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Decolonization and Popular Contestation in Sierra Leone: The Peasant War of 1955-1956

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Abstract

Between 1955 and 1956, peasants in the northern region of Sierra Leone, following the steps of workers in Freetown, launched an insurrection to protest colonial taxation and the exploitative practices of their paramount chiefs and local ruling elite. The insurrection, which started as a protest against the paramount chief of Port Loko, Alkali Modu, soon engulfed all of the districts in the northern region and parts of the southern region. Through their violent actions, the peasants indicated that the oppressive practices and the excessive financial demands by the paramount chiefs and the state were neither tenable nor acceptable during the decolonization era. Their actions also illustrated the inadequacy of 'traditional' and 'paternalistic' forms of governance that had been the linchpin of British colonialism in Sierra Leone, and which still underpinned the chieftaincy and new local institutions that had been created by the departing British. The peasant insurrection interrupted the tranquil process of decolonization being executed between the Sierra Leonean elite and the British, and it took a heavy toll on the national and local security forces. However, the subsequent public investigation and acknowledgement of the peasant grievances by the Cox Commission of Inquiry as well as the restitutive actions by the SLPP government affirmed the legitimacy of many of the peasant claims. With the 1955-56 insurrection, it could be argued that the peasants in northern Sierra Leone had not only rudely interrupted the process of decolonization, they had forcibly renegotiated the terms of a 'new' Sierra Leone political order in their favour.

Résumé

Entre 1955 et 1956, les paysans de la région du nord de la Sierra Leone, emboitant les pas des travailleurs de Freetown, ont lancé une insurrection pour protester contre l'imposition coloniale et les pratiques exploitantes de leurs souverains et de leur élite locale au pouvoir. L'insurrection, qui a

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commencé sous la forme d'une protestation contre le chef souverain de Port Loko, Alkali Modu, se propageait bientôt dans tous les districts de la région nord et des parties de la région sud. Dans la violence, les paysans indiquèrent que les pratiques oppressives et les exigences financières excessives de leurs chefs souverains et du gouvernement n'étaient ni supportables, ni acceptables durant l'ère de la décolonisation. Leurs actions illustraient également l'inadéquation des formes « traditionnelles » et « paternalistes » de gouvernance qui avaient été la charnière du colonialisme britannique en Sierra Leone, et qui renforçaient encore la chefferie et les institutions locales nouvelles créées par les britanniques qui s'en allaient. L'insurrection paysanne interrompait le processus tranquille de décolonisation en cours d'être exécuté entre l'élite sierra léonaise et les britanniques, et cela fit beaucoup de victimes parmi les forces de sécurité nationales et locales. Cependant, l'investigation et la reconnaissance publiques des griefs des paysans par la Commission d'Enquête Cox ainsi que les actions restitutives par le gouvernement SLPP confirmaient la légitimité de beaucoup des récriminations paysannes. Avec l'insurrection de 1955-56, on peut arguer que les paysans du nord de la Sierra Leone ne s'étaient pas contentés d'interrompre rudement le processus de décolonisation, mais ils avaient énergiquement renégocié les termes d'un « nouvel » ordre politique Sierra Léonais en leur faveur.

Introduction

In 1955, the relatively tranquil process of decolonization in Sierra Leone was rudely interrupted by two violent events – a workers' strike in Freetown and a peasant insurrection in the northern region. While the workers' strike had erupted over pay and conditions of service in Freetown, the peasant insurrection was directed against the excessive colonial taxation and the pecuniary demands of paramount chiefs in Port Loko, Kambia, Tonko Limba and Bombali districts. By the time the dust settled in early 1956, the insurrection had led to the death of over a hundred people and the deposition of a dozen chieftains.

This article examines the origins, timing, character and historical significance of the peasant insurrection of 1955-56 in northern Sierra Leone. Rather than being anomalous or representation of intra-chieftaincy struggles as some scholars have suggested, it argues that the peasant insurrection represent an organized effort to counter the oppressive and extortionate practices of their local rulers and the state, and to reshape process of decolonization in Sierra Leone in their favour. More broadly, the insurrection, like the Freetown workers' strike, was an organized challenge to the processes of colonial 'developmentalism' and 'modernization', which had started in the 1930s, and had picked up pace after the Second World War. These processes involved the colonial renovation of 'native' administrations, improvement of agricultural production, raising of revenue, and the reshaping of peasant and working classes.¹ By the 1950s, however, this colonial project intersected

with the tide of anti-colonialism sweeping through Africa. In West Africa, 'nationalist' elite groups mobilized the masses to demand independence from the European colonialists. The French and British colonizers rode the initial nationalist storm, but by the mid-1950s they were executing relatively tranquil transfers of power to sections of these elite groups.²

The 'high' politics of decolonization in Sierra Leone was played out mainly between the conservative factions of the protectorate and Creole elite. The movement towards independence, despite the 'conflicts' between the two factions of the Sierra Leone elite, followed rather formulaic processes: parochial cultural and social groups morphed into regionally based national parties, new constitutions (for example, the Stevenson Constitution of 1951) were crafted, legislative council elections were conducted, district and chiefdom councils were being reformed. The most conspicuous problem with these processes institutions lay not only in their conception but whom they included and excluded. The colonial administration had fashioned the institutions to neutralize radical politics, incorporate the rural elite and encourage communal over class-consciousness. It had therefore constructed them around chiefs and their appointees.

The short-lived but violent workers' strike and peasant insurrection of 1955-6 in Sierra Leone bucked this formulaic decolonization trend. Workers from the city and peasants from the countryside fiercely contested the post-war modernisation project, politics and the institutions, which the British hoped would be the linchpins of the post-colonial state in Sierra Leone. In the 1950s, only in Algeria, Kenya, Cameroon and the Portuguese colonies had peasants and other rural groups violently engaged the colonial state and sections of the indigenous elite in the process of decolonization. Unlike Sierra Leone and the Cameroon, these were settler-colonies and scholars agree their decolonization process tended to be more complicated and violent.³ Unable to explain or fit the Sierra Leone rebellion into their neat narratives of the decolonization process in West Africa and Africa, historians have either ignored or treated it cursorily.⁴

Discourses of Discontent, 1945-1954

The 1955-56 Peasant War in Northern Sierra Leone had deep historical roots. The region was the site of the war by Bai Bureh, Chief of Kasseh in protest against the institution of colonial taxation in 1898. The immediate antecedents of the peasant war, however, date to rural disaffection from the late 1930s. Since then, peasants had repeatedly complained to the colonial administrators about exploitative practices of their paramount chiefs. Their grievances included the misappropriation of public funds, excessive taxation and fines, sale of political offices, extortion, and the ill-treatment and disgracing of

'big men' in public. They had resisted with non-compliance, boycotts, and refusal to provide labour for the chiefs or participate in communal services. To maintain social peace, the colonial administrators intervened and deposed at least half a dozen paramount chiefs engaged in excessive extortion and abuse of authority in the 1930s and 1940s in the Sierra Leone Protectorate.⁶ Paramount Chief Bai Sherbro of Mambolo and Alimamy Sattan Lahai (1945-1947) of Massumbala in Kambia district, for example, lost their staff after people resisted their excesses and withdrew their political support.⁵

The colonial administration did acknowledge that the deposed chiefs and their henchmen had been unpopular, extortionate or incapable of enforcing their authority. Colonial administrators argued that since some of the chiefs had been educated, they were less constrained by 'customary paternalism'. They deemed these chiefs as generally incapable of mediating the interests of the various factions in their chiefdoms. Even when they regarded the chiefs as culpable, colonial administrator showed little tolerance for the 'ill-disciplined' and 'defiant' gangs of young men who spearheaded the anti-chief protests. These men who had provided leadership for protestors were aggressive in their resistance to the chiefs. These 'young men' had been become very active around the 1930s.⁷ It was their unbridled radicalism that the colonial state sought to curb with the revamping of 'native administration' from the 1930s onwards.

In reforming native administration, instead of responding to peasant grievances and the radicalism of the 'young men', the colonial government expanded the size of the elite incorporated within the system. The government membership opened the member of new district councils to 'tribal' authorities and other prominent persons in a district. It also broadened the representative base of the districts, allocating one representative to every forty-six taxpayers in a district.⁸ The persistence of peasant protests, however, illustrated the ineffectiveness of these changes. It was hardly surprising. Chiefs and their cronies still dominated the institutions. The discontent, which had been evident in the Scarcies Rivers chiefdoms since the 1930s, continued to grow.

In Port Loko, potentially the most volatile district in the Northern Province, this disaffection took the form of a discernible rebellious discourse in the early 1950s. Rather innocuously, its genesis was signalled by two petitions sent to the administration in 1953 by Kali Morba Bempa, a 'loyal native born at Port Loko and a trader'.⁹ Bempa accused Paramount Chief Alkali Modu of Port Loko of injustice and victimization over a land lease. The lease had in fact been a subject of much dispute, and the Alkali had been made to apologize to another chief, Bai Kablo of Lunsar, over its disposal. Bempa, an educated African trader, felt he had been cheated by the chief. The manner in which he framed his case was telling. Bempa expressed his cause as a

struggle between the weak and the powerful, and as a struggle for liberty, justice and individual rights. In his first letter, he wrote:

I know what it has meant for me to acquire property, and for it to be divorced from me in this manner does not in my humble opinion, constitute an act which conforms to individual liberty nor to British law, order, good government and justice. I am well aware what my position is vis-a-vis that of the Honourable P.C. but my humble status does not, nor can deprive me of the ordinary rights of a subject.¹⁰

The colonial administration did not respond to the plea for justice. Undeterred, Bempa sent another letter to the commissioner, complaining of further victimization by Modu. He claimed that the chief had wrongfully fined him for a crime he did not commit.¹¹ Bempa's second letter reiterated the respect he had for authority, but he questioned its efficacy in redressing his grievances. He stated, 'I respect the Chief. I however hardly feel this is British fair-play and justice that had been meted to me. Why the DC has taken no action again beat [sic] me.'¹² Bempa's petitions invoked, and trod carefully between, the twin elements of chieftaincy paternalism and British liberalism.

Far from being unique, Bempa's complaints seemed emblematic of broader discontent against the reign of Alkali Modu. Two other petitions against the chief landed on the desks of Governor de Zouche Hall and Albert Margai, the Minister for Local Government and Education. The first, a well scripted four-page treatise, was penned in the name of the 'Tribal Authority of the Maforki chiefdom' and dated 1st November 1954.¹³ The authors accused Alkali Modu of pilfering £775 from the chiefdom treasury and misappropriating a government loan of £8,000. The loan had been secured through the district council to develop an organized transportation system for the chiefdom.¹⁴ The transport scheme had been one of many development projects enthusiastically drawn up by District Councils and financed by government loans.

Like many of the other local government schemes, it had run into difficulties. In the case of Maforki Chiefdom, the petitioners claimed that Alkali Modu had used only £4,000 to buy useless 'old army trucks' and had diverted the rest of the money to develop his private transport and hotel businesses. The chiefdom transportation system had failed. The 'big men', who as members of the Chiefdom Tribal Authority had co-guaranteed the loan, had to 'mortgage' their property when the government demanded the first instalment of the loan repayment. The transportation loan debacle was, however, part of a wider dissatisfaction with the chief's commercial endeavour. The petitioners condemned his monopolization of chiefdom commerce, which they maintained had stifled trade, driven 'ambitious citizens

of Maforki into exile and seclusion', and threatened the prosperity of the chiefdom.¹⁵

The underlying intra-elite struggle over trade and resources was obvious. It had long been part of the history of the northern region. What was significant was the transformed context in which this struggle was being played out. Paramount Chief Alkali Modu, a supporter of the Sierra Leone Peoples' Party (SLPP) and a representative in the Legislative Council, commanded political power and support that extended far beyond his chiefdom.¹⁶ Furthermore, his actions, far from being extraordinary, were part of the process of renewed accumulation of resources by the political elite in the period of decolonization. The context may explain the manner in which the petitioners framed their claims. They invoked their time-honoured obligations to defend popular interests:

We are the leaders of our tribesmen, and although we elected Alkali Modu III as Paramount Chief of Maforki Chiefdom, we consider it remiss in our duty to our people, if we allow these things to pass without due notice. We are therefore asking that administrative justice be allowed to prevail in all matters, and strongly suggest that a commission of inquiry be set to look into the affairs of the whole Chiefdom.¹⁷

The petitioners requested a discreet investigation of the chief. They appealed to the state to prevent the chief from assembling the 'big men' to swear on 'bad native medicine'.¹⁸ Within Temne culture, this act would immobilize the big men and coerce them into supporting the chief. By claiming to defend the people and not themselves, the petitioners creatively linked their own disaffection with popular discontent against the chief. The state, however, paid no attention to them.

Undeterred by official inaction, the petitioners sent a second letter, this time in the name of the 'Tax Payers, Traders, Farmers, Tribal Authorities and the Youths of Maforki Chiefdom'. Dated 25 September 1955, it restated the earlier charges of financial misappropriation and 'exclusive trade monopoly' against Alkali Modu.¹⁹ The authors added forced labour and excessive fines to their growing list of grievances. They expressed disappointment that the colonial administration and the SLPP government had not investigated the earlier charges made against Alkali Modu.

The new petition was occasioned by a renewed levy of five shillings imposed by the chief to construct a personal house. The chief had collected an earlier levy in 1952 but had not constructed the house. The authors resented the insertion of another five shilling levy into the already inflated 1955 tax. Calling the levy an 'extortion', the petitioners informed Albert Margai:

We do not threaten your Ministry in the Local Government Schedule but repudiate any recourse to extortion of all kinds. We therefore hasten to inform you that if some plan for extortion works, which undoubtedly will deride of

the power of good and healthy living due to lack of resources for getting finance, we may resort to violence in protest or desert the chiefdom and the environs, under the influence of a despotic climate.²⁰

The demand for reform and the threat of rebellion were not new. What was new was the forceful and uncompromising manner in which reform was being demanded. Two years earlier, a petitioner from Loko Massama chiefdom, writing under the pseudonym 'Shegbendeh' had complained about maladministration and the corrupt reign of Bai Sama. He had warned, 'there is riot a-head'.²¹ In ignoring the petitions, the colonial government underestimated the seriousness of the crisis brewing in the Northern Province.

The second petition had clearly expressed popular disaffection with the 1955 tax in Maforki chiefdom. This tax, with the additional district precept, became the major catalyst for rebellion. The passage of 1954 Local Tax Ordinance had replaced the House Tax and Chiefdom Tax with a single poll tax of twenty-five shillings to forty shillings payable by all males who were twenty-one years and above. The new taxation system shifted the burden from property to persons.²² For years, the administration maintained the House Tax at five shillings and chiefdom rates at four shillings. After World War II, it allowed chiefdom rates to slowly increase to meet the financial needs of the newly created Tribal Authorities. Chiefdom taxes grew yearly to a variable rate of six shillings and six pence in Bombali and ten shillings in Port Loko district. Peasant tolerance and willingness to pay the yearly increases might have created the impression that they could continue to pay additional taxes.

The crucial tax increases came at a critical historical juncture when the peasants found it difficult to meet additional financial obligations. By 1955, peasants in Northern Province had begun to feel the negative impact of the changing structure of the post-war economy. The artificial agricultural boom generated by diamonds had faded, and the production and value of key agricultural exports, including rice, had begun to decline. Export of agricultural commodities dropped sharply in tonnage and receipts. The visible balance of trade worsened sharply, with the economy experiencing a formal trade deficit of £1,505,000.²³

The conditions may have been bad, but did it mean that a rebellion was inevitable or even possible? What then made the rebellion possible? Part of the answer lay in the timing of the tax hike. It had coincided with the implementation of two crucial administration decisions. These were the amendment of the district council ordinance and the disbandment of the court messenger force in 1954. The council amendment provided the opportunity for district councillors to replace district commissioners as presidents in ten of the twelve districts.²⁴ Except for Kono and Pujehun, the replacements

were all chiefs. All the councils, with the exception of Kono, removed the district commissioner from the Finance and General Purposes Committees.²⁵ The replacements weakened the position of the District Commissioner vis-à-vis the chiefs and the SLPP government. Consequently, it sharply attenuated the paternalistic role commissioners could play in mediating the relationship between peasant, the chief and the state.²⁶

The retirement, re-employment or reintegration of some of the ex-court messengers within a reconstituted National Police Force removed an important local law enforcement mechanism.²⁷ By its training and organization, the police was an urban force and a poor substitute for the Court Messenger Force, whose focus and orientation had been primarily rural.²⁸ The administration definitely did not consider the impact of implementing the two changes almost simultaneously. The changes in the configuration of power took on an added significance with the tax increase. The diminution of the authority of the colonial state and empowerment of chiefs was lost neither on chiefs nor on peasants. The conjuncture of events in 1954 and 1955 constituted a 'crisis' of colonial rule and an 'opportunity' for its contestation.

The crisis and opportunity became apparent after a workers' strike in Freetown in February 1955. The workers had demanded better wages and conditions of service. The attempt by the state to break up the strike led to three days of 'rioting' in the city. The strike set the tone for the year. Except for urban workers in Bo, the events did not directly involve the people in the provinces. Its significance and achievements, however, did not go unnoticed. It became 'common knowledge' that the wage demands of workers that had initially been rejected by employers were conceded after the riots.²⁹ The Freetown strike provided a lesson in protest and a reference point for rural rebels. Peasant protestors appropriated the discourse of 'strike' and creatively applied it to their own circumstances for their own goals.

The 1955-56 Peasant Rebellion: From Strike to War

The colonial consensus, which the state had worked so assiduously to maintain and refurbish in the post-war period, was in crisis. It was in Maforki Chieftdom, Port Loko district, which had been the epicentre of the 1898 rebellion, and where a rebellious mood already existed, that peasants first seized the opportunity to 'strike' against taxes and their chiefs. On November 25 and 29, over seven thousand peasant protestors marched to the offices of the District and Provincial Commissioners and complained about the five shilling levy by Paramount Chief Alkali Modu for his new house.³⁰ They also protested against the excessive taxation, extortion and oppression in the chieftdom. The commissioners assured the crowd their grievances would be investigated.

They dispersed.³¹ The scale of popular discontent forced Alkali Modu to drop the tax.

The rescinding of the tax, however, did not satisfy Maforki protestors. They wanted the administration to freeze the tax and to ensure that Alikali Modu would not reimpose the levy. They scheduled another meeting for December 2, 1955. Wary about the potential of such a gathering, the government accused the protest leaders of merely attempting to use Alkali Modu's 'concession as a stepping-stone for further negotiations'. Many peasants, it claimed, had been satisfied with the chief's retreat.³² To prevent the meeting, the police blockaded the town. They arrested 73 people and dispersed the thousands of people who were on the way to the gathering. Many eluded the police and made it to the meeting site, but Pita (Peter) Kamara and Abu Sankoh, who had emerged as two of the informal leaders of the protest, did not. The government later claimed that Kamara stayed away from the meeting because he was satisfied with Alkali Modu's concession.³³

Tensions remained high. Fennell Smith, the Provincial Commissioner of Northern Provinces, declared a state of emergency, prohibited all assembly and instructed police to arrest armed protestors in Port Loko.³⁴ By then, peasant protests had exploded in other chiefdoms. In Buya Romende Chiefdom, peasants demonstrated against excessive taxation and misrule of Bai Banta, a native of Port Loko and close friend of Alkali Modu.³⁵ In Marampa-Masimera Chiefdom, protestors destroyed the house and rice stock of the Section Chief, Almami Sheriffu, whom they accused the chief of extortion. The District Commissioner had to calm the crowd with promises of an enquiry into the chief's conduct.³⁶

Peasants in Songo in the Koya chiefdom also held protests to coincide with those in Port Loko on November 29, and December 2, 1955. Led by Amadu Kanda, the crowd complained to the District Commissioner about high taxes, corrupt tax assessors and oppression by Paramount Chief Bai Kompa.³⁷ Kompa was described as 'the worst corrupt chief' in the Northern Province. Police dispersed the crowd with tear-gas and baton charges and removed the twelve road blocks that had been set up. The chief hid during the disturbances, and Amadu Kanda became the 'virtual leader' of the chiefdom. By December 5, the revolt had subsided in Maforki, Marampa-Masimera, Buya Romende and Koya chiefdoms. According to the colonial administration, the 'constitutional approach' became ascendant among the protestors.³⁸

The most intense, and perhaps destructive, phase of the rebellion in Port Loko District took place in Kaffu Bullom and Loko Massama chiefdoms. The protestors destroyed properties and set up road blocks.³⁹ Clashes between the police and demonstrators from the December 18 to 26 resulted in the

death of five people.⁴⁰ The government had to put the International Airport at Lungi under military guard after the police force was overwhelmed by the crowd.⁴¹ Similar violence occurred in the two Bombali chiefdoms, Makari Gbanti and Bombali Sebor. In spite of efforts by leaders in Makari Gbanti to keep the protest peaceful, the crowd destroyed the Native Administration Court house and records, and the eight properties belonging to Native Authority members whom they also 'manhandled'. Protestors pelted the car of the District Commissioner, J. Watson, with stones. They relented only after the neighbouring Paramount Chief Bai Sebor intervened and the District Commissioner promised an enquiry.⁴²

By the time the protests spread to Kambia District on December 19, they had acquired the character of a war. Intelligence reports described the crowds as 'better armed and organized and more directly and systematically aggressive in burning and looting houses and stores of the Chiefs and Native Authority officials'.⁴³ In Samu, protestors destroyed the houses and farms of Chief Yumkella. They claimed that the chiefs had enjoyed 'these evidences of affluence for a long time and now did not need them any longer'.⁴⁴ Expectations that the crisis would blow over at the end of the year proved unfounded.⁴⁵ Fresh outbreaks of violence took place in Bombali and Kambia districts. The police arrested people in Tonko Limba chiefdom for arson. Police guards had to be posted at the rice mill at Kasseire in Mambolo to prevent its destruction. In Sanda Loko, the crowds protested taxation and extortion.⁴⁶ Armed with dane guns, swords and machetes, they defied police tear-gas and baton charges. They construed police actions as 'making war on the people'.⁴⁷ The 'rebels' associated the police with 'steel helmets, tear gas and firearms and regarded them as people who had to be fought'. Police became targets because they were perceived as defenders of chiefs and the corrupt local elite. Their appearance and aggressive tactics to restore order made them unpopular. By February 14, 1956, an estimated 20 people had died in the 'war'.⁴⁸

The most aggressive protestors coalesced in two 'hardcore gangs', which operated from Magbema and Samu chiefdoms. Police estimated that the 'gang' based in Samu town had between 200 to 300 members. One of the gangs ambushed police officers at Kychom on February 24, 1956, injuring many of them. Another gang attacked police at Mapotolon town, wounding a British Police officer. One of the protestors was killed in the fray.⁴⁹ Police attempts to penetrate the gang by infiltration proved unsuccessful. The two infiltrators sent by the police were discovered, denounced and abducted by peasant protestors. They were never found. The police presumed they had been beaten

to death. The police eventually arrested the leader of one of the gangs, which reduced their activities.⁵⁰

Before then, the protestors had succeeded in chasing six Kambia district chiefs, including Kande Yumkella, from their chiefdoms. Kande Yumkella, who was also the district council president, had been sent by the government to explain the tax increase to his people.⁵¹ His mission failed. Peasants did not listen to him. The protestors also intimidated Paramount Chief Bai Farima Tass, who was also a Minister without Portfolio in the SLPP administration. Farima had to be escorted from the wrath of the crowd by the police.⁵² Yumkella and Farima Tass, subsequently accused Commissioner Greenwood and the police of failing to protect them. The allegation was discovered to be false.⁵³

The Southern Province also felt the shockwaves of the revolt but peasant protests actions there were less violent.⁵⁴ The only exception was Moyamba District where protestors burnt ten houses in Rotifunk and Bradford and attempted to destroy a section of the railway. Calm returned only after the police killed two people and arrested about 335 demonstrators. Furthermore, the police proscribed public meetings and the possession of sticks.⁵⁵ By the time the riots subsided, over £750,000 worth of property had been destroyed and twenty-six people, including three policemen, had been killed.⁵⁶ In Bo and Pujehun districts, the thousands of peasant protestors displayed neither the animosity nor the violence of their Northern Province and Moyamba counterparts towards their chiefs.

What was to be made of this general outpouring of the rural discontent? Despite the numerous indications and hints of restiveness, the outbreak of mass protest came as a rude shock to the political elite and colonial administration. The elite had been busy formulating 'constitutional' amendments and political arrangements for greater autonomy. They had put far more credence in the portions of the colonial reports describing the districts as 'law-abiding and peaceful' than those pointing to social discontent. The instinctive reaction of the SLPP elite was to blame their political opponents for both the workers' strike and the rebellion. Their provincial journal, the *Observer*, based in Bo, accused SLPP opponents of using the 'emotions of ignorant people' and 'backdoor methods' to challenge them.⁵⁷ Yet, as clearly explained above, the warning signs had been evident from the late 1940s.

The Rebellion as a Historical Process

Scholars who have analyzed Sierra Leone's political evolution have labelled peasant actions 'reactionary' or 'anomic'.⁵⁸ Martin Kilson drew two major conclusions from the 1955 peasant rebellion. First, he argued that the rebellion challenged the myth that nationalist elites and the masses had identical inter-

ests or acted harmoniously during the decolonization period. Second, although peasants had real and concrete grievances, their 'reaction ... followed anomic lines, entailing violent, riotous political expression'.⁵⁹ John Cartwright essentially endorsed this broad view. While Kilson's first conclusion is tenable, the second needs reconsideration. Kilson had interpreted colonial political evolution in Sierra Leone as a struggle between 'modernity' and 'tradition'. As a consequence, he decried the ambivalence of the rebellious peasants towards the chieftaincy and their failure to push for 'outright revolution'.

Far from being an 'anomic' or 'reactionary' sequence of events, the 1955 rebellion should be understood as an unfolding historical movement – composed of different strands and personalities in different localities – held together by common class discontent and interests. It was also a historical discourse composed with the actions, intent, culture, language and social reality of the participants. Thus, the revolt should be seen for what it was, not what the analysts want it to be.⁶⁰ What started as a strike against excessive taxation and the depredations of Chief Alkali Modu rapidly evolved into multiple 'chiefdom rebellions' and 'chiefdom revolutions'. By December 1955, even the colonial administration had to concede that the events were a 'peasants' revolt' aimed at corrupt paramount chiefs and their henchmen.⁶¹

By using the language of a 'strike', peasants echoed the actions of workers in Freetown in the same year and strove to give a national dimension to their movement and rebellion. However, by the time the revolt was suppressed, it had assumed the character of a civil war between the state, the chiefs and the peasantry. Although a civil war, it was largely restricted to the ethnic groups in the region. Looking at peasant rebellions in South Africa and Uganda between the 1930s and 1980s, Mahmood Mamdani makes an interesting observation on this point. He posits that the peasant struggles against oppressive chiefs and indirect state structures assumed the 'dimensions of a civil war inside the ethnic group'.⁶² Northwestern Sierra Leone proved to be no different in this respect.

The peasant rebellion had been primarily directed against their chiefs. It had started peacefully and purposefully though it quickly took on the character of a civil war, with the destruction of the property of the chiefs and local authorities. The state escalated the war when it interposed the police between the peasant rebels and their chiefs in order to enforce law and order. The rebel peasants naturally associated the actions of the police with defence of rural despotism and opposition to their interests. The escalation of the protest into a 'war' also reflected the hardening attitude of some of the protestors, the disintegrative effects of the confrontation and the lack of solidity of the peasant leadership. The destructive violence invested in the protest should also be seen as the consequent supersession of individual and sectarian

concerns over the collective expression of peasant interests in the unfolding drama. This resultant anarchy, however, should not mask the fact that in the sequence of events, the protestors, except on rare occasions, directly targeted chiefs, local chieftdom authorities and property. They spared Europeans, Syrians and their properties.⁶³

The 'crowds', 'demonstrators', 'mobs' and 'rioters' who were engaged in the rebellion were not faceless people. They consisted mainly of peasant farmers, fishermen, small traders and rural artisans with real interests and grievances. In the primary and secondary literature, the tendency has been to lump them together as 'young men'.⁶⁴ The term has ambiguous generational and political connotations. 'Young men' had long been a local euphemism for the politically disempowered. In fact, it included all those, men and women, who did not hold positions of authority within the local network of power.

That disempowerment of a section of populace, and the inability of newly created colonial structures to empower them, partly explains the nature of the peasant leadership that emerged. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, these young people had been dynamic and aggressive in the pursuit of their interests. The question was whether they had the credibility to challenge 'traditional authority'. The peasant protestors, therefore, did not just gravitate around any 'young man'. In every chieftdom and town, they gravitated around those who had the social standing and personality to ably represent their cause. Thus, in Port Loko, Bakorobah, Pita (Peter) Kamara and Abu Sankoh became the most prominent leaders of the protestors.⁶⁵ The colonial administration described Bakorobah as an influential and popular Mandingo businessman of Guinean origin. He had operated a successful transport business at Port Loko, 'until practically squeezed out by Alkali Modu'.⁶⁶ Pita Kamara, also a trader, had a similar axe to grind with the chief. The third man, Abu Sankoh, had strongly opposed the amalgamation of Maforki and Port Loko Chieftdoms. These men drew support from an assortment of local leaders, including Tejan Kamara, Abu Kamara and L. Bangurah, a clerk. The brothers of Pita Kamara, Maligie Kamara and Abu Kamara, also joined the campaign against Alkali Modu. Maligie and Abu were well known diamond dealers.

The administration also tried to link the Port Loko leaders with Mahmoud Akar, a member of the United People's Party. It was said that the party took an active interest in the rebellion and actually held 'propaganda meetings' around it.⁶⁷ Beyond this event, the administration had little concrete evidence to link Akar with the Port Loko leadership. In the end, the crucial point was that the confluence of grievances between the essentially elitist group of leaders and the peasant masses in Port Loko positioned the former to provide the requisite leadership for the rebellion.

The general character of the leadership did not differ radically in the other chiefdoms. In Loko Massama, the site of some of the most violent protests, Pa Buya, Yorro, Kaba Conteh and Mr. A. B. Kamara (Bai Bai) were identified as the inspiration behind the events. A.B. Kamara, a literate man, had very strong ties with Wallace-Johnson.⁶⁸ He carried copies of Mr Wallace-Johnson's correspondence with London and allegedly distributed party cards of the National Council of Sierra Leone (NCSL) to his peasant supporters.⁶⁹ Keku Bangura of Karsona, Abu Ibrahim, a retired civil servant and sub-Chief Alkali Conteh were reported as being very influential among the protestors in Kaffu Bullom. In Masimera, Amadu Kule, popularly known as 'An Boye-Kek', led the crowds.⁷⁰ Headmen, retired petty bureaucrats and educated men for a plethora of reasons led the peasant crowds against paramount chiefs and other chiefdom administrators. In short, the peasant movement drew its leadership from popular community figures that were not necessarily commoners. Drawn sometimes from competing and opposing royal houses and political factions, this leadership represented a credible but ambivalent alternative to paramount chiefs.

This elitist leadership helped the peasant movement by its ability to sufficiently represent the peasant cause to the state. They coherently articulated peasant grievances to the local and state authorities. The crowds accepted and publicly acknowledged their leadership. In some cases, peasants refused to talk with government administrators in their absence. Their unwillingness, however, to pursue peasant demands or challenge the state beyond a particular point hampered the movement. They accommodated the state when they perceived sufficient concessions had been made. For example, Abu Sankoh did not show up for the December 2, 1955 meeting in Port Loko because he felt the tax concessions were enough. Bakorobah, another prominent leader, withdrew when the whole thing got 'too big' for him.⁷¹ The limitation of this leadership to effectively represent peasant interests or provide a real alternative may have been responsible for the intensification of the violence and the degeneration to 'gangsterism' in certain areas.

What triggered the rebellion and what motivated these peasant rebels and leadership? The increase in local taxation and the replacement of house tax with a poll tax in 1955 have been accepted by colonial authorities and scholars as the motive behind the rebellion. There is much merit in this position because the increase did add to peasant burdens. Taxation became equal for the rich and poor. The 'big men' who had carried the tax burden for 'young men' and their dependants were less inclined to do so when it went up to 40 shillings. Heavy extortion and over-assessment by tax assessment committees compounded the burden on the poor.⁷² The lack of visible benefit in remote villages made the tax increases questionable. Peasants perceived correctly

that their taxes swelled the salaries of local officials and paid for their concrete and iron sheet roofed houses. The almost spontaneous outpouring of anger against the taxes is, therefore, understandable.

Eliphas Mukonoweshuro, however, cautions against over-emphasizing the taxation as the main cause of the revolt. He maintains that neither the concept of taxation nor resistance against tax were new.⁷³ Mukonoweshuro essentially accepts the arguments of Chief Provincial Commissioner H. Childs, who maintained that the 1955 ordinance did not constitute a serious departure from the spirit of the 1937 tax amendment, which already equated house with family. Both Mukonoweshuro and Childs have a point. The novelty of taxation had long worn off after 1898, and the house tax had effectively become a poll tax by 1937.⁷⁴ The system had always been riddled with extortion and assessment problems that the administration could not resolve. Lastly, the Cox Commission later concluded that 25 shillings was a reasonable and affordable tax level for peasants. Peasants, in fact, accepted and paid that amount after 1955. However, while this reasoning is useful in explaining why the protests did not erupt simultaneously or affect all parts of the provinces equally; it does not explain why the rebellion started in Port Loko or became extremely violent in Kambia and other districts.

Part of that answer may lie in the incidence and impact of the new tax system. The striking feature of the 1955 tax assessment was the dramatic increase in the tax amount and taxable population in the Northern Province. The province had an increase of 24.6 per cent compared to 9.6 per cent in South-Eastern Province and 1.8 per cent in South-Western Province. In Port Loko, figures showed a staggering 53 per cent increase in taxpayers.

The figures indicate that the inhabitants of Port Loko and Kambia felt the burden of the new tax-system more severely than those in other districts. The astronomical increase in tax revenue suggests that the paying population had been either previously under-assessed, or was over-assessed in 1955. Under-assessment meant people who had escaped taxation in the past now had to pay taxes. Over-assessment meant existing taxpayers had to pay more. The problem of assessment featured prominently among the widespread complaints received by the administration on abuses that accompanied the collection of the taxes. The taxes ranged from twenty-five shillings to forty shillings a head (in Kambia). This differential impact is important in helping to understand why rebellion started in Port Loko and why it assumed such violent proportions in Kambia.⁷⁵

The focus on taxation can partly explain why the rebellion happened when it did, but it cannot fully explain the virulence of the rebellion or the animosity towards the local elite. It also cannot explain the nature of peasant leadership. After all, the tax was imposed by the state and, until 1955, collected by its

agents. To reach a deeper understanding, we have to turn to the plethora of grievances that underlay politics in rural areas. The rebellion had revealed an alarming extent of corruption, extortion and despotism by the local chieftdom elite. Local authorities interpreted 'native custom' in diverse ways to extract forced labour, levies and fines from peasants and the rural poor.⁷⁶

Petitions sent to the government at the height of the rebellion graphically conveyed the manifold manipulations of 'custom' for extortionate ends. Formulated in the language of the ruling elite, the documents were the work of 'peasant intellectuals'.⁷⁷ These 'intellectuals' were usually educated men who had held minor clerical posts in the bureaucracy. What made them peasant intellectuals was not necessarily their immediate social status, but their wider communal links and spirited presentation of peasant grievances. Their petitions marked a sharp departure from immediate pre-rebellion documents. Unlike Bempa and the other Port Loko petitioners, they made no concessions to the paternalism of the chieftaincy.

The SLPP government and colonial officials received many petitions, which they largely ignored and discarded.⁷⁸ Two petitions from Loko Massama and Samu Chiefdoms, however, made their way to the Colonial Office in London. A.B Kamara, Alimamy Sampha Yorroh Kargbo, Pa Lamina Bonthor and Idrissa Fofanah authored the Loko Massama petition on behalf of the chieftdom residents. The Samu petition was penned by one M.S. Mansaray. The Loko Massama petition addressed from the office of the West African Youth League, 7 Trelawny Street, symbolized the facilitative role of Wallace-Johnson as well as the link between rural and urban radicalism. Significantly, the two petitions came from areas where the tax rebellion had assumed the character of a war.

The petitions countered the stigmatization of peasant protestors as anomic, and shifted responsibility for the violence to the state and local elite. The Loko Massama petition attributed the violence to the local ruling elite and security forces, calling them the perpetrators of the violence. It stated, '[t]he people only protested and without an act of violence at all to the paramount chief and tribal authority against excessive taxation'.⁷⁹ M.S. Mansaray of Samu expressed similar sentiments, describing the protestors as 'law abiding and loyal inhabitants who have silently and patiently borne a variety of hardships' under the chief, and not 'hooligans (sic) destroying property indiscriminately and wantonly'.⁸⁰

Both petitions censured Paramount Chiefs Bai Sama of Loko Massama and P.C. Bai Sherbro Yumkella II of Samu. The Samu petition painted an unflattering image of Yumkella. It described the chief as a self proclaimed 'Black Governor', who was 'intolerant of popular opinion, uninterested in the welfare of the people and exploitative of his people'. Among his long list

of transgressions were incompetence, despotism, corruption, bribery, malicious persecution, incarceration, victimization, extortion, financial misappropriation, use of 'free labour without feeding them', and the imposition of a plethora of fines. Mansaray wrote:

We have seen people fined £50 or more, or flogged, or asked to 'pick pins' on one leg for a long time or to be placed in stocks in front of their wives and relatives, just because they had no money to pay; in some cases their farms are taken and given to the Chief so that the Chief now owns a lot of farms. Lands have been seized by this means and given to the friends of the Chief. The Chief is always after money and uses many ways to obtain the utmost from the people.⁸¹

Mansaray maintained Yumkella had insulted their 'manhood'. He claimed the chief had reduced people to poverty, enslaved them and made it impossible to maintain tranquillity. Many protestors later described their condition vis-à-vis chiefs as 'domestic slavery'.⁸² The Provincial Commissioner of Northern Province dismissed Mansaray's allegations against Yumkella as 'false and exaggerated', though he conceded that the general picture painted of the depredations of the chieftaincy was 'fairly true'.⁸³

The Commissioner may have questioned the veracity of Mansaray's claims, but his accompanying despatch essentially legitimized the substance of the anti-chief discourse of the peasant intellectuals. In his despatch accompanying Mansaray's petition, he added his own long list of the omissions of the chieftaincy. High on his list was forced labour. Chiefs had continued to demand forced labour even though that right had been commuted to fixed salaries. The commissioner also conceded that chiefs set up illegal courts and collected undeterminable sums in fines and levies. There were levies for funerals, for sending chiefs to Legislative Council and for the crowning of 'Black District Commissioners' – as presidents of district councils became known. Peasants paid fees or fines for fishing, hunting, birth and death, carpentry, and secret societies.⁸⁴

The commissioner also pointed out that chiefs profited from sale of titles to the local elite and elections to public offices. Many chiefdoms were cluttered with *almamis*, *kaprs*, and *santigis*, many of whom had paid the various paramount chiefs for their titles. Chiefs also took bribes and presents from candidates for tribal authorities and district councils. These officials, more often than not, recouped their expenses from peasants. The district commissioner also maintained that with the introduction of Native Authorities, 'chiefs have revived old habits and got away with what amounts to a breach of contract'.⁸⁵ The chiefs used every opportunity to line their pockets. Mansaray's petition was finally vindicated, with the concession by the

commissioner that the chiefs of Mambolo and Samu (Yumkella) had enriched themselves considerably by using unpaid labour for their farms.⁸⁶ Popular revulsion against the conduct of this chiefly elite was evident in widespread destruction of their farms, stores and houses.

Excessive taxation and local tyranny in 1955 had sparked the tinderbox of frustrations over colonial institution-building and modification of the historical relationship between the state, chiefs and peasants. Initiated with the native administrations in the 1930s, by the 1950s the changes had modified the chieftaincy, giving chiefs greater access to resources and prominence in state politics. The refashioned and revitalized chieftaincy re-assumed control over peasant lives in ways which were far 'more powerful' than in the precolonial period.⁸⁷ In the decolonization period, the decision by Dr Margai to anchor the Sierra Leone Peoples' Party around the chieftaincy considerably strengthened it. The propensity towards primitive capital accumulation and ostentatious consumption, which became the hallmark of the new political elite, sharply attenuated the traditional paternalism of the chieftaincy. Under these circumstances, the customary means of challenging local despotism became greatly circumscribed. The institutional modification of the relationship between chiefs and peasants and its ensuing contestation has been wrongly construed by colonial officials and academics alike as the struggle between 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

The failure of customary mechanisms or the new institutions to accommodate or resolve the struggle produced the violent rebellion. Protestors had used petitions and peaceful demonstrations to articulate their grievances, contest and negotiate their relationship with the chiefs and the state, and defend their class interests. It was the failure of these peaceful actions to convey effectively the depth of peasant discontent and produce speedy results that led to the 'riots' and the 'war'.

Until then, the reasons for the outbreak of violence should be sought in the contradictions between chiefs and commoners, and the inability of 'custom' to accommodate them. To its credit, the colonial administration admitted that the 'absence of any recognised means by which changes in chieftain government could be made peacefully and constitutionally' had produced the violent confrontation.⁸⁸ The government's attempts at restoring order were not, therefore, limited to the use of force. It also tried mediation and conciliation. In short, as the situation worsened, it tried to reassert its paternalistic role. At the end of 1955 and the beginning of 1956, it instructed provincial administrators to conduct enquiries in the areas of unrest. The government advised administrators to give people the full opportunity 'to voice their grievances and disclose the root cause for the comment'.⁸⁹ African

as well as European administrators took on the tasks of visiting, enquiring and reconciling the turbulent chiefdoms in Northern Province.

Administrators learnt about the level of animosity within the chiefdoms, the main targets of peasant grievances and the dynamics of the protests. In Loko Massama, the protestors refused to even meet or reconcile with Chief Bai Sama, who was described as despotic and tyrannical. In chiefdoms like Sella Limba and Kaffu Bullom, popular animosity was directed more at chiefdom clerks, tribal authorities, sections and headmen than at the chiefs. The Massumbala Chiefdom enquiry revealed that sub-chiefs had spearheaded the protests against the chief and the government. Only the chief's house had been destroyed during the protests. According to administrators, the sub-chiefs had joined the protests because the institutional changes had curtailed their access to 'illegal' resources.⁹⁰

The conciliation exercise gave the opportunity to contending factions to articulate their grievances and for the administration to take stock of the situation. In a few cases, the 'riot fever' seemed to have propelled unscrupulous individuals into action.⁹¹ On the whole, however, they revealed the twin impact of the cumulative 'customary' or 'traditional' demands made by chiefs and new local government institutions. An administrator observed that peasants complained about a bowl of rice levied by the chief in Sella Limba. Putting the complaint in context, he maintained that the bowl of rice may seem negligible but when added to district and chiefdom taxes, birth and death taxes, circumcision taxes, palm wine taxes and many other seemingly minor customary 'obligations', it became unbearably burdensome for peasants. The meetings also demonstrated that many people simply could not fathom the role and functions of the new officials and institutions and their relationship to much more familiar ones.⁹² What was the relationship between the court president and chief? What was the relationship between Native Administrations and District Councils? Colonial administrators and chiefs had not provided sufficient answers for these questions. The murky ground between intention and practice gave chiefs not only leeway for corruption, but also bred popular suspicion and antagonism to the members of the new institutions.

The Cox Commission: Validation, Arbitration and Intimidation

Even with all the unresolved questions, the colonial state felt that local enquiries would be cathartic and remedial enough. Both the governor and African-led government resisted demands for a general commission of inquiry. The demand for a general enquiry had been vigorously pushed by I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, who accused the administration of using excessive force

to quell the rebellion. He telegraphed a socialist British Member of Parliament, Fenner Brockway, to demand a tax freeze and an inquiry into the disturbances from the Colonial Office.⁹³ Johnson reiterated this position in a letter of December 30, 1955, calling on the Colonial Office to resolve the 'great burden of taxation, thus obviating the threat of the incident which took place in the year 1898' by appointing a Royal Commission.⁹⁴ Pressured constantly by Wallace-Johnson, Fenner Brockway pushed the Colonial Secretary for Colonies, Alan Lennox-Boyd, for an investigation into the rebellion.⁹⁵ Unsurprisingly, to deflect the pressure, the colonial administration in Freetown accused Wallace-Johnson of being a prime instigator of the rebellion. Administrators charged him with having gone to Rofinka in Maforki Chieftdom to address demonstrators.⁹⁶

The scale of the revolt and fear of further pressure from the British Parliament eventually compelled the Colonial Office to concede to the demand for an inquiry on January 16, 1956. The Local Government Minister, Albert Margai, felt that the district level inquiries that had been conducted were sufficient. Colonial Secretary Lennox Boyd insisted on a single official inquiry. The Leader of Government, Milton Margai, reluctantly agreed with him.⁹⁷ A commission of inquiry was set up on March 29, 1956. The commission paid most attention to the events in the Northern Province since it was the epicentre of the rebellion. It authenticated the multitude of grievances – excessive taxation, extortion, corruption and despotism – already expressed by peasants and known to the colonial administration. The commissioners posited that the tax problems which triggered the rebellion had been 'a mere symptom of an administrative breakdown', for that the government should be held responsible.⁹⁸ In its view, the 'riots' merely 'unmasked' an administrative weakness which had been present in the system. They wrote:

Apart from taxation and rural despotism, the commission mentioned other causal factors. It suggested that diamond digging and high taxation disorganized rural family life. Generally, it suggested that the sociological and economic changes following World War II had greatly corroded the fabric of rural life, but it did not elaborate on these changes. Its main focus throughout the report remained colonial institutional arrangements and provinces and the relationship between chiefs and peasants.

The commission confirmed the linkage between the workers' strike and the peasant rebellion. It referred to the language of protest and actions of the rebels. The peasant rebels in Maforki, who were essentially non-violent, called their protest against taxes a 'strike'. Others justified their violence by indicating that a strike involved the 'indiscriminate' destruction of property.⁹⁹

The commission showed no sympathy for chiefs and other victims of violence, many of whom, it maintained, retained their 'provocative conduct' during the rebellion. Even as it condemned the violence, the commission reiterated 'the people whose property has suffered were sometimes collectively and sometimes individually and, to a greater or lesser extent, guilty of committing maladministration as to inflame the rioters'.¹⁰⁰ In short, the Commissioners justified the actions of the protestors.

Having placed omissions of chiefs at the heart of the rebellion, it was not surprising that the commission strongly censured them and the tribal authorities.¹⁰¹ The commissioners indicated that considerable popular mistrust existed about the new government machinery and peasants wanted to return to the 'supremacy of administrative officials'.¹⁰² This suggestion has been taken too literally to mean that peasants preferred colonialism rather than the rejection of colonial modification of the relationship between chiefs and commoners.¹⁰³

The future position of chiefs created a dilemma for the commission. It wanted to recommend their abolition but had to concede their relevance for the people and the state. To compromise, the commissioners advised the adoption of measures to reduce their power and influence. The state should restrict the access of chiefs to peasant labour and resources, and their role in politics. Their right to forced labour should be terminated. Chiefs must be kept away from party politics and commercial relations with their people. The emoluments of chiefs were to be strictly controlled and their rights to forced labour terminated. The commission suggested that no funds should be spent on buildings except those that were chieftom property. Finally, the commissioners recommended that the state investigate the conduct of certain chiefs. The commissioners sincerely believed these steps would make rural life tolerable and the relationship between chief and commoners less oppressive. They believed historical change and institutional development would render the chieftaincy, a 'sinecure'.¹⁰⁴

The commission supported administrative development at chieftom rather than at district level. It suggested the scaling down of district councils because they had performed woefully. The commission recommended limitation of their role to local affairs and a return of some of their functions to chieftom authorities. Chieftom authorities should replace Tribal or Native Authorities, which had degenerated. The new bodies should be smaller, more representative and more closely supervised by government. The commission clearly outlined the role that chiefs and local authorities should play with reference to justice, law enforcement, taxation and issuing of licenses. Ultimately, the commission's emphasis leaned heavily on 'regulation' and

‘control’ of affairs in the provinces in view of the ‘desire for constitutional developments and the social revolution of recent years’.¹⁰⁵ Caught between popular demands and elite aspirations, these essentially institutionally-minded and bureaucratic men called for more state supervision and control.

Like the David Chalmers Commission that investigated the Hut Tax War of 1898, the Cox Commission served similar ‘public’ and ‘latent’ functions. Publicly, the commission, in its procedures, its findings and recommendations, sought to reaffirm faith in colonial paternalism, liberalism and justice. It also gave the opportunity to the rural rebels to ventilate their grievances. This function was perhaps more crucial from a popular perspective in the late 1950s than it was in the late 1890s. Unlike the earlier situation, the rebels of 1955 lacked the means to voice their grievances. The former ‘colony’ newspapers, especially the *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, which had provided a forum – ambiguous though it was – for ‘protectorate’ voices, had disappeared.¹⁰⁶ The *African Vanguard*, owned by Wallace-Johnson, came out intermittently and was out of circulation for the duration of the rebellion. The most vocal politicians were in government and opposed to the rebels. Except for Wallace-Johnson, the Creole elite who were in the opposition, made no political capital out of the insurrection.¹⁰⁷ In its ‘latent’ function, the commission gave the Colonial Office the opportunity to assess, and mediate the behaviour of its African partners in the decolonization process. For the Office, the rebellion and the report had revealed an apparent lack of popular support for the SLPP government and had confirmed it was merely an oligarchic ‘alliance of the Chiefs and educated element’. Loveridge, one of Commissioners, accused SLPP ministers of being incompetent and the real ‘villains’ of the rebellion.¹⁰⁸ The Colonial Office, never enamoured by the ‘independence’ of African governments, suggested to the Governor R. De Zouche Hall that he should ‘clip the wings’ of SLPP ministers.¹⁰⁹ It instructed Hall ‘to let the Ministers know that they have been given their yard of rope, that they came pretty close to hanging themselves and that in the future a much shorter length of rope would have to be used.’¹¹⁰ Colonial Officials insisted that the fact that the government had been maintained in power by security agents under ‘European direction’ should be driven home. The extent to which the leverage, arising from the Commissioner, was used during colonial talks at the pre-independence negotiations between Sierra Leone politicians and the colonial office is unclear. What is clear was that the plans for independence in 1961 were executed with the minimum of difficulties.

The Colonial Office did not spare De Zouche Hall from criticism. Hall was seen as too familiar and tolerant of the SLPP regime. In the eyes of the Colonial Office, he displayed familiarity, indecisiveness and a lack of policy

when dealing with the government.¹¹¹ Hall had been ailing for some time and could hardly be said to have been in firm control of the situation. Furthermore, his political position steadily grew weaker with 'constitutional' developments and the transfer of power to the new African ruling elite. For its part, the Colonial Office accepted no responsibility for the crisis and ensuing rebellion. Instead, it despatched a 'conscientious and vigorous' governor, Maurice Dorman, 'to tighten things up' in the colony at the end of 1956.¹¹²

Needless to say, the SLPP government found the report unpalatable, especially in its criticisms of the government's ignorance of and ineptitude in dealing with rebellion.¹¹³ It rejected the commission's argument that rural oppression had intensified. The government blamed the conflict on the diamond boom and other economic changes. In general, the SLPP felt that it had been treated unfairly by its British partners in colonial administration. In the Legislative Council, the government, led by the Minister of Mines, Siaka Stevens, accused British provincial officials of intrigue and collusion in fomenting the crisis.¹¹⁴ The SLPP government relented in its attack only after the Colonial Office and the Governor called for a more 'constructive approach'. In its public statement on the rebellion, the government endorsed the British provincial officials as 'agents' of the government. It quickly addressed some of the recommendations and pressing demands by peasant rebels. The government, however, retained its critical tone of the Cox Report.¹¹⁵

As part of the recommendations of the Cox Commission, the government instituted two commissions of inquiry. The commissions found the conduct of eleven chiefs and many local authorities 'subversive' of good government. Nine of the paramount chiefs were deposed or forced to resign. Among these were Legislative Council members Alkali Modu of Maforki and Bai Farima Tass II of Magbema. The inquiries surprisingly exonerated Bai Sherbro Yumkella II and Bai Sama of Loko Massama. Both chiefs and others similarly exonerated were temporarily suspended from office. Many district council and Tribal Authority members and headmen lost their positions in the process.¹¹⁶ The tax, which triggered the revolt, was reduced and set at an affordable maximum level of twenty-five shillings. The government proscribed many of the more oppressive aspects of rural life, including forced labour, illegal levies and extortion. Chiefs unsuccessfully fought to retain some of the proscribed privileges.¹¹⁷ Representation in local government structures increased and was made potentially accessible to peasants and other rural groups. These gains partly reformed the relationship between the local 'feudal' elite and commoners but they did not change it. Chiefs continued to be a significant force in the SLPP party and government. They even

reclaimed some of their lost resources through the Riots Damages Commission created by the government. Chief Yumkella eventually received £32,290 out of the £394,360 that was set aside to compensate 'victims' of the rebellion.¹¹⁸ Despite the recovery of lost ground by the chiefs, it was evident that peasants and the rural poor had won a significant victory which included the deposition of despotic chiefs, the abolition of coerced labour and the reduction in taxation.

Conclusion

In a profound historical irony, the colonial state in Sierra Leone had begun and ended in rebellion. The insurrection in 1898, which accompanied its inception, had been spearheaded by chiefs resisting the intrusion of foreign rule and the diminution of their authority. Almost sixty years later, the rebellion that signalled the twilight of the colonial state was launched by peasants against those very chiefs, who had by then become the linchpin of colonialism. Like the chiefs, the peasants had chosen their moment: decolonization, a period when the colonial process was in flux and a new 'moral' and 'political' order was in the process of being created. They used the 1955-56 war to contest and negotiate the demands of, and their relations with their chiefs, and by extension, the colonial state. Peasants indicated that those demands and relations were neither tenable nor acceptable in the new order. Furthermore, in their recourse to violence, they illustrated the inadequacy and obsolescence of 'traditional' and 'paternalistic' forms of seeking redress in face of the British refashioning of the chieftaincy and local institutions. The public investigation and acknowledgement of the peasant grievances by the Cox Commission and the reluctant restitutive actions by the SLPP government affirmed the legitimacy of these peasant claims. With the 1955 rebellion, peasants in northern Sierra Leone, like their chiefs in 1898, had negotiated the terms of a 'new' political order. They had not destroyed the nexus that connected them with the chiefs or with the state. That may have not have been their intention. What they ensured was that some of the more obnoxious features of that nexus which predated, survived and were even enhanced by colonialism, were removed.

Notes

1. Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, pp. 18-19, 173-175. For the origins of British developmentalism see J.M. Lee and Martin Pether, *The Colonial Office, War and Development Policy: Organization and the Planning of A Metropolitan Initiative, 1939-1945*, (London: Institute of Commonwealth Studies. 1982) pp. 243-256.
2. For typology of nationalist groups see Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, (New York: New York University Press, 1956), pp. 139-168. See also Thomas Hodgkin, *African Political Parties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

3. Marie Perinbam, 'Fanon and the Revolutionary Peasantry – The Algerian Case', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11, 3, (1973); Pierre Beysadde, *La Guerre d'Algerie 1954-1962* (Paris, Editions Planète, 1968); Philippe Trupier, *Autopsie de la Guerre d'Algerie* (Paris 1972); pp.427-445; Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau in Perspective* (London: James Currey, 1989); Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflicts in Kenya and Africa*, Books One and Two (London: James Currey, 1992), pp 265-504. For Portuguese colonies, see Chapter 7 in Patrick Chabal's *Amilcar Cabral: Revolutionary Leadership and People's War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 188-240.
4. John D. Hargreaves, *The End of Colonial Rule in West Africa: Essays in Contemporary History* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 79-80. Tony Smith, 'Patterns in the Transfer of Power: A study of French and British Decolonization', in Prosser Gifford and W. M. Roger Louis, eds., *Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonization, 1940-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 87-116. David Williams, 'Chapter 7: English Speaking West Africa', in Michael Crowder, ed., *Cambridge History of Africa: Vol. 8* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.350-353; Jean Suret-Canale and Adu Boahen, 'West Africa, 1945-1960', in Ali A. Mazrui, ed., and C. Wondji, asst. ed., *General History of Africa VIII: Africa Since 1935* (Paris: Unesco and Heinemann, 1993), pp. 161-191.
5. See Chapter Six in Ismail Rashid, 'Patterns of Rural Protests, Chiefs, Slaves and Peasants in Northwestern Sierra Leone 1898-1955', Ph.D Dissertation (McGill University, Montreal 1998).
6. *Protectorate Reports*, 1949-1952.
7. Ibid. The colonial administration also blamed 'professional trouble-makers' for fomenting disturbances in the provinces. This oblique reference implicated the radical populist politician, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson. Wallace-Johnson had actively protested government actions in the Boama Chiefdom disturbances. He had also actively solicited the interference of Fenner Brockway, the Socialist MP for Eton and Slough and the Colonial Secretary. These efforts certainly did not endear him to the colonial administration, which accused him of actively fomenting the disturbances for personal gain, an accusation that had no basis in reality.
8. *Protectorate Report*, 1949/1950.
9. SLNA SPA 507/4, Letter 1, Kali Morba Bempa to Chief Commissioner, dated August 13, 1953.
10. Ibid.
11. SLNA SPA 507/4, Letter 2, Kali Morba Bempa to Chief Commissioner, (August, 1953). The precise date of the second letter is unclear because of its condition. Its contents clearly reveal that it was a second letter since it made references to the previous letter.
12. Ibid.
13. SLNA SPA 507/4, The Commissioner, Northern Province to Chief Commissioner, Bo, November 1, 1954.
14. Davidson, *Report on District Councils*.
15. SLNA SPA 507/4, The Commissioner, Northern Province to Chief Commissioner, Bo, November 1, 1954.

16. Alkali Modu III was elected chief of Maforki Chiefdom in 1949 and became a member of the Sierra Leone Legislative Council in 1951, Goddard, *Handbook of Sierra Leone* (1955), pp. 12 & 24; Hargreaves, *End of Colonialism in West Africa*, p. 79.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. SLNA SPA 507/4, Tax Payers, Traders, Farmers, Tribal Authorities and Youths of Maforki to Minister Education Local Government and Welfare, September 25, 1955.
20. Ibid.
21. CSO SPA 506, Shegbendeh to Commissioner, Northern Province, January 2, 1952.
22. CO554/1329/25725, Governor R. de Zouche Hall to Secretary of State, February 20, 1956.
23. Due, *Changes in consumer Goods in Sierra Leone*, p. 23.
24. *Protectorate Report*, 1954.
25. *Protectorate Report*, 1955.
26. *Manchester Guardian* December 8, 1956.
27. *Protectorate Reports*, 1947, 1954 and 1955.
28. *Protectorate Report*, 1947.
29. For the Freetown riots see *Report of the Commissioner of Inquiry into the Strikes and Riots in Freetown, Sierra Leone, during February 1955* (Freetown: GPD, 1955).
30. *Daily Mail*, November 21, 1955.
31. Reuters Report, December 1, 1955; PRO CO554/1329/25725, Appendix, Political Intelligence Reports: Chiefdom Disturbances, November -December, 1955.
32. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Appendix, Political Intelligence Reports: Chiefdom Disturbances, November -December, 1955.
33. Ibid.
34. PRO CO554/1329, Ffennell Smith, Provincial Commissioner; SLNA MP 9236/6, Proclamation, December 19, 1955.
35. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Appendix, Political Intelligence Reports: Chiefdom Disturbances, November -December, 1955.
36. Ibid.
37. The aforementioned Bai Kompa was elected as chief in 1941 and was different the one who spoke in Legislative Council in 1926 against abolition (See Chapter Four). Goddard, *Handbook of Sierra Leone* (1955), p. 12.
38. Ibid.
39. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Telegram 537, Governor to SS, Colonies, December 12, 1955; In 1967, J. H. Riley, the former Registrar of Cooperation blamed the erstwhile Port Loko District Commissioner for the exacerbation, if not the precipitation, of the rebellion in Loko Massama in a letter to retired governor, De Zouche Hall. Hall disagreed. He maintained that the rebellion was indissolubly bound' with the political and administrative changes made from 1951 onwards. RHL. Mss Afr. S 1752, J.W. Riley to Robert De Zouche Hall, February 14, 1967 & Robert De Zouche Hall to J.W. Riley, February 19, 1967.

40. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Appendix, Political Intelligence Reports: Chiefdom Disturbances, November - December, 1955.
41. Thomas S. Cox, *Civil-Military Relations in Sierra Leone: A Case Study of African Soldiers in Politics* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 32.
42. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Appendix, Political Intelligence Reports: Chiefdom Disturbances, November - December, 1955; Reuters, December 5, 1955; *Times*, London December 6, 1955.
43. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Appendix, Political Intelligence Reports: Chiefdom Disturbances, November -December, 1955.
44. PRO CO554/1329, Zouche Hall to Vile, March 23, 1956.
45. PRO CO554/1329 Secret, From GHQ, West Africa to War Office, 29 December, 1955; *Times*, January 6, 1956.
46. PRO CO554/1329, Hall to Secretary of Secretary of State, Colonies, January 21, 1956.
47. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Telegram 66, Deputy Governor to Secretary of State, Colonies, January 30, 1956.
48. PRO CO554/1329,25725, Governor Hall to Secretary of State Colonies, February 14, 1956.
49. PRO CO554/1329, Governor De Zouche Hall to Secretary of State, Colonies, March 2, 1956.
50. PRO CO554/1329, Governor De Zouche Hall to Secretary of State, Colonies, March 9, 1956.
51. Yumkella and other paramount chiefs had been despatched by the SLPP government to assuage the protestors. *Daily Mail*, December 29, 1955; *Daily Mail*, January 27, 1956.
52. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Minute, P. A. P Robertson, August 31, 1956.
53. *Report of Commission of Inquiry into Disturbances in the Provinces: November 1955 to March 1956* (London: Sierra Leone Government, 1956) (Hereinafter referred to as The Cox Report). Cox was the Chairman of the Commission. pp. 83-85.
54. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Telegram 528, Governor to Secretary of State, Colonies, 13/12/1955.
55. PRO CO554/1329, Reuters Report, December 16, 1955.
56. Cartwright, *Political Leadership in Sierra Leone*, p. 68.
57. *Observer* (Bo) December 31, 1955.
58. Kilson, *Political Change in a West African State*, p.285; Cartwright, *Politics in Sierra Leone*, p. 82.
59. Kilson, *Political Change in a West African State*, p. 285.
60. In an extreme case of Marxist historical teleology, a Soviet historian, L.V. Pribytovskii, even characterized the revolt as joint peasant and workers' movement, which was eventually sold out by their 'bourgeois' leadership. See Lev Naumovich Pribytovskii, 'S'ERRA LEONE: KRESTI'IANSKOE DVISHENIE, 1955-1956'. SG, *Narody Azii i Afriki*, 3, (1983), pp. 125-132.

61. PRO CO 554/1329/25725 Sierra Leone Political Intelligence Report, December 1955. Secret S.F.9102; PRO CO554/1329, Extract from the notes of a conversation between Minister of State and W.A. Creech-Jones, April 4, 1956.
62. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996) p. 196.
63. CO554/1329/25725, Telegram 66, Deputy Governor to S.S. January 30, 1956; Cartwright, *Political Leadership in Sierra Leone*, p. 68.
64. Kilson, *Political Change in a West African State*, p.179; Barrows, *Grassroots Politics in an African State*, p. 102.
65. Peter Kamara died a few years after the conflict. See Hargreaves, *End of Colonialism in West Africa*, p. 80.
66. PRO CO554/1329, Telegram, Secretary of State Colonies to Governor Hall, January 16, 1956.
67. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Extracts from CID Report on Ant-Taxation Demonstration and Disturbances in North and South Western Provinces from November, 1955 to February, 1956.
68. In the post-independence years, A.B. Kamara joined the All Peoples Congress (APC), a largely northern province based party. He rose through the ranks of the party to become Minister of Finance and Vice President of Sierra Leone.
69. The extent to which the NCSL benefit from its association with the peasant rebels was unclear but Akintola Wyse claims that people of Kambia asked the party to help them defeat Chief Yumkella in the elections of 1956. Apparently, the party's candidate Lerina Bright failed to register her candidacy for the area. See Wyse, *Bankole Bright*, p. 174.
70. See SLNA File on Conciliatory Enquiries, 1955/6 Riots. See especially Chiefdom Conciliatory Enquiries: Loko Massama Chiefdom, A Wurie, Provincial Education Secretary to Secretary, Ministry for Local Government, March 27, 1956; Chiefdom Conciliatory Enquiries: Kaffu Bullom Chiefdom, A. Wurie, Provincial Education Secretary to Secretary, Ministry for Local Government, March 27, 1956; Chiefdom Conciliatory Enquiry: Massumbala Chiefdom. W. Greenwood, Ag. District Commissioner, Kambia to Commissioner, Northern Province, April 12, 1956; Chiefdom Conciliatory Enquiry: Sella Limba. John Watson, District Commissioner, Bombali to Commissioner, Northern Province, April 12, 1956.
71. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Extracts from CID Report on Anti-Taxation Demonstration and Disturbances in North and South Western Provinces from November, 1955 to February, 1956.
72. *Daily Mail*, October 21, 1955; CO554/1329/25725, Appendix, Political Intelligence Reports: Chiefdom Disturbances, November - December, 1955.
73. Mukonoweshuro, *Colonialism, Class Formation and Underdevelopment*, p. 212.
74. The Cox Report, p. 101.
75. *Sierra Leone Provincial Reports*, 1954 and 1955.
76. Kilson, *Political Change in a West Africa State*, p. 189; Cohen, *Politics of Elite Culture*, p.133; Mukonoweshoro, *Colonialism, Class Formation and Underdevelopment*, p. 212.
77. I have utilized the term 'peasant intellectuals' in a narrower and more attenuated sense than Steven Feierman who coined and applied the term to peasant leadership in Tanzania. For an elaboration of the concept, see Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*:

Anthropology and History in Tanzania (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 18-27.

78. See for examples SLNA, Correspondence and Files of the 1955 riots, Fallah and Soriba Kamara (c/o M.S. Mansaray, Kychom, Selu Chiefdom, Kambia District) to Mr. Grey-Wood, District Commissioner, Kambia District, January 23, 1956; Petition from Santigi Thoronka of Masunba, a member of the Tribal Authority; Lamina Serrie of Maybean, a member of the Tribal Authority and Dura Tholi of Madorra, a headman to Sir Robert De Zouche Hall, January 12, 1956.
79. Petitioners (witnessed by A.B. Kamara) to Gov. R. Hall, March 21, 1956.
80. PRO CO 554/1329/25725, Mansaray to Commissioner, Makeni Division. cc. to Government, Local Minister etc, December 2, 1956.
81. PRO CO 554/1329/25725, Mansaray to Commissioner, Makeni Division. cc. to Government, Local Minister etc, December 2, 1956.
82. Cox Report, p. 98.
83. Cox Report, p. 98.
84. PRO CO554/1329, The Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province to [Mr Hoe,] Colonial Office, March 3, 1956.
85. PRO CO554/1329, The Provincial Commissioner, Northern Province to [Mr Hoe,] Colonial Office, March 3, 1956.
86. Chief Yumkella had several farms. One was estimated at about 1,000 acres. Cox Report, p. 131.
87. PRO CO554/1327/25725.
88. PRO CO554/1327/25725.
89. PRO CO554/1329, Telegram: Hall to Secretary of State, Colonies, January 6, 1956.
90. Ibid.
91. SLNA, CSB, Tax Disturbances, Gbonkolenken Chiefdom: Ag. District Commissioner to District Commissioner, Northern Provinces, March 27, 1956.
92. Ibid.
93. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Fenner Brockway to Lennox Boyd.
94. PRO CO 554/1329/25725, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson to Colonial Secretary, through the Colonial Secretary, Freetown. December 30, 1955. (From Wallace-Johnson representing the West African Civil Liberties and National Defence League (incorporating the West African Youth League, Sierra Leone Section).
95. PRO CO554/1329, Brockway to Lennox Boyd, December 30, 1955; PRO CO554/1329, Brockway to Secretary of State, Colonies, January 6, 1956; PRO CO554/1329, Telegram, Secretary of State Colonies to Governor Hall, January 8, 1956.
96. PRO CO554/1329, Telegram, Secretary of State Colonies to Governor Hall, January 16, 1956.
97. Ibid.; PRO CO554/1329, Eastwood to Zouche Hall, Colonial Office, January 21, 1956; PRO CO554/1329, Zouche Hall to Eastwood, Colonial Office, January 26, 1956; *Observer*, January 27, 1956.
98. The Cox Report, p. 9.
99. The Cox Report, pp. 13 & 146.

100. The Cox Report, 14.
101. The Cox Report, p. 146.
102. The Cox Report, p 16.
103. Cartwright, *Politics in Sierra Leone*, p. 86.
104. Cox Report, See Chs. XI to XVI.
105. The Cox Report, p.230.
106. As if signalling the final eclipse of Creole political ambitions, the *Sierra Leone Weekly News* ended its run in 1951, the year of the Stevenson constitution and the election of the SLPP. See Bernadette Cole, *Mass Media, Freedom and Democracy in Sierra Leone* (London: Premier Publishing House, 1996) p. 9.
107. Akintola Wyse suggests that the workers' strike and rebellion brought certain Creole leaders closer to the masses. This may have been truer of the workers' strike than of the rebellion. Wyse, *Bankole Bright*, pp. 174-175.
108. PRO CO554/1329, Loveridge to Vile, July 7, 1956.
109. PRO CO554/1329, Secret and Personal, Eastwood to De Zouche Hall, February 22, 1956.
110. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Colonial Office [Eastwood] to Sir Robert De Zouche Hall.
111. PRO CO 554/1329/25725, Colonial Office [Eastwood to Sir Robert Hall, Government House, Freetown, SL; See also CO554/1329, Zouche Hall to Eastwood, Colonial Office, January 13, 1956, The governor calls the party an 'unholy alliance' of chiefs and politicians.
112. PRO CO554/1329/25725, Minute. J. S. Bennet.
113. *The Statement of the Sierra Leone Government on the Report of Commission of Inquiry into the Disturbances in the Protectorate* (November 1955 to March 1956 (Freetown: SLG 1956).
114. Sierra Leone Legislative Council Debates, 1956; Cartwright, *Political Leadership in Sierra Leone*, p. 69.
115. Statement of Sierra Leone Government.
116. *Reports of Commissioners of Inquiries into the Conduct of Certain Chiefs and Government Statement Thereon*, (London: GPD, 1957). & *Further Reports of Commissioners of Inquiries into the Conduct of Certain Chiefs and Government Statement Thereon*, (London: GPD, 1957).
117. Cartwright, *Politics in Sierra Leone*, p. 84.
118. *Ibid.*, p. 85.