Remaking from Below: The Political and Policy Implications of Subaltern Experiences in Postcolonial Freetown

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Abstract

This article deals with the archaeology of violence and urban exclusion in postcolonial Freetown. It argues that subalterns underwent a double exclusion – from the colonial to the postcolonial: first as natives on the basis of race, and then subsequently, as a marginal economic category. Their dogged resistance to structuration from above compels us to rethink the city and the citizenry in new ways that challenge our conception of urbanization, citizenship and the nation state in contemporary Africa. The article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses colonial restrictions from above and the exclusion of natives in the colonial city based on race. The second section examines the postcolonial divide and the reinvention of the natives as subalterns within the prism of class. The third section deals with the monumental changes that continue to make and remake post-war Freetown and the travails of the urban poor.

Résumé

Cet article traite de l'archéologie de la violence et de l'exclusion urbaine à Freetown durant la période postcoloniale. Il soutient que les subalternes ont subi une double exclusion pendant et après la période coloniale : d'abord en tant qu'indigènes sur la base de la race, puis en tant que catégorie économique marginale. Leur résistance obstinée à la structuration par l'autorité nous oblige à repenser la cité et les citoyens d'une nouvelle façon qui remet en question notre conception de l'urbanisation, de la citoyenneté et de l'État-nation en Afrique contemporaine. L'article comprend trois sections. La première aborde les restrictions par l'autorité et l'exclusion raciale des indigènes dans cette ville au cours de la période coloniale. La deuxième examine la division postcoloniale et la transformation des indigènes en sujets sous le prisme de la lutte des classes. La troisième traite des changements monumentaux qui continuent de faire et de refaire Freetown durant la période d'après-guerre ainsi que des souffrances des pauvres en milieu urbain.

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Introduction

The city paradigm, the largest spatial assemblage of humanity history has ever known, presents us with a bipolarity that is at once multifaceted and contradictory. Imperial pro-consuls, the architects of the modern capital city in Africa, would have us believe that their imposing and undoubtedly awesome architecture in the city centre, its exclusive residential pattern, and its restrictions on the movement of specific social groups constitute a veritable signpost of their hegemonic branding of the colonial capital city. Their peculiar landmarks, designed to cower and subjugate the native, were always shown, to quote Frantz Fanon, 'by barracks and police stations'; veritable icons suggestive of the racial hierarchy in the city as well as the limits of colonial enlightenment (1963: 38). Yet not too far from this imposing architecture can be found dispossessed peasants, migrant labourers, unemployed 'natives', and the occasional 'stray' women; in one word the very social group – the lumpenproletariat – that city officials sought to exclude, eking out an existence in a space that is supposedly not theirs. How do we explain this contradiction between top-down structuration from above and dogged agency from the bottom? Whose city was the African colonial city? And, whose city is the African postcolonial city? The journey from the colonial past to the postcolonial present constitutes a history of double exclusion: the first based on race; the second anchored on class.

This article argues that the city, especially the capital city in Africa, can best be understood within the context of the formation of the nation state. That nation state came dripping with blood, the result of the stitching together of several independent polities under the aegis of an external power – the colonial state. The capital city in Africa – a colonial creation founded on violence – was not built for Africans. Rather, it was built for the white man, the foreigner, the other. Constructed on an exclusivist paradigm, it was the apartheid city par excellence. Exclusion was the major hallmark of the colonial capital city (Banton 1957; Cooper 1983; Howard 2003).

The exclusion of particular social groups, subalterns in my view, did not come to an end with the formal attainment of flag independence. Put differently, the exclusive paradigm that informed the construction of the colonial city continued to reproduce itself in the postcolonial era. Exclusion denies citizenship rights; it creates squatter citizens, those living on the edge, whose collective actions and voices are always criminalized: their honest and innovative strategies dubbed informalization, that is to say, outside the law, and by implication, illegal (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989; Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2001). Their collective actions continue to shape official policy on major urban issues: from land ownership to livelihoods to service delivery – water, energy, roads, health facilities, sanitation and schools. In the case of

Sierra Leone this group is predominantly composed of young men and women – marginal youth – those without jobs, without any visible means of sustenance. They are not easy to define, in part because their youthfulness is not solely based on age. Here youth enframes itself as an identity marker of the powerless: those who want to be somebody; to be empowered – the urban labouring poor; the dregs of society; those who have entered the global lexicon of the International Financial Institutions as the less-than-a-dollar-a-day generation. They range from thirteen-year old street kids to fifty-year old adults. What define them are their culture, their worldview, and their everyday imaginary to be counted, to mean something, and to become somebody. This elasticity of age is poignantly captured in the notion of 'youth man' – an individual well passed the conventional Western age bracket of youthhood (18–25) yet subjected to all the vicissitude of youthful existence. It is how their militant and dogged agency reconfigures the city, in their own image, that is the subject of this article.

Their double exclusion, first on the basis of race, then class, constitutes the central theme in the making and remaking of the colonial and postcolonial capital city. The monumental challenge now is how to domesticate this dogged resistance from below, how to capture and mainstream it, because it doubly compels us to rethink the city and the citizenry in new ways that challenge our conception of urbanization, citizenship and the nation state in an ever-changing and globalizing environment.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the colonial restructuring of Freetown from above and the exclusion of natives in the colonial city based on race. The second section examines the postcolonial divide and the reinvention of the natives as subalterns within the prism of class. The third section deals with the monumental changes that continue to make and re-make post-war Freetown and the travails of the urban poor.

Excluding the Native: The Colonial City

The modernist project that gave birth to the idea of Freetown, a city of freed men and women, was a product of the anti-slavery lobby in late eighteenth-century England. It was, arguably, the first major 'humanitarian' project in global history conceived as a way of compensating Africans for three-and-a-half centuries of European slavery. The original settlement was therefore designed as a 'beacon of hope' for the people of Africa from where, it was argued, the blessings of the three Cs – Commerce, Christianity and Civilization – would flow to combat the deadly superstition, backwardness and inhumanity that had plagued the 'dark continent'. From 1787, when the first group of Africans from London and the so-called New World landed in

Freetown, to 1893, when the city was constituted as a municipality, the settlement remained exclusive and discriminatory (Fyfe and Jones 1968; Harrell-Bond, Howard and Skinner 1978). The returnees/settlers were not only favoured in the day-to-day running of the settlement, but their descendants – who would later be called Creoles – exerted enormous influence in the administration of the settlement from which the original inhabitants were excluded. Access to Western education and jobs ensured the dominance of the settlers/returnees in the social and commercial activities of the new enclave. This division between the indigenous people and the returnees/settlers – between citizens and subjects (Mamdani 1996) – would continue to shape political discourse and everyday life for the next two centuries.

The settlement in Freetown attracted people from the Sierra Leone hinterland, the Western African sub-region, and the New World. The residential pattern in the city was ethnicized: each group was confined to a separate area in the city. Space, ethnicity and Westernization were crucial variables in the making of the nineteenth-century city (Porter 1963; Harrell-Bond, Howard and Skinner 1978). Thus the settlers occupied the city centre and its surroundings close to the central business district and the seat of government together with the few European officials and administrators. The Europeans would vacate this central area in the late nineteenth century for the much more pleasant and amiable surroundings on the hilltop. The city centre was dotted with impressive West Indian architecture complete with the places of worship of the different Christian denominations, from mainstream Anglicans to dissenting Huntingdonians. The only group allowed to settle close to the city centre was the Kru from neighbouring Liberia, a seafaring group that was indispensable to British maritime commerce in the region. The original inhabitants were pushed to the fringes of the settlement, where they lived side by side with immigrant groups like the Fullah, the Sosso and the Mandingo, who were predominantly Muslims, from neighbouring Guinea. These groups would establish their own places of worship in their respective communities by the end of the nineteenth century. The existence of separate social and cultural groupings and communities was a key marker of Freetown in the nineteenth century. All these groups, without exception, were however subordinated to a higher authority: the Crown colony state proclaimed in 1808 when the British Crown took control of the colony of Freetown from the Sierra Leone Company.

Yet, the most enduring legacy of the nineteenth century was undoubtedly the creation of two different types of administration for the two groups: the descendants of the settlers/returnees and the indigenous inhabitants (Harrell-Bond, Howard and Skinner 1978). Why did the British promote a discourse that facilitated the division of the city into citizens and subjects? What are the

connections between the establishment of a city council in 1893 and the construction of a so-called 'tribal' administration in the city at about the same time? Why did the Europeans abandon the city centre for the hilltop in the West End? What are the linkages between this laboratory of indirect rule in the city and the eventual imposition of indirect rule in the hinterland after the 1898 wars? Did this happen because the British 'respected' the culture of the indigenous people in the hinterland, or was it a deliberate attempt to impose a botched modernist project? Are there any connections between the exclusionary nature of this modernist project and the exclusionary politics of the colonial and postcolonial states? Is there an archaeology of exclusion that runs through colonial and postcolonial societies? These questions are crucial to understanding contemporary Freetown; they touch on the idea of the nation state as it was imagined before independence, and they underline the obvious gaps in our knowledge of social citizenship, rights, obligations and justice.

That the British created two local government institutions – the city council and the system of 'tribal' headman – for the two different categories of peoples they invented at a time when Creole identity was in the making suggests that the modernist project was exclusivist and discriminatory, designed solely for citizens. These two institutions, however, fell short of anything close to citizenship/subjecthood. The construction of these two categories was a convenient way for the British to manipulate two different symbols, two different systems of signification, to arrive at the same thing: domination and control.

The subjects in the city were ostensibly under the control of their respective 'tribal' headman. The headman, who doubled as a labour contractor and custodian of 'tribal' culture, was responsible for the actions of his countrymen in the city. Yet he had no right to land nor was he in a position to determine what that 'tribal' culture might be. He was therefore at the mercy of the British colonial official to determine what his real role was. Similarly, the construction of citizens supposedly gave members of the civis the right to govern themselves. Since they were, in theory, subjects of the British Crown, they were ipso facto accorded certain rights and privileges befitting their status as citizens. Their citizenship did not translate into making laws for themselves, nor did they exert much influence in the affairs of the city. Such rights and privileges – freedom of expression, of assembly, of the press, and so on – granted to them were circumscribed by the very colonial power, which accorded them the right of citizenship. The inherent limitation of these two institutions became the subject of endless debates in the period leading to independence. The Freetown experiment would be extended to other parts of the country after the 1898 war against colonial taxation.

But the city did not change much between 1898, when it became the capital city of a much wider territorial area, and 1961, when Sierra Leone became independent. The segregation that became a marked feature of Freetown society after 1900 meant that Europeans lived separately from Africans, on the then mosquito-free hilltop overlooking the city. The emerging African middle class, predominantly Creole, of mixed returnees/settlers and indigenous parentage, lived in central and West End of Freetown around the original settlement and outlaying areas. The 'other', the mixed bag of Sierra Leoneans classified as natives, were bunched in the over-crowded East End and peripheral areas where their ranks continued to swell with migrants from the hinterland. Freetown still remained an administrative centre dependent on the hinterland and surrounding villages for its food supply.

The colonial state was the largest employer of labour in the railways, the docks/port, and the state bureaucracy. The merchant class remained small and relied largely on import and export trade. The two world wars and decision to abolish slavery in 1927 were the major developments that shaped the history of the city in the colonial period. The numerous construction projects during the wars created job opportunities for both skilled and unskilled labour; a labour movement emerged and workers flexed their newfound strength by withholding their labour (Abdullah 1994). The boom in construction meant that more people left the hinterland for Freetown in search of jobs. Soldiers recruited from the hinterland opted to stay in Freetown after their discharge from active service. And when slavery was abolished in 1927, some ex-slaves, particularly those whose owners did not want to let go, migrated to Freetown in part to safeguard their newfound freedom but also to find other ways of making a living. By the end of the colonial period, the population of Freetown had doubled.

The Africanization of the civil service on the eve of decolonization gave the middle class access to the exclusive residential areas hitherto the preserve of the colonialists. The movement of the African middle class, mostly civil servants and politicians, to the exclusive residential white suburb, did not translate into better housing for the working people/labouring class. The situation continued as if nothing had changed. It was only towards the end of the first decade of independence that the government began to contemplate a national housing scheme for low-income earners.

Excluding the Dangerous Classes: The Postcolonial City

If its cultural and political divisions palpably marked the colonial city, the postcolonial city sought to mend those cracks by invoking the language of inclusion: the voice of the nation. Independence, in this reading, signified not only the end of colonial rule but also the beginning of prosperity for the

citizens of the new nation state. The bright lights of the city signified this new hope and aspiration; it was the place to go, the place to find jobs, and the place to settle. The city of Freetown therefore became the dream destination of every citizen in search of the proverbial greener pasture – from the high school dropout to the college graduate, from the casual labourer to the skilled worker, from the rural migrant to the Sierra Leonean in the diaspora. And, Freetown would be the place to go when a nasty rebel war broke out in 1991, exactly thirty years after independence.

Key to understanding the postcolonial city are the extreme centralization of politics in the 1970s and the devastating consequences of the World Bank-sponsored structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s. The centralization of politics and power under the All Peoples Congress (APC) from 1968 to 1992 made it impossible for any local government institution to function *qua* local government. The Freetown city council that had functioned reasonably well, with regular free and fair elections, was converted into an arm of the ruling party's patronage network. The outdated and backward system of 'tribal' administration was subsequently reinvented and reintroduced to undermine the legitimacy of the municipality. Lacking any form of autonomy, the city council gradually ceased to play an important role in the running of the city. Consequently, all the municipal schools, the markets, the cemeteries, the City Park, and the revenue-yielding institutions directly under city control entered a long period of decline from which they are yet to recover. A management committee answerable only to itself was put in charge of the city administration for well over two decades. It is therefore not surprising that the city council was unable to function *qua* government when it was confronted with the devastating consequences of World Bank-sponsored structural adjustment policies.

By the time war broke out in 1991, the city's infrastructure was already in an advanced stage of decay. Incessant power cuts and erratic water supplies – public utilities not under the control of the city government – were part of the daily misery confronting Freetownians. Garbage piled up for months on the streets while corrupt officials at the Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Environment conspired to sell prized state land used as refuse collection points. The level of filth was so appalling in the mid-1990s and subsequently that the central government had to devote the last Saturday of every month to mass general cleaning of the city. By then, Freetown's contribution to the decay of the postcolonial city had come a full circle.

Cutbacks in education and social services, rampant corruption, dwindling revenue, galloping inflation, and chronic unemployment begin to describe the Sierra Leonean political economy in the 1980s. The most important development in the reconfiguration of Freetown was the ghettoization of the

city and the intense struggle over space and housing. Unlike elsewhere on the continent, affordable housing, whether for the working class or the middle class, was never undertaken by the city or central government. High-ranking civil servants were encouraged through state grants to purchase and build their own houses in the 1960s and 1970s – the result of Africanization in the era of decolonization. A modest attempt was later made to provide housing for people in the low-income bracket at Kissy, a location close to the industrial centre on the outskirts of the city. This was not a city-sponsored project and it did not benefit the urban poor. A plan to continue the scheme in the late 1970s had to be abandoned because of inadequate funding. The city's poor therefore remained unhoused throughout the 1980s, 1990s and beyond (Makannah 1996).

The lack of adequate housing, a properly regulated housing market, and well-defined urban policy are central to understanding the increasing ghettoization of the city. Even though the discourse on ghettoization had became part of official considerations in the post-1945 period, no attempt was made to arrest or reverse the situation. Overcrowding in the waterfront area of central Freetown, where families of three generations could be found living in abandoned warehouses, was to be reproduced tenfold in the East End area in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and the post-war years. Ask a Freetownian about the East End and s/he will immediately express disapproval. The East End is not only the gateway to the city from the hinterland; it is also close to the industrial area and the city's major port – where many migrants from the hinterland could easily get jobs as labourers. Migrants from the hinterland therefore make it their first port of call, a place to set up shop until they can find suitable accommodation. Close to 25 per cent of the good houses in the East End were destroyed during the rebel occupation of Freetown in January 1999. The densely populated East End and its rough life contrast sharply with the sparsely populated central or West End and its upper class hilltop suburbs of Wilberforce, Juba Hill and Hill Station. The lack of affordable housing and the intense overcrowding in the East End opened up other avenues for those entering the city. 'Illegal' structures or so-called informal settlements began to proliferate on the numerous hills surrounding Freetown. And these illegal structures would be the veritable enclave of Freetown's new poor.

More people entered Freetown during the 1980s, 1990s and post-war years than in any other period of its 200-year-plus history. Unable to find a place they could call their own in an already over-crowded city, new Freetownians began to reclaim the hilltops in the far-east and central parts of the city and the marshy and muddy waterfront on the western edge of the city and the peninsular. So-called informal settlements on state and private property began to emerge on the city's hilltop. Corrugated iron sheets, *pan*

bohdi in Creole language, held together by wooden pillars served the housing needs of Freetown's teeming population.[1] These *pan bohdis* are extremely hot in the dry season, when temperatures are high, and very uncomfortable in the rainy season, when it is wet and cold. Some inhabitants in these new settlements could access power supply through illegal channels, or even manage to purchase the now ubiquitous mini generator, but in most cases these dwellings go without power, water and proper sanitation. The inhabitants own some of these dwellings and they exploit informal networks to acquire legal documentation through the Ministry of Lands to legitimize their claims on their newfound property. Once constructed on state land, officials rarely take down these structures.[2]

The struggle over space is so intense that Freetownians have encroached on land reserved for the dead: cemeteries. More that 50 per cent of the land area of the Rokupur cemetery in the East End – a place where convicts and executed prisoners are laid to rest – has been illegally taken over by squatters and 'legal' occupants. The Kingtom Cemetery in the West End, the Circular Road cemetery in the central area, and the Kissy Road cemetery in the East End have all lost between 10 and 20 per cent of their space to informal settlements. The land grabbing or illegal occupation has occurred on both state and private property, so that more that 65 per cent of lawsuits in Freetown involve land-related matters.[3] Whole new cities peopled by Freetown's urban poor have sprung up within the city of Freetown. These cities of subalterns are expanding the frontiers of the ghetto from the East End to the west and central area. Every space in the city is under siege from subalterns: from open space in cemeteries to dangerously inaccessible areas under the city's numerous bridges, surrounding hilltops and environmentally unfriendly coastline. The mushrooming construction sites on the hilltops have also provided an avenue for new Freetownians to set up shop. Here mini-cities peopled by youths have sprung up with no sanitation, no drainage facilities, no water and no electricity.

The culture in these informal settlements revolves around the ghetto,[4] the *ataya bases*, the periodic masquerades, the rickety but not so rickety TV/video cinema houses, and the ever-present Pentecostal churches. The ghetto is a joint, a rendez-vous, where unemployed youth, mostly male, congregate to talk, do drugs and just hang out. It is a space created by subalterns far away from the prying eyes of the law. It was in the ghettos of Freetown that subalterns and their student allies sat to discuss the insurgency alternative; it was to the ghetto that the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) returned to recruit its cadres; and it was the ghetto that they would turn to for support when their short-lived regime was under siege in 1998 (Abdullah and Muana 1989; Abdullah 2005). The *ataya base* is strictly speaking a tea-drinking joint

where Chinese green tea is served. The ghetto, the *ataya base*, and the TV/video cinema houses equipped with satellite dishes rule the world in the numerous informal settlements. European soccer matches and Nigerian home video movies, plus occasional pornographic films, are the favourites. One can watch two European soccer matches in a day for less than one US dollar. The favorite teams are Manchester United, Liverpool, Chelsea and Barcelona, and it is not uncommon to see fanatic supporters arguing at the end of the game over what went wrong and why. Betting for one's team is also a common practice.

Home video movies and European soccer matches are the two most popular forms of leisure for the young in a city devoid of any common recreational space for its teeming young citizens. The collapse and eventual demise of the large cinema halls in the 1980s, the conversion of the only public park in the city centre into a marketplace, and the appropriation of the few public spaces to resettle those displaced by the war have put paid to most of the city's mainstream recreational and leisure activities. Jogging, now a popular form of recreation, takes place on the street, particularly in the Lumley beach area on weekends, and the newly expanded Wilkinson Road in the West End. The street, the veritable public space owned by marginal youth, is currently being reclaimed in ways that were unthinkable in the past. Food vendors, kids playing soccer, construction material, and the ever-present mobile street hawkers are all contesting for whatever little space they can claim on the city's narrow streets and pavements. Culture, leisure and space are reconfiguring the city of Freetown in new and imaginative ways that continue to defy official top-down logic.

There is a contradictory process going on in the city. On the one hand, there is ghettoization and an intense struggle over space; on the other hand, there is the establishment of many fancy restaurants in the city centre and its pristine beaches. These islands of plenty in a sea of impoverishment cater almost exclusively to a foreign clientele – the expatriate worker and tourists with dollars to spend – with a menu featuring Asian, Middle Eastern, Indian and African cuisine. A new trend in this booming restaurant industry is the feminization of the workforce: the restaurants in the city centre only employ female waiters, while those on the beachfront only have men. Whereas both women and men are to be found in the numerous security firms that have emerged in the city, the internet cafes employ more women than men. There are more women working in the formal sector today than at any time in Freetown's history. The feminization of the workforce in the formal sector is partly a result of the war and partly due to widespread poverty. Mostly young, single and still living with parents or guardians, these women are

compelled to earn a living to augment the household income constantly being eaten up by inflation and currency devaluation. The domestic pressure to earn a living, to subsidize the household budget, begins to explain the high number of sex workers, both male and female, in contemporary Freetown.

The traditional division of labour based on gender, which hitherto prevailed in the informal sector, has also disappeared. Women have moved from selling foodstuff and textiles to hawking all sorts of odds and ends in the city centre. They now sell anything from razor blades to exercise books; from candles to matches; from safety pins to nail cutters and handkerchiefs. Hawking is now a full-time occupation for Freetown's teeming population of young men and women. Low overheads, aggressive marketing strategy and mobility put the hawker in an advantageous position compared to the stationary petty trader. But competition – too many hawkers selling the same item – makes one wonder how profitable this kind of trading is. The most common among this group are the boys and men selling coconut, the cigarette and kola boys, and the shoeshine boys from neighbouring Guinea. Other groups worth mentioning are the dollar boys trading in foreign currency, boys selling currency notes to cab drivers, the ever-present photographers in the city centre, the newspaper vendors and the audiocassette/compact disc hawkers. Of all these groups, only the dollar boys, the cassette sellers and the newspaper vendors are organized in the form of a union.

War and Post-war Freetown

Freetownians like to imagine that the current urban malaise is largely war-induced. Overcrowded dwellings, the proliferation of sex workers, endless traffic jams, incessant power outages, and erratic water supply are some of the markers of everyday life in contemporary Freetown. But the ugly truth is that these developments pre-dated the war. What the war did was to accelerate the rate and pace of decadence in a city with no visible and functional governing structure, a city whose inhabitants do not pay taxes or elect those who run the affairs of its so-called management committee – an ad hoc body periodically appointed by the central government to guide the affairs of the city. Between 1991, when war broke out, to 1999, when Freetown was attacked and occupied by rebels, the city population trebled and living conditions deteriorated to an extent that people are to be found occupying any and every abandoned building. By 2000, the city could easily be described as congested, dilapidated and abandoned. Its inhabitants are living on top of each other: the rich at the top, the poor at the bottom. At the apex of this set-up, ironically, were those who had come to Sierra Leone because of the war: the UN personnel, both civilian and military.

The war in the hinterland remained a distant reality for Freetownians up to 1995. Before this period, the scars of war were visible only through the occasional mass recruitment drive in the city, the movement of large convoys of troops to the war front, and the trickling presence of displaced civilians seeking refuge. This changed with the coming of mercenaries (the Gurkhas and Executive Outcomes) and the multinational peacekeeping forces – the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).[5] The presence in the city of a substantial number of foreign troops and their civilian support staff put heavy strains on the already destroyed infrastructure, even as it brought needed cash to a cash-strapped economy dependent on donor funding. Housing these newcomers in the city, their first port of call, drove up the price of rented space as landlords and fly-by-night estate agents hiked their rents a hundredfold. Instead of collecting rent in the local currency, landlords now demanded foreign currency and a minimum two-year lease. Stories abound of Sierra Leoneans who were evicted from their dwellings by their compatriots because they could not pay in dollars. Within two years of their arrival, the peacekeepers – ECOMOG and UNAMSIL – had taken over all the beautiful villas and bungalows in Freetown's sparsely populated suburbs. Their arrival in the city worsened the housing problem and pushed to the hilltops and the crowded seaside many who would otherwise have found a place with their kith and kin. Overcrowding, congestion and over-stretched amenities describe the housing situation in the city.

War, it must be remembered, is a doubled-edged sword: it makes some people rich and others poor. The housing conditions and the struggle over space constitute the most visible aspects of the state of abject poverty that pre-dated the war years, 1991 to 2000. Every social group in Sierra Leone was hit by the war, beginning with the peasantry who lost their land, to workers who lost their jobs after the mines or factory folded, and yet others who could not be paid because the money was just not available. A majority of those who lost out and could afford it travelled to Freetown hoping to begin a new life. Teenage girls and young women, forced by the war to fend for themselves, or to augment meagre household incomes, became involved in the sex trade. Their principal target clientele were UNAMSIL personnel, who it is generally believed had more than enough dollars to spend. Armed with a cellular phone given to them by their UNAMSIL liaison and clad in tight jeans with outrageous wigs to match, these teenage girls and young women could be seen on the beach front, at the main entertainment centres and the UN headquarters, plying their trade from dusk to dawn. Most of them were displaced Sierra Leoneans from outside Freetown, or Liberian refugees who had come to the city to make a living. They could be seen

every evening haggling with their clientele in their posh four-wheel-drive vehicles marked 'UN'. There are now more sex workers in Freetown than at any time in its history.

Freetown is what it is today not because of the war but because Sierra Leone is a one-city nation. To unmake Freetown, or even remake the city as its besieged inhabitants are currently doing, is to question received ideas and practices about who should be in the city and what rights they should have. The cessation of hostilities and the formal ending of the war in 2002 followed by elections opened a new chapter in the city's history. A new local government act was promulgated in 2004 followed by elections later in the year. This gave life to a city administration with elected officials seemingly accountable to the people. Gradually city officials began to assert firm control over municipal schools; market dues were paid; and attempts were made to do something about garbage collection by instituting a waste management unit funded by the World Bank. Even so, the lines between the city's functions and that of the central government remain blurred. The first mayor to be elected under the new dispensation, Winstanley Bankole Johnson, spent the better part of his four-year tenure fighting the central government over who should control what in the city.[6] A new mayor, Herbert George-Williams, elected to office in 2008, quickly went on the offensive: he created a metropolitan police force and levied a flat tax on every adult citizen in the city of $1.25. This move, though unpopular when it was announced, was nevertheless embraced by Freetownians who now reasoned that they might as well pay up if they were to receive any service from their elected representatives.

When officials of the newly created metropolitan force began to harass citizens to pay their taxes by erecting roadblocks during early morning rush hour, the public was incensed. This was subsequently followed by mass demolition of stalls/kiosks and makeshift markets on the sidewalk. Tax payers threatened to withhold their taxes even as the metropolitan force continued to harass and arrest citizens. Hardest hit were hawkers, petty traders on Freetown's main streets whose stalls were demolished, the unemployed who were constantly harassed to pay their taxes, and the huge army of the physically challenged polio victims who had colonized a choice area in the city centre next to the mayor's office. The new mayor's assault on urban congestion and illegal structures/settlement did not go down well with the dispossessed urban poor. The physically challenged and the petty traders cried foul: they were deliberately singled out because they are powerless and without political connections. Those with political connections, they charged in reference to the mayor's actions, were the greatest offenders. Some of them even claimed to have legal papers from the respective authorities before erecting their roadside stalls.

This selective attempt to remake Freetown from above is revealing: the mayor did not attempt to demolish the numerous enclaves of shanties peopled by the urban poor that now dot the Freetown landscape. These ghettos of the young and the unemployed are as bizarre as their names suggest – they range from Afghanistan in the city centre to Kohlbot in the East End to Obama Area on the periphery of the sparsely populated suburb of IMATT,[7] about 300 metres away from the new US Embassy fortress on the hilltop between Regent and Leicester Peak. These shanties, predominantly peopled by the young, are to be found almost everywhere in Freetown: there is Madina and Bongo town on the coastline behind the military headquarters; Kamayama, a rocky patch of land on the periphery of the densely populated suburb of Lumley; and the numerous colonies on the hilltops overlooking the city from central Freetown to the far east. The collective misery of Freetown's *favelados* only registered on the national radar during the rains when disaster struck.[8] But between the occasional disaster and everyday happenings they remain, as they always have, off the national radar as unofficial statistics for rent seeking officials out to make an extra buck.

As is often the case with officialdom's dealing with subalterns, the disaster that led to the death of twelve people in early August 2010 elicited a series of pronouncements from city officials trying to absolve themselves. A disaster waiting to happen was the general refrain from the public as word went round that twelve people had perished in a badly constructed building on the hilltop. Freetown's numerous tabloids had a field day: the papers were full of stories about living conditions in the *favelas* and what *favelados* and officials could do avert another accident. The lively conversation in the tabloids elicited a prompt response from city officials: a quit order was issued to residents of Afghanistan – a coastal eyesore of shanties peopled by unemployed youths in the city centre – to prevent another disaster. And the order came not from the mayor but from Councilor Bode Gibson who informed the public that 'we should not turn a blind eye to things that would cause disaster'. Denying the charge that city officials were collecting dues from the squatter citizens of Afghanistan, the councillor squarely put the blame on officials at the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Environment: 'let us not hesitate to condemn the Lands Ministry as they were the ones charged with the responsibility of issuing building permit'.[9] City officials, it would appear, could issue quit orders and demolish illegal structures but the right to issue building permits solely rests with the Lands Ministry. Between city officials and the Lands Ministry a no-go area exists that makes it impossible for both institutions to function properly. Who then is responsible for the proliferation of *favelas* in Freetown?

An answer to this question would take us back to where we started: exclusion as the major hallmark of the colonial and postcolonial capital city in Sierra Leone. Is it any wonder that after 200 years of its existence Freetown is now faced with a teeming population of youngsters who are homeless and living in slum-like conditions? Is it any wonder that food and housing – the two most basic of basic needs – constitute the most challenging aspects of everyday life for the majority of its inhabitants? The grim reality of the situation is that the inhabitants of Freetown's shantytowns do not have to apply for building permits; they erect their makeshift structures wherever and whenever they see the possibility of establishing a place they could call home. Subalterns know too well that city officials and bureaucrats from the ministry would turn a blind eye to any infringement of official regulation if their rent seeking appetites are whetted by those who seek to occupy and convert public or private space for their personal use. The irony here is that Freetown, originally settled and peopled by subalterns from London, the so-called New World, the West Indies and the West African sub-region, is now being reclaimed by another group of subalterns, as of right. This reclaiming from below poses enormous problems for city and state officials as they collectively strive to remake the city from above.

Contemporary Freetown is a city bursting at the seams with close to 2 million people (some say 2.5 million) bunched into a land space that has not seen any new network of roads for more than half a century. The current attempt to widen some of the major roads in the western half of the city is coming too late at a time when the city council is on the verge of bankruptcy. How do we begin to make sense of land grabbing ('encroachment' in local parlance), the proliferation of informal settlements, and the ghettoization of the city whose nominal administrators know nothing and care less about how its inhabitants live or even die? What tentative conclusions can we draw from the independent and single-minded action of its inhabitants to make life more comfortable for themselves by converting public space to private use? Do we dismiss these developments as a by-product of the war and therefore assume that they will vanish now that the war is over? Or do we fashion policies that will engage these multiple voices/actions from below and thereby arrive at a solution to some of these challenges?

The post-war gentrification and reclaiming of the hilltop, formerly the abode of the British colonialists, is now threatening to dwarf the old Recaptive settlements of Gloucester, Leceister and Regent. And, as this new gentrified Freetown eats up the remnants of the rainforest in the Western Area, the lack of planning and absence of running water and electricity ensure that the new city on the hill continues to reproduce the class division that is the bane of post-coloniality. *Pari passu* with the gentrification characterized by razor

fencing and huge acres of prime state land is the ghettoization of the new city and the ubiquitous presence of subalterns on the margins as caretakers, hawkers, security personnel and domestics. The presence of the 'other' in the city of the nouveaux riches is a constant reminder of the inherent contradictions in the neo-colony. For subalterns are not about to go away; if anything the existence of the nouveaux riches calls forth the existence of the subalterns: the ones need the other to exist just as the existence of one is the precondition for the existence of the other. This dialectic continues to reproduce the citizen–subject dichotomy that had characterized the colonial city. The major difference is that the key marker is now class, not race.

The citizen–subject dichotomy that characterized the colonial city may have disappeared, to be replaced by a new exclusion based on class wherein an army of subalterns is threatening to remake the city in ways that would be accommodative of their collective interests. This new army of subalterns defies subjecthood even as it strives toward the legitimate goal of social citizenship. After all, the city, the historical *civis*, was constituted as a place for citizens: people with full rights and obligations. The enormous energy being invested in this survivalist project, to live and to reproduce in the postcolonial city, could be channelled in more productive ways if only subalterns were accepted as citizens with full right and obligations. The lumpenproletariat may not be the revolutionary class that Fanon envisioned. And they may not have played the revolutionary role that he said they would. Yet their everyday action in the city of Freetown and elsewhere on the continent of Africa compels us to rethink the city and the role of its citizens in new ways that challenge our conception of urbanization, citizenship and the role of the nation state in the contemporary era.

Mainstreaming Subalterns: An Inclusive City?

Contemporary Sierra Leone is overloaded with a myriad of institutions and structures that compel officialdom to think through the lenses of the past when finding solutions to current challenges. Thinking through institutions and structures of yesteryear to resolve current challenges implicates official policy at all levels of governance: from the framing of legislation to the implementation of policy. Trapped and closeted in images of the past, policies and legislation become dated even before they see the light of day. This conceptual trap begins to explain some aspects of the current urban malaise in contemporary Freetown. And it gets messier in the absence of a land or comprehensive urban policy: two instruments that are central to any meaningful urban renewal project. A recent study by UN-Habitat/UNEP (2010) *The State of African Cities* underlines the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling the issue of urbanization as a national priority.

The study concludes that 'populations are growing much faster than local economies, leading to major social and economic challenges like high unemployment rates, slum proliferation, social polarization and crime' (*ibid.:* 100). It therefore urges West African states to 'build governance and management capacities in cities of all sizes and plan for significant spending on services provision' (*ibid.:* 98). The need to combat our 'planet of slums' through structuration from above has been on the front-burner of academic and official discourse since the turn of the century; so too is the realization that we are now in an urban age where a majority of the world's population would live in 'non-functional' cities in the global South (Davis 2006). Putting structures and systems in place to manage cities and make them functional is one thing; getting those structures to work for youth and other marginalized subaltern categories quite another. The major political challenge is not how to make cities functional. Rather, it is how to make cities work for marginalized groups. In other words, how to create citizens out of marginal groups by giving them a stake in the new configuration.

Sierra Leone, like most African countries, has a young population with 70 per cent youth unemployment. The 2015 census recorded a total of 1,050,301 for Freetown: 14.8 per cent of the total population of 7,075,641.[10] Statistical projections based on the 2004 census put the total urban population for 2011 at 2,394,041 out of a population of 4,976,871. This figure is likely to hit the 50 per cent mark by 2017 at which point majority of Sierra Leoneans will live in cities.[11] Even so, the second poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP II) launched in 2008 only identified youth employment as one of the major risks because it 'deprives the country of its most valuable human resource' and 'if not checked could also result in social unrest and threaten the country's peace and security' (Government of Sierra Leone 2008). Once more, subalterns, youth, are seen as a security issue. Yet the way forward is not to decouple the issue of youth and urbanization. City officials and government bureaucrats should begin to link the twin issues of youth and urbanization by recognizing that a growing proportion of the city's population is both urban and young. Devising inclusivist strategies – from health to education, from housing to transportation, from energy to sanitation – that would speak to the individual and collective needs of the growing army of young, unemployed, houseless squatter citizens would lay the foundation for a solid partnership between this marginal cohort and the officialdom (Tranberg Hansen 2008: 218; UN-Habitat 2008, 2010; Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989). This would give them a stake and a participatory voice in the evolving dispensation that would privilege their collective interests as a group.

Notes

1. A *pan bohdi* dwelling consists of corrugated iron sheets, held together by narrow wooden poles. These are the most popular dwellings among Freetown's urban poor. The materials are cheap and affordable but they are extremely uncomfortable in the tropical heat.

2. The officials in the Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Environment occasionally embark on a demolition exercise of the so-called illegal structures in some of the informal settlements to give the impression that they are working. But these are hardly ever sustained!

3. Conversation with senor legal practitioners.

4. A ghetto in the language of Freetown youth is a place to do drugs. The original name was *pote* – a leisure space to relax.

5. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) deployed a multinational monitoring group with heavy Nigerian presence to keep the peace in Sierra Leone in 1998. The following year, 1999, the United Nations sent in a peacekeeping force – UNAMSIL.

6. The situation was complicated by the fact that the then mayor belonged to the opposition All People's Congress (APC).

7. The International Military Assistant Training Team (IMATT) was constituted at the end of the war to train/retrain senior officers of the Sierra Leone army. They were predominantly British and some Canadians. They occupied a sparsely population suburb on a hilltop over looking the city.

8. Twelve people perished on 9 August when an unfinished building they had occupied on one of Freetown's hilltops collapsed during heavy downpour. The President was there to console the victims!

9. 'Quit order for «Afghanistan» Falcon Bridge squatters', *Awoko Newspaper*, p. 2, 13 August 2010.

10. According to the 2015 census figures the total population of the Western Area, urban and rural, is 1,493,252 of whom 442,951 are rural and 1,050,301 urban. This amounts to 21 per cent of the total population of 7,075,641. The 2015 census figures were still being processed at the time of writing; only district and gender break down are available.

11. The 2004 and 2015 census figures for Freetown/Western Area are highly suspect and therefore not very reliable. There is evidence that the regime in power underreported the Freetown population in the 2004 census because it was an opposition stronghold. The current regime seems to have 'doctored' the 2015 census for similar reasons.

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