

Stephen Ellis & Gerrie ter Haar ~ Africa's Religious Resurgence And The Politics Of Good And Evil



*Charles Taylor - Former
President of Liberia*

Charles Taylor, the former president of Liberia, can be found every workday sitting in the dock of a small, bright, ultramodern courtroom in The Hague. Taylor is accused of responsibility for some of the gravest crimes imaginable— atrocities committed in Liberia's neighbor to the northwest, Sierra Leone, during that country's 1991-2002 civil war. The crimes include authorizing mass recruitment of child soldiers, mass rape, and hacking off the hands of hundreds of people. Yet Taylor is known as a man who devotes considerable attention to religious matters. His example serves as a reminder that combining the practice of religion with the use of extreme violence is not as unusual as one might think.

The ex-president does not dispute that these crimes actually occurred. Nor does he deny that equally terrible things happened in his own country during the war that was fought there, off and on, between 1989 and 2003. But the charges against him concern Sierra Leone, not Liberia. And he maintains that the atrocities perpetrated in Sierra Leone were none of his doing. It is the first time an African head of state has ever stood trial before an international tribunal. Taylor is appearing before the Special Court for Sierra Leone—a hybrid body created jointly by the state of Sierra Leone and the United Nations. The case is

being heard in the Netherlands rather than West Africa for security reasons: Taylor still has a few influential friends in the region.

Most of the time Taylor, born in Liberia in 1948, resembles nothing so much as the benign patriarch of a wealthy family. He wears a dark business suit, a silk tie, and lightly tinted glasses. He has a chunky gold watch on his wrist. He chats affably with his lawyers. Yet not only is he standing trial for war crimes; his eldest son, Charles Taylor Jr., better known as “Chuckie,” currently awaits trial in Florida on charges of torture. Taylor’s speeches, in the days when he was Liberia’s head of state (1997–2003), were full of extravagant references to Jesus. He once declared to a mass rally that Jesus Christ was the true president of Liberia, and he is often described as having been a Baptist preacher. It is also reported that he joined the Nation of Islam during the year when he was held in a Massachusetts jail awaiting extradition to his home country. (Taylor had escaped to America from Liberia in 1983—apparently with \$900,000 of government money in his possession—after a dispute with the country’s military dictator. Detained by us authorities at the request of the Liberian government, which wanted to try him for embezzlement, Taylor escaped from the Plymouth House of Correction in 1985.)

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