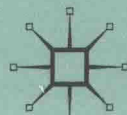




GENDER AND POWER IN SIERRA LEONE

WOMEN CHIEFS OF THE LAST TWO CENTURIES

LYNDA DAY

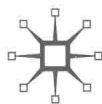


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Women Chiefs of the Last Two Centuries

Lynda Day



palgrave
macmillan



GENDER AND POWER IN SIERRA LEONE

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Map of Sierra Leone showing rivers, towns, and regions. From Christopher Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*. Reprinted with permission from the Centre of African Studies.

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Preface

In the last twenty years, Sierra Leone has been best known for the vicious civil war during which rebels—through murder and violence—tried to lay claim to so-called blood diamonds, the country's most valuable resource. The Sierra Leone shown in news stories, movies and documentaries from those years depicted child soldiers, burned out buildings, and amputated civilians. But I am much more familiar with a different country, one that possesses luxuriant tropical beauty, pristine beaches, and verdant rice fields. Though the country I first encountered in 1979 showed the effects of postcolonial disarray, it mostly featured panoramas of great natural beauty, lively and moonlit towns and villages, and gracious, welcoming citizens. News stories about Sierra Leone never fully describe its mesmerizing landscape, riverine coastal lowlands, sandy beaches, fertile interior plains, lush mountainous plateaus, and the Sierra Leone Peninsula itself: its one- to three-thousand-foot-high, lion-shaped mountains overlooking azure blue seas on one side and flat coastal marshes on the other.

Located along the western edge of the African continent, just at the convergence of the great savanna zone and the tropical forest zone, the country comprises 27,925 square miles (slightly smaller than the state of Maine) and has a population of about six million. Bounded on the north and east by the Republic of Guinea and on the south by Liberia, the nearly round country has a coastline 212 miles long and an east-west axis 180 miles wide. The climate features consistently warm temperatures, high humidity, and a season of heavy rains alternating with a comparatively dry season. Highly populated areas marked by red, lateritic soil alternate with vistas of green farm bush and savanna woodlands. The marshy coastal lowlands stretch the entire length of the country, extend 5 to 25 miles into the interior, and are dissected by a shining network of streams and estuaries.

This is the country I encountered on my first visit to Africa. I was drawn to Sierra Leone that first year as a graduate student in African history at the University of Wisconsin, when in my initial cursory readings I found much of diasporic interest. As I prepared my master's thesis on Afro-British settlers on the Sierra Leone coast, I saw so many puzzling references to powerful queens

and madams in the secondary literature that I decided to write a doctoral dissertation that would explore and give voice to these women who seemed so unlike the “oppressed” African women I had expected to read about. Unlike most of my fellow graduate students, however, I had never been to Africa, and though the topic fascinated me, the idea of pursuing this research in such a far away and different land was daunting at best.

So to plan for an extended stay in Africa, I made my first trip to Sierra Leone that rainy season of 1979. I took out a loan, got my shots and papers together, and booked passage on Air Afrique, first to Paris and then on to Sierra Leone. When they called the Air Afrique flight at JFK airport, I found that the many years of French I had studied were coming in handy. After we got to Paris, I did not feel especially out of place at Charles de Gaulle airport since I could read all the signs and understand the announcements and most of what was going on around me, even snatches of conversation. Other than a few vaguely curious glances at this young, single, *noire américaine* from my fellow passengers, I was mostly left alone as we all boarded the plane in Paris and found our seats. I was really now on my way to Africa. As the majestic sand dunes of the Sahara came into view and stretched out mile after mile to the horizon, I was transfixed by the reality of what I had embarked on, a solo exploratory trip to the motherland, familiar only through books, legends, and the testimony of friends.

I found Freetown, the capital city, a fascinating mix of whitewashed concrete colonial style structures, sixties vintage office buildings and ancient clapboard houses unique to the Krio, the original English-speaking African settlers of this busy urban center. Outside of the buildings strolled hawkers selling goods of all kinds including hand made items like *gara* (tie-and-dye) cloth, dolls, fans, and carvings. Lively, talkative women with fistfuls of money tied up in their lappas (wrap skirts) controlled the market stalls that jammed the sidewalks and central squares. Soca, reggae, and funk music poured out of drinking spots, restaurants and bars, enlivening the atmosphere. Cars, buses, *poda podas* (commercial minivans), and pedestrians crowded the narrow streets.

Though it was a new setting, there was much that was comfortable and familiar. After a month on the ground, convinced that a year of research in the country was a doable project, I did all the requisite proposal and grant-writing, then returned and spent January 1981 to March 1982 as a dissertation student. My research proceeded in several stages. I had been accepted as an associate of the Institute of African Studies, so my base was Fourah Bay College in Freetown. I made many friends in Freetown those first few months who invited me along on their business or social trips to the north, east, and south, giving me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the country outside the capital.

I found that Sierra Leone was home to speakers of at least 18 different languages including Krio, the Creole English dialect of Freetown, which serves as

the country's lingua franca. The other languages fall into two main groups—that is, the Mande family of languages, of which Mende is the largest, and the West-Atlantic family comprising Temne, Sherbro/Bullom, Krim, Kissi, and Gola, as well as Fula and Limba. The West-Atlantic speakers are the oldest inhabitants of the region and were settled along the coast from north of the Great Scarcies River to Cape Mount when Europeans arrived. Early travelers' accounts relate that the West-Atlantic language speakers lived in many small villages scattered along the littoral, fished the many creeks that cut through the region, planted rice in the marshes, and manufactured salt for sale to the people of the interior.

Mande languages currently spoken in Sierra Leone include Mende, Koranko, Kono, Vai, Susu, Yalunka, and Loko. Of the Mande-speaking people, Mende speakers are now the most populous group in Sierra Leone and for almost two hundred years probably the most influential in terms of linguistic and political influence. The best synthesis of the origins of the Mende people suggests that the present Mende people are derived from various combinations of people who moved into the forest zone from the savanna region starting at least four hundred years ago. The Mande speakers at that early stage did not cultivate nor build permanent settlements but later Mande-speaking migrants brought more sophisticated techniques of agriculture, settled among the earlier Mande speakers, and together formed the current Mende population.

Currently, tens of thousands of Mende speakers now live in the coastal area, which for hundreds or perhaps thousands of years was the home of Sherbro and other West-Atlantic language speakers; Sherbro and Mende speakers now share many cultural and linguistic features. However, most Mende speakers are concentrated somewhat farther inland in the interior plain and the lower plateau region. Here the vast majority plant rice and other crops for food and sale. Cash is generated through marketing cocoa, coffee, and palm oil. Panning the streams and riverbeds for diamonds is an important second occupation. This region, the Mende region, and its towns and numerous porous ministates is the focus of this book.

During those first few months in the country I gained fluency in Krio the language of Freetown, and improved my ability to "hear" and understand Mende. From those early short trips, I learned the geography, the roads and various methods of transportation, as well as basic customs, greeting patterns, and safety issues regarding health, diet, and so on. At the same time, I was meeting people who would become friends, sponsors, hosts, and interviewees as the year went on.

An important consideration for focusing on the Mende region was to avoid duplication with Carol MacCormack's work on women leaders in Sherbro country. So that first year, after preliminary interviews in and around Bo, the

provincial capital of the Southern Province, I concluded that one of the five chiefdoms headed by women in the Eastern Province would be an ideal new home base for another phase of research on the history of women chiefs. My first stop was Small Bo Chiefdom, and the paramount chief, Madam Mamawa Benya welcomed the project so warmly that I asked permission to settle in her headquarters town of Blama, a town that also featured excellent transportation to the regional capitals and all the interior towns and villages.

Madam Benya arranged things for me in the classic fashion of a landlord for her stranger. She provided for my lodging, appointed her son (by our reckoning a nephew) as guide and interpreter, and introduced me to the government officials I needed to know. Though I had a letter of introduction from the African Studies Institute, it was the paramount chief's personal endorsement of my project and the presence of her son as my spokesman that put many elders at ease and cleared the way for numerous important interviews. During the months I was based in Blama, Madam Benya provided me with a room in the large comfortable home of Mrs. Dolly Greenwood, a widow who was originally from the Sherbro region near the coast and spoke perfect English.

So, though I was not housed in the chief's compound, I became Madam Benya's "stranger" and by extension, the stranger of all her large household and numerous classificatory wives and children. My daily pattern of work was to call at the chief's compound in the morning and share itineraries. I often accompanied Madam Benya, universally known in the chiefdom as "Mama" (lit. grandmother), on her visits to other towns and villages in the chiefdom. I quickly became familiar with the complex political structure in which she operated. In the chiefdom itself, she was responsible for tax collection and served as the chief executive of local government consisting of a court, chiefdom treasury, and chiefdom police. She oversaw the town chiefs, ward leaders, and councilors who made up the chiefdom legislature. She reported to the district officer of Kenema District, which was a unit of the Eastern Province administration. The chiefdom was also a unit within the Kenema West constituency represented by a member of parliament in the national legislative body.

Early in my stay, Madam Benya took me to meet the district and provincial officials I needed to know for research purposes, and she also introduced me to the member of parliament from that region who was her great friend. With these introductions, the chief in effect vouched for me and announced her responsibility for me as her guest. For all the months that I used the archives and conducted interviews in the Eastern Province, being introduced as Madam Benya's stranger from America gave me a place, a location, legitimacy, recognition, and validity.

Since that first year, I have returned four times to continue my research, twice in 1995 while the civil war was on, then in 2005 as the country had

barely begun its recovery from the war years, and then more recently in 2007 when the country had clearly moved into a new phase of social, political and economic reconstruction. When I returned to the country in January 1995, I found that the three-year-old insurrection in the Eastern Province had turned surprisingly bloody over the previous Christmas season, with outbreaks of violence and murder in hitherto untouched regions of the country. The army was on the defensive and unable to quash the rebels. Thus, in 1995, the ongoing war and resulting insecurity in the countryside meant that all my interviews had to be conducted in the capital. That year I began to focus on women's antiwar activism and women chiefs in the context of the war years. It was then that I began to collect their narratives of fear and loss at the hands of the rebels.

When I returned later that year, during the rainy season, also known as the *hungry season*, I found a time of real trouble for the paramount chiefs of the country. The rebel war had forced them all from their homes and into refugee status. Their sources of income had dried up, their people were scattered in camps for the displaced, and indeed the future of the office of paramount chief itself was being widely questioned. I was invited to attend meetings of the Council of Chiefs where the chiefs discussed the dangers and challenges they faced at that historic moment.

In 2005, as the country was rebuilding from the war, I contacted friends and Benya extended family members to ease the transition and returned to the country. That year, though the war was finally over, its horror was readily apparent with burned out buildings at every turn, and amputees on crutches and sad-eyed beggars lining the streets. My research agenda was severely impacted by the adverse affects of the rainy season and the aftermath of the war. Most people were not traveling because of flooded roads, washed out bridges, and the damp, unsettled, and gloomy weather. Although the roads were rutted and muddy and provincial towns still lacked electricity and other amenities for travelers, with the help of a borrowed vehicle, I finally returned to Blama in the Eastern Province, where the then newly elected chief of Small Bo, Madam Benya's nephew, assured me of his continuing support. I spent some time in Kenema, the Eastern Province's capital, where I interviewed Madam Haja Gessama, a newly elected woman chief and in Boajibu, where I videotaped Madam Mamie Gamanga at work re-building her town, a center for diamond mining that had been burned and looted during the war. In Freetown I met and interviewed Madam Margaret Segbureh, who had been elected paramount chief of Bum in 1988, just a few years before the war reached her chiefdom.

By 2007, most of the worst effects of the war had been erased. What I saw was a developing country with modest signs of growth and improvement. Hawkers selling imported gadgets had largely replaced the beggars on the streets of Freetown. Most amputees seemed to have found shelter and sustenance and few

were homeless. Traffic jams and busy construction sites all over Freetown and in the provinces attested to a reawakened economy. On a three-hour motorbike ride to the Krim Chiefdom of Madam Matilda Minah, I passed through villages that several years before had been the scenes of gruesome violence, but were now almost eerily quiet. Citizens of the sleepy Freetown of the early 80s had been replaced with a younger, more hard-edged and clear-eyed population eager to move on into a new and uncharted future. The fortress-like American Embassy installed on top of Leicester Hill, denuded of the thick forest that had facilitated the rebel invasion of Freetown, signaled a new relationship with the outside world. Ubiquitous cell phone towers and top-up card kiosks demonstrated the country's intimate connection to the global marketplace.

That year, in addition to following up with women chiefs I had known over the years, I interviewed government officials and attended meetings of women's rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to assess the prevailing discourse on women's leadership. I wanted to look more closely at the interplay and contradictions between notions of women's empowerment as defined by feminist NGOs and the work of women chiefs in local and national government. I wanted to investigate how women chiefs use power in yet another evolutionary landscape, fascinated by the reach of women traditional leaders re-constituted yet again in the post-war era. For example, new ways of imagining and implementing old ideas of family loyalty and *wealth in people* suggested that as the world changes, women chiefs also change, though still drawing on tropes of women's power ever present in their cultural nexus.

Thus this study spans a thirty-year time period as it incorporates my earliest research in the period before the civil war and follows the enormous social and political upheavals wrought by the civil strife of 1991–2001. It looks backward to the precolonial past and forward to a future that engages the existing hermeneutics of women's power with the political and social imperatives of the current era.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Preface	ix
Introduction: Gender and Power: The Women Chiefs of Sierra Leone	1
1 Men's and Women's Cultural Associations: The Construction of Gender and Gendered Authority	15
2 Women of Authority before the Colonial Era	45
3 Women Chiefs During the Nineteenth-Century Wars of Trade, Expansion, and State Building	65
4 Women Leaders and the Mediation of Colonial Rule	95
5 Women Chiefs in Building the Independent State	119
6 Civil War and the Attack on Women's Customary Authority	147
Conclusion	181
Appendix: List of Sierra Leone Women Chiefs	183
Notes	185
Index	217

INTRODUCTION

Gender and Power

The Women Chiefs of Sierra Leone

Like other studies in the last decade, which critiqued received paradigms of gender analysis in African history, this book interrogates gendered political authority in southern and eastern Sierra Leone and conceptualizes issues of women's power and authority in new ways.¹ Following other research on women of high status in West Africa, this study asks readers to see beyond earlier political histories of the region, which erased the roles of community responsibility held by women, and to engage in a conversation regarding women of influence in the public domain. Informed by Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi's stunning recalibration of scholarly thinking on the construction of gender in Yoruba challenges an assumption of women as an essential category of inferiority and leads to a fuller appreciation of social construction of gender theory as well as new paradigms in the production of knowledge.

The Women Chiefs of Sierra Leone traces a long trajectory of eras in the history of the south and east of the country, in which the political legitimacy of women came to the fore, was tested, and still endured. The gender constructions of the cultural initiation societies of the region, most notably Sande and Poro, and how they connect to and legitimize female chieftaincy are explored in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 describes female ritual leaders who exercised authority in the pre-colonial era and investigates the overlap between their positions as titleholders in the cultural societies and their role as leaders in the public domain. The influence of women titleholders such as the Ya Kumba of Tasso and the Kong Charma of Bendu grew out of what in Western cultures would be described as socioreligious concerns but which, in this region, were equivalent to positions of public responsibility.

Chapter 3 traces the lives of several women of influence during the wars of trade, expansion and state building in the late nineteenth century. Most notable among these was Yoko of Senehun, though others such as Nyarroh of Banda-suma and Nenge of Baoma are described as well. This chapter discusses how changing power dynamics called for adjustments to assure continued access to wealth, dependents, and land.

Chapter 4 focuses on women leaders as colonial subjects and considers how they exercised political authority within the confines of the colonial state. Madam Yoko was the most prominent of these women, though Humonya of Kenema, Yaewa of Sendume and Maajo of Limeh manipulated many of the same vectors of power. This chapter problematizes the binary of resistance/colonization that marked earlier scholarship on the colonial era.

Chapter 5 covers the period in which the country moved into the era of national party politics as an independent state. One woman chief, Ella Gulama of Moyamba, gained national and even international fame through her work at many levels of government, but others, for example Mamawa Benya of Blama and Theresa Vibbi of Levuma also consolidated their power within the climate of national and local electoral politics. This chapter explores the articulation of precolonial ritual authority and lineage loyalties within the modern nation-state.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, considers the impact of Sierra Leone's ten-year civil war on the women chiefs of the region and looks at the participation of women chiefs in postwar reconstruction. The war brought an end to many of the advances and accomplishments of Benya and Gulama, for example, as the fighting destroyed their chiefdom headquarters. The challenges faced by Mamie Gamanga of Boajibu, Matilda Minah of Karlu, and Margaret Segbureh of Medina during the war and its aftermath are also highlighted. The interface of female chieftaincy as a cultural construct with an evolving neoliberal women's rights movement is explored here.

Like Oyèwùmi's, this study seeks to unveil local epistemologies, which in this case support the legitimacy of women's authority in the public realm. In 1997, Oyèwùmi proposed that "woman" as a social category did not exist in Yorubaland prior to sustained contact with Western cultural discourses and that, in contrast to Western epistemology, the body was not foundational to the organization of the Yoruba social world. She wrote, "The cultural logic of Western social categories is based on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world."² Oyèwùmi pointed to seniority as the most vital category of social hierarchy in a system in which social identities were "highly situational" and shifted constantly in relation to others around them, thus challenging the universality of the Western binary of "male" and "female," reaffirming that

gender must be examined in the context of specific social institutions at various historical moments.

My research shows that gender in Mende is not assumed, binary, or biologically defined, but is constructed, fluid, and offers powerful cultural tropes that can be applied as necessary to gain social and political power. The cultural associations in this region, often referred to as secret societies, have articulated a symbolic and cultural order which has largely defined public political authority for at least two hundred years. A flexible gender construct has led to a surprising number of women holding high office in a variety of public roles.

Background

As early as André Dornelas's description of Macarico, the woman who led the Mane invasion around 1545, travelers' accounts from the upper Guinea coast region have been sprinkled with references to influential women leaders.³ Surveys of the secondary and primary sources on social institutions and history of the Sherbro, Mende, Vai, and Krim, invariably note queens and madams in formal political positions.⁴ The basic anthropological work on the Mende discusses influential women leaders at some length, most notably Madam Yoko of Senehun.⁵

Though the general histories of African women by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Iris Berger and E. Frances White briefly mention Mende women chiefs, it may be said that Mende women chiefs have "fallen through the cracks" of African women's history.⁶ However women of high status in imperial systems such as Asante, Benin, Buganda, and Dahomey have received considerable attention.⁷ Kamene Okonjo and Judith Van Allen's work on the Igbo women of Eastern Nigeria illustrates women's influence in the public sphere through informal, though well-organized, social pressure.⁸ Other studies, for example, show that women's productive and reproductive roles in society are linked to religious, magical, or ritual powers even when women played no part in the formal political arena. Whether looking at women's participation in early kingdoms as queen mothers, titleholders in charge of market affairs, or fighters in anticolonial struggles, discussions of African women's participation in indigenous political systems have expanded our understanding of the variety of ways in which women can access and wield both authority and influence in their societies.⁹

This consideration of Mende women chiefs alert us to yet another model of women's authority within the spectrum of women's leadership roles, combining elements from the complex state-based political systems and the lineage-based parallel sex systems presented by other scholars for other regions and time periods in African history. Mende women chiefs, before the era of formal colonial

rule, were not titled royal women in the sense of the *kpojito* (female coruler) of precolonial Dahomey, a position of lifetime tenure as the reign mate of the king of Dahomey. Nor were they placed in their positions as stand-ins for male rulers in the sense of the *iyoba* (mother of the king) of Benin. Nor did they “represent” the collective body of women as described for the *omu* (female ruler) of Onitsha. Mende women chiefs were not responsible for independently checking the power of male rulers as did the *asantehemaa* (supreme female ruler) of the Asante and the queen mothers of the Swazi in southern Africa and the Baganda of East Africa.¹⁰

However, Mende women chiefs are like royal women in African imperial systems in that they exercised political power through military expansion and control of resources, including captive laborers. Coquery-Vodrovitch and Berger and White note that unlike those female titleholders, and like women leaders in lineage-based systems, Mende women chiefs were legitimized by the collective body of women through their gender-based associations. Further, the colonial state, and then the nation-state sustained and even expanded the women chiefs’ political power and prerogatives.¹¹ Carol (P. Hoffer) MacCormack pointed to a bundle of political supports—that is, the control of local resources, women’s authority within their associations and lineages, and finally the policing arm of the colonial state—to explain the existence of women paramount chiefs in Mende and Sherbro countries, a case MacCormack effectively made in her research on the late nineteenth-century woman chief, Madam Yoko of Kpaa Mende.¹²

The book offers a nuanced, gendered consideration of the early colonial history of Mende country and adds to the corpus of literature on women leaders in Africa before colonial annexation. It considers the importance and flexibility of gender constructs, and the fluidity of power and political leadership, that led the way to the tradition of recognizing women as political leaders in the region. The life stories of these women allow us to look at precolonial and colonial Mende and at our own era to consider the extent to which traditional women’s leadership and prerogatives have been readapted and reinvented by colonial penetration, the national period, and the devolution of the state in the postindependence era.

This work looks at women’s political activities in a new site of study, where the colonial model of indirect rule left many indigenous political systems relatively intact, and invites comparison to examples of indirect rule in other parts of the British Empire, which allowed for the maintenance and evolution of traditional political structures.

This study argues that female chieftaincy is derived from indigenous, operative, and long-standing principles of social organization that permitted women to be elected as paramount chiefs in Mende and Sherbro countries. It presents