC. Mohamed Soko, the chief – the real one – of Bendu Malen, confirms that mourning is a luxury, one postponed sine die: "What we are asking is support for religious ceremonies. By ourselves, we can't hold them with dignity. The victims have found no rest." Neither, we might add, have the living.

The skulls are green, covered with a thin film of moss. Life grows on them, coating the ivory of the dead with a silent, delicate vegetal force – like all in the village-cemetery of Bendu Malen. Officials would like to transform Morie's village into a memorial of the Sierra Leone civil war, something like the style of the memorials of the Rwandan genocide. For now, the deliverance of the dead takes place in simpler fashion, the most human of all: in the memory of the living.

The new inhabitants of Bendu Malen know that names have the power to transform a common grave into a place of intimacy – an inhabited place. These names, uttered in the fetid air of the clearing, against forgetting and against timidity, seem to overcome the silence of the green skulls. "Mamen Soko," "Lahai Yorgboh," "Braima Caulker," "Sina Mahe," "Gassumu Kandó," "Morie Massalé," "Foday Cassó, Braima Lamine, Lamine Conowy," "Massah Kokima," "Mamie Kone"...



Far away from there, Morie seldom speaks. Unless he's asked, he says nothing, about anything. Around him, on the veranda of the madrassa, among the chickens and manioc drying racks, the other children dash about, shout, tease, run away. He concentrates, with all his being, on his hands: he rubs one hand against the other, as if molding clay, or bread, or dreams. To us, the dream is invisible. To Morie, it seems very real. A new world that is his alone.