



Kevin J. A. Thomas. *Contract Workers, Risk, and the War in Iraq: Sierra Leonean Labor Migrants at US Military Bases.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. 256 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7735-5123-7.

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Studies of migration, and in particular labor migration, have long been a topic of interest for Africanists. Scholars of Africa have examined how regional and international economic networks, colonial demands for labor, and more contemporary issues such as limited economic opportunity, political oppression, and conflict influenced the decisions of disparate Africans to migrate for work. Analyzing the push-pull factors for migration has been integral for historians of Africa to understand the perspectives and experiences of ordinary Africans as a result of larger domestic and international influences.

Kevin J. A. Thomas's *Contract Workers, Risk, and the War in Iraq* adds to the canon of scholarship on migration by analyzing the influence of the American military industrial complex on contemporary African labor migrations. Thomas examines the reasons for the high rate of Sierra Leonean recruitment by private military corporations (PMCs) during the Iraq War between 2003 and 2011. In particular, he focuses on ideas of risk and how these influenced the decisions of Sierra Leoneans to migrate to and their experiences in Iraq. He argues that the "structural conditions in poor African countries such as Sierra Leone increase the appeal of migration to high-risk destinations, where comparatively higher wages can be

found" (p. 8). According to Thomas, the influence of risk on Sierra Leonean labor migrations to Iraq was intricately enmeshed with personal motivations, domestic economic determinants, and international political-economic forces.

Thomas analyzes the recruitment of Sierra Leoneans for contract work in Iraq, their experiences on US military bases, and the effects of return migration on laborers and Sierra Leone at large. In chapters 1 and 2, he demonstrates that motivations for migration "were usually a combination of economic and non-economic," providing a nuanced analysis of Sierra Leonean contract workers' decisions to migrate to Iraq during the war (p. 84). He analyzes how postconflict socioeconomic factors in Sierra Leone, government policies and institutions, individual motivations, and targeted recruitment practices by PMCs combined to motivate many Sierra Leoneans to undertake contract work in Iraq despite the high levels of risk. In chapter 3, he expands upon this idea and demonstrates how global inequalities translated to inequalities in employment for Sierra Leonean contract workers, especially regarding information provided prior to deployment (few Sierra Leonean contract workers were briefed on survivor benefits during predeployment training), pay (PMCs paid workers from Sri Lanka \$400 a

month, while workers from Sierra Leone performing the same jobs were paid only \$200 a month), and the right to organize and protest (p. 88). Thomas claims that what was provided in terms of employment conditions to Sierra Leoneans “would arguably be unacceptable in industrialized countries” (p. 89). In chapters 4 and 5, he discusses the experiences of Sierra Leonean contract workers on US military bases in Iraq. It is in these chapters that Thomas really draws out Sierra Leonean perceptions and experiences of risk, highlighting how contract workers primarily performed “migrant” or “3D jobs (“dirty, dangerous, and demeaning”) and how different occupations influenced risks to Sierra Leonean contract workers (p. 96). Beyond risk, these chapters also examine how Sierra Leonean contract workers integrated into the social life and work processes on American military bases and the disadvantages of contract work in Iraq. Chapter 6 explores the motivations and experiences of return migration for laborers and the socioeconomic influence of “blood dollars” (Thomas’s emblematic term for the money earned while supporting the controversial American military operations in Iraq) in the Sierra Leonean economy (p. 152). Here Thomas questions the ability of migratory labor to promote long-term domestic socioeconomic development in migrant-sending countries. Finally, in chapter 7 Thomas analyzes how the collection of migrant perspectives could be used to inform policy and improve the recruitment, working conditions, and reintegration of laborers within migration processes. He highlights the importance of governments of migrant-sending countries and military institutions to the management, supervision, and facilitation of labor mobility in these increasingly common and high-risk contexts.

Throughout his text, Thomas skillfully weaves together a myriad of methodologies and ideologies from disparate disciplines to critically analyze the contemporary phenomenon of Sierra Leonean labor migration to a conflict zone. The core of his evidence is drawn from data collected during

qualitative surveys conducted in Freetown, Sierra Leone, between May and June of 2012. A selection of respondents to this questionnaire were chosen for interviews and snowball sampling. The diversity of migrant histories collected through this methodology is perhaps the greatest strength of Thomas’s text. Through his incorporation of these narratives, Thomas provides a personal history of Sierra Leonean labor migration and risk during the Iraq War. Privileging the voices of contract migrant workers themselves enables Thomas to foreground workers’ experiences in Iraq—including working conditions, risks encountered, and racial and gender discrimination experienced on American military bases—information that is often excluded from corporate documents.

Through his analysis of risk and labor migration during the Iraq War, Thomas exposes the inequalities of the globalized world within new African and military contexts. His examination of the socioeconomic conditions in developing countries, the demand for labor on American military bases, and the predatory practices of PMC explains why and how many Sierra Leoneans decided to migrate to an active war zone for employment. Thomas also discloses the gross inequalities and resultant increased exposure to risk experienced by many contract workers on US military bases in Iraq. Consequently, he brings to light several pressing questions regarding the need to develop policies and structures for the protection of migrant labors. Perhaps most significantly, Thomas’s study bears the question of the role and responsibility of the American military in developing and enforcing policies for the fair recruitment, treatment, and protection of laborers, particularly in high-risk situations, where it is increasingly employing migratory contract workers. The contemporary cost of waging war needs to better account for the assumption of risk by migrant laborers, who increasingly find themselves employed in places where few others dare to go.

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