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The Interaction of Global and Local Models of Governance: new configurations of power in Upper Guinea Coast societies[1]

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Abstract

This paper studies emerging power configurations in post-conflict and no-peace-no-war Upper Guinea Coast societies. These result from current interactions of global and local models of governance. With empirical data on shifting meanings of chieftaincy and control of land, changing tax regimes, and the rising importance of youth in domestic politics, shifts in authority and legitimacy of rule across time are contrasted with the effects of international interventions and global discourses on socio-political change. It becomes evident that some of these interventions accelerate, others accentuate or counteract, processes of change within local power configurations. Only by carefully considering the innate malleability of local concepts of authority, history, and tradition may contemporary processes of change be identified as either mere re-configurations or genuinely new configurations of power.

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Introduction

This paper discusses emerging power configurations in post-conflict and no-peace-no-war Upper Guinea Coast societies, which occur in relation to changes and reconfigurations of local leadership and traditional authority and as a result of the interaction of global and local models of governance. New configurations of power emerge in mutual exchange with previous such configurations and integrate the latter to varying degrees.

We conceptualise and study such processes as dimensions of social interaction, which are connected with specific processes of identity formation and categories of identification (like the nation, ethnic group, social class, etc.). As configurations of power are related to specific social alliances and identity constructions within society at large, they must be explored as facets of the social dynamics in which they occur (see Højbjerg, Knörr, Kohl, Rudolf, Schroven, and Trajano Filho 2012). An understanding of power configurations therefore requires that the roles of traditional leadership and other forms of local leadership are examined in consideration of changes occurring in social relationships and identity formation on the local level and of external influences on the latter.[3]

Along the Upper Guinea Coast, just as in many other regions of the world, local leadership and ideas of traditional authority are closely intertwined. Local leaders of different character may draw legitimacy from local history and from institutions such as secret societies or sodalities. Politicians may oppose village elders or leaders of secret societies, competing for socio-political leadership positions in the local arena. They may combine, in their very person, different positions ranging from political and administrative positions to membership in spiritual and religious institutions deemed traditional. While it is nowhere absent, state governance manifests itself differently in various parts of the Upper Guinea Coast region of West Africa. In many places the state is only slowly resuming its governing function after many years of war and often in interaction with non-state actors ranging from so-called traditional chiefs to religious leaders, businessmen, and (I)NGOs, all of whom compete or collaborate to edify governable spaces as well as war time regimes of power and authority.

The first empirical section of this paper highlights how political authority is intricately intertwined with historic perceptions, territory, and religious lives in legitimising local governance today. These elaborations also serve as the background for the second section in which changes in local leadership are discussed. Some are caused by migration, such as war-related displacement and rural-urban migration. Whatever the reason, population composition changes necessitate adjustments in a community’s socio-economic and political make-up. Other changes are related to transnational discourses concerning manifold dimensions of life. How these different forms of interaction and social and discursive practices bring about change and affirm or alter the position of established actors will be elaborated by analysing ethnographic examples from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Senegal (Casamance), provided by different members of the

[3] We understand traditional authority as authority (of an institution, organisation, regime), which is legitimised by refering to tradition, i.e. practices and beliefs, which are conceptualised and passed down as being rooted in the past and having a special symbolic meaning. Whether what is portrayed as tradition has a factual or ‘invented’ long history is often irrelevant for those conceptualising and passing it on as such (Shils 1981; Hobsbawm 1999).

research group "Integration and Conflict along the Upper Guinea Coast."[4] This region's particularities will be discussed and cross-referenced with historic and contemporary notions of state and nation, colonial and postcolonial histories, spiritual and religious beliefs, as well as changing social and political dynamics as a result of regional and local conflicts. These processes are interconnected with the (re-)construction and (re-) configuration of different categories of identification. Hence, the following debate also reflects on the potentials and limits of identity-related malleability.

Political Authority and Local Leadership along the Upper Guinea Coast

Patrimonialism is a central dimension of the political culture in the Upper Guinea Coast region. It is based on a system of landlord-stranger reciprocities within and across local communities that serves as a means to incorporate outsiders/newcomers into existing communities and to create mutual dependencies between the ruler and his followers in the governance of the mass of subjects (slaves, women, young males) (see Knörr and Trajano Filho 2010; cp. Brooks 1993, 2003; Mouser 1980). Patrimonialism in Upper Guinea Coast societies is closely linked with social and religious values and operates at state and non-state levels (e.g. Murphy 2010; Pitcher, Moran and Johnston 2009; Reno 1995, 2006; Richards 2005; Sall and Smith 2004). Its persistence is closely related to the long-lasting existence of corporate groups such as lineages, cult associations, age-grades, secret societies, and values such as the logic of belonging (social dependence), and landlord-stranger reciprocities. We know that patrimonial structures have no dysfunctional effect in and of themselves[5] and that they can in fact be stabilising structures – as long as they are well-established and broadly accepted. However, patrimonialism at the state level often goes along with corruption, embezzlement and clientship in modern nation-states, in which traditional corporate groups have lost most of their structuring force. In such a context, one set of rules tends to be replaced or supplemented by another set of rules involving improvisation and shrewdness. When the closely-knit networks created by corporate groups such as lineages or age-sets are replaced by loosely-knit networks of clientship grounded on *ad hoc* bases, social systems tend to become unstable, the effects of which may lead to different reconfigurations of power and power assemblages.

Chieftaincy

Without question, chieftaincy has changed throughout its history. In pre-colonial periods, the region has known territorial principalities and theocracies next to more acephalous systems. They were partly competing with principalities over trade relations and religious questions. With the establishment of colonial empires by the British, French, and Portuguese, the flexibility of these local and regional ruling bodies was restricted. While so-called direct and indirect rule varied across the colonies, European intervention included altering and fixing territorial delimitations and jurisdictions as well as the establishment of new hierarchies such as village chiefs, town chiefs, and paramount chiefs. While in some areas, chieftaincy was invented to fit the overall ruling practice in

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[5] Patrimonialism has often been identified by popular literature and the media as one major cause for the region's many civil wars and violent unrests. Therefore, it is important to clarify under which conditions patrimonialism exerts socially stabilising or destabilising influences.

the colony, in most parts of the Upper Guinea Coast it met older ruling systems, in which case practices and eligibilities for chiefly or landowning families changed in that they now linked their authority not to older, established notions of power, but to the colonial state.

This legacy was addressed differently in late colonial and recently independent states. Sierra Leone and Liberia maintained chief-paramount relations and, in the case of Sierra Leone, formally included them into the parliamentary system, notwithstanding contestations for chieftaincy on the grounds of one family holding older or more traditional claims on the title, leading back to the pre-colonial period. While in pre-colonial and colonial times competing branches of landowning lineages could agree to alternate the position of (paramount) chief, this arrangement is complicated by (national) party politics today and upsets the sensitive balance of power in some chieftaincies (e.g. Fanthorpe 2006).

Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, on some level, represent opposite cases. In Guinea, chieftaincy had formally been abolished a year before independence and former chiefs and their families were charged as collaborators of the colonial power. Chieftaincy and other institutions like secret societies were deemed traditional, holding the country back from socio-economic development and 'modernisation'. They were systematically attacked by the young state, their secrets exposed and values attacked. While these institutions were formally abolished, their existence and the authority of individuals representing them was not eradicated (Højbjerg 2007). In Guinea-Bissau, chieftaincy was formally abolished after the country's independence in 1973/4. In the context of democratisation policies in the 1990s, persons belonging to ruling families gradually re-emerged as political leaders in parts of Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. In the latter case, these individuals are semi-officially recognised by state officials. In recent years, traditional leaders and allied politicians have made attempts to revive chieftaincy and other so-called traditional forms of leadership. For instance, the late state-president Malam Bacai Sanhá (r. 2009–2012) appointed a close ally national representative of traditional leaders. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is involved in this process in that over the past few years it has collected data that are related to customary law and meant to contribute to its codification (UNDP 2011). However, it still remains to be seen what these efforts will lead to.

In the Lower Casamance (Ziguinchor region), where most violence in connection to the Casamance conflict occurred, chieftaincy as a form of political organisation is rather absent, the ethnic majority, the Diola, being acephalous. Their opposition to central power is commonly referred to as a major reason for the Casamance conflict as well as for the allocation of political offices to 'Northerners' rather than *Casamançais*. However, it is not an organised and strong opposition to central state power that effected the exclusion of the local *Casamançais* elite, but rather their distance to the centre of power, which, on their part also caused a lack of national identification (Cruise O'Brien 1998). The Senegalese state's authorities are seen as intruding strangers and the state as a neo-colonial actor rather than a cohesive entity to which they belong. The concentration of political and economic power in the hands of Northerners became particularly problematic when land in the Casamance was expropriated and reallocated by the state (Hesseling and Eichelsheim 2009), when agriculture was modernised and sacred forests allocated as timber resources.

Territory, Kinship, and Historical Memory

Spiritual links to the earth are also important dimensions of agricultural and social life along the Upper Guinea Coast. Access to land and control over its spirits is vital for the production and reproduction of human life. The specific access to spiritual beings may be granted within the context of the predominant creation myth of the respective community or ethnic group. It may also derive from a particular history of migration and conquest that is shared with other groups inhabiting the area. Past events that are part of the collective memory or oral tradition legitimate the leadership of particular people over others. Terms of expressing this hierarchical relationship vary between founding family and landlord. They entail the position of those whom groups of people have authority over as late-comers, strangers, or clients, respectively. Kinship terminology of uncle-nephew-relations is also employed to express the hierarchical structure of this relationship as well as the particular duties it involves.

Traditional authority is commonly understood as evolving in the context of (local) histories and institutions like extended families, lineages, village elders and, for the Upper Guinea Coast, secret societies (Poro, Sande), and other, more restricted sodalities. All these social entities constitute corporate groups and belonging to them is, in various contexts, the pre-requisite for being considered a proper social being and claiming benefits from patronage relations such as landlord-stranger-relations that form the basis of rural life throughout the region.

Local leadership can comprise leading members of all those institutions mentioned above. Usually, they are particularly relevant in rural settings. However, also urban areas have subdivisions along neighbourhood, district, or ward lines and here, too, bodies and individuals participate in local leadership practices. Local leaders are usually members of first-coming families with land titles, also referred to as landlords or ruling families. Due to their position in extended families or lineages, they influence large groups of people and thereby wield power over land and linked resources. However, the status of first-comer is contested in many regions and the kinship group it is assigned to may shift over time. Past events and oral tradition grant the title of first-comer to a certain group, but once another group comes into the territory and asserts its power it may claim the title of first-comer and landlord as its own, often by way of altering perceptions of the past.

As Højbjerg (2007, 2010, 2013a) and Schroven (2010a) show, such shifts in first-comer status are not merely historical contestations but contemporary processes that reveal how dynamic local leadership is and how relevant history is to local perceptions concerning the legitimacy of power. The hinterlands of Guinea and Liberia provide illuminating cases for such processes. Historical imagination in the form of oral tradition is highly significant in shaping distinguishable and even opposed perceptions of ethnic groups and their ways of relating to each other, peacefully and violently. Oral history constitutes a way for people in war-affected communities to justify and try to come to terms with war through reference to the past both as lived experience and transmitted knowledge. Just as importantly, local settlement narratives serve to legitimise local competition over land and political leadership. Telling history is thus a part of an on-going experience and social practice. A comparison of local recollections of the past by Mandingo and co-existing ethnic groups in southeastern Guinea and northwestern Liberia points to a significant difference in scale and agency of people's self-perception. 'Forest people', on the one hand, tend to stress autochthony in small-scale settlements, i.e. their status as first-comers and landowners. The Mandingo, on the other hand, stress their tradition of large-scale political leadership that references the historic

Mandé and Malinké empires, their economic role in the history of the Liberian nation-state, and their religious role as propagators of Islam. These different forms of historical narratives, links to territory, and form of leadership appear incommensurable. In times of crisis, these differences can be exploited by political entrepreneurs, just as tensions in the region manifest currently.

The relationship between first- and newcomers can also be well observed in the case of the former Portuguese trading post of Geba, about 120 kilometres east of Guinea-Bissau's capital, situated on the Geba River. Historical documents suggest that Geba was founded in the 16th century as an important and eastern-most trading hub for all kinds of commodities, including slaves (Kohl 2009b, 2011). As in other trading posts in the area – such as Cacheu, Bissau, Ziguinchor, or Farim – lusocreole communities emerged, whose members shared their Christian belief as well as the creole vernacular Kriol and developed new cultural features and social institutions such as carnival and *manjuandadi* associations – primarily female associations of mutual solidarity (Kohl 2009b, 2012a, 2012b, n.d.). Since the late 19th century, Geba has been in a state of decline, losing its former role as administrative, cultural, and commercial centre while most of its creole inhabitants relocated to the nearby towns of Bafatá or Bissau. However, the town's historical relevance remains and is closely associated with Geba's creole population, the Kristons de Geba (literally: Christians of Geba). According to popular oral narratives, the original inhabitants of the Geba area were of Beafada origin. Whereas most Beafadas later left the area and converted to Islam, a number of them continued to live in the town of Geba after it had become a Portuguese settlement. They converted to Christianity, evolving into a Kriston community that also amalgamated individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds, such as Mandingos, Manjacos, Portuguese, Fulas, and Cape Verdeans. Despite their numerical inferiority in present-day Geba, the Kristons de Geba continue to be regarded as first-comers, as "*donus di tchon*" in Kriol (literally "owners of the land"), at least of the southern, oldest part of Geba – the northern part now being the area of the majoritarian Muslim Mandingos. Although vast parts of the quarters originally inhabited by Kristons are now left deserted, Kristons de Geba nevertheless claim that they belong to specific Kriston families that now reside elsewhere. Although these claims are not legally recognised, nobody can settle there without the consent of the Kriston neighbours – and no Mandingo late-comer can yet be found living in the area claimed by the Kriston de Geba (Kohl 2009a).

In Sierra Leone, the Krios continue to be linked to the territory of Freetown and the Freetown Peninsula in specific ways. In the late 18th and early 19th century their ancestors – different groups of liberated slaves – arrived in what had been established as the Province of Freedom by British philanthropists and which was declared a British crown colony in 1808. These disparate groups from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds passed through a process of creolisation, developing an identity as Krio (Fyfe 1962; Fyle 2006; Knörr 1995). They used to cultivate a rather exclusive identity by setting themselves apart from 'the natives', by developing a relatively British lifestyle, merging it – to varying degrees – with elements from their respective African backgrounds (Knörr 2010a, 2010b, cp. Knörr 2007, forthcoming). By emphasising the differences rather than the similarities between themselves and Freetown, on the one hand, and the indigenous population and the 'Provinces' beyond the Freetown Peninsula, on the other, the Krios have at times had a disintegrating effect on Sierra Leonean society. Vice versa, they were deprived of being considered 'Sierra Leonean proper' by the local population. Hence, whereas in other colonial and postcolonial contexts Creole populations also had unifying effects across ethnic boundaries, the Krios were perceived of as a colonial leftover rather than a symbol of postcolonial nationhood in Sierra Leone.

The gap between Freetown and the Krio, on the one hand, and the Provinces and the indigenous people, on the other, was broadened rather than narrowed in early postcolonial times.

Being a small minority living almost exclusively in Freetown and its environment, Krios were seldom considered for political mandates beyond Freetown in the later phases of colonialism and after independence had been achieved in 1961. However, the position of mayor of Freetown has always been occupied by a Krio, even when being challenged by members of other ethnic groups in recent local elections. It seems that as ethnic identity is closely associated with a territory of descent, it would be considered unduly harsh by many Sierra Leoneans to deprive the Krios of being able to relate to a territory they can call home – irrespective of the contestedness of their nativeness. Beyond Freetown and the Freetown Peninsula, the Krios are still – constitutionally – deprived of other Sierra Leoneans' rights in that they are not entitled to buy land 'upcountry'. However, such restrictions are increasingly contested not solely by Krios but by many Sierra Leoneans, who believe that restrictions based on ethnic identities are generally neither in the interest of social and economic progress nor compatible with modern citizenship and democracy. With tens of thousands of refugees having fled to Freetown and the Freetown Peninsula during the civil war (1991–2002), many of whom have meanwhile settled there permanently, new conflicts over land and territory have recently flared up. They are connected with contestations over autochthony and first-/late-comer status on both sides – the Krios arguing they were "here" first/before the newcomers, the newcomers arguing the Krios were late-comers "here" "in the first place". Whereas the Krios situate their territorial status primarily within a local and regional context, referring to "here" as (the territory of) Freetown/the Freetown Peninsula, the newcomers situate theirs within a primarily national context, referring to "here" as the (territory of the) Sierra Leonean nation-state.

Religion and Links to Territory

Religious and spiritual leaders like Christian priests and Muslim imams may also serve as councillors to chiefs or elected town councils. Many imams in the region are, in fact, also linked to village elders due to their descent from the founding family. Due to the non-centralised organisation of the Muslim clergy, pious men often receive their education at centres of Muslim learning and afterwards return to their area of origin to become imam of a local mosque. The Christian clergy, in contrast, is often sent elsewhere than their region of origin to serve as priests.

All these groups may function as links between local and non-territorial notions of leadership. Imams, for example, are highly respected dignitaries in large parts of Guinea and their authority in socio-economic and political matters of family and community life are not questioned – even if not all members of the community are Muslim and if the advice given does not correspond to personal opinions. Their basis of authority originates from their religious position that may, as in the case of Christian priests, be emphasised by institutional ties to a bishop or other prominent members of the diocese.

Other leaders in the local arena may emerge from (state) bureaucracies – people who are posted to a particular locale for professional reasons and then become part of the local elite. Their authority arises from their professional position, which often provides them with access to public funds and the (bureaucratic) centre (Schroven 2010b). Different from village elders, they have no claims to family leadership, control over (spiritual) land titles, or other resources often employed in the context of landlord-stranger-relations.

Individuals and corporate (family) groups, who can claim a privileged relationship to the spirits of the land, are key to the survival and wellbeing of the community. Due to their exclusive link to the land, they hold high positions in the traditional secret societies, of which Sande/Bundu for women and Poro for men are the most encompassing ones concerning membership and distribution. With the initiation, special knowledge is conferred that is secret and potentially dangerous for the non-initiates. By employing respect for and fear of the secret knowledge, collective control can be exerted by the secret society.

Ties between spiritual leaders and political office are highly significant in the context of secret societies. Leaders in these societies are predominantly women and men who belong to landholding lineages and thereby acquire a 'double mandate' within the power configurations in their community. Whether so-called late-comers or strangers have the same chances of ascending to the higher echelons of these societies is a subject of debate (see Højbjerg 2007; Murphy 2010). The local and extra-territorial political role of (some) secret societies seems to have increased in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire during the war as well as in Guinea. Cases in point include the hunters' associations (e.g. Leach 2004; Hellweg 2011) and the Poro society (Højbjerg 2007). However, there are also reports that youths in rural areas of Sierra Leone and Liberia have contested secret society leaders' authority both during and after the wars (Richards et al. 2005).

Beyond the question of individual respect or opposition by youth, the institution of secret societies is closely tied to political leadership in large parts of the Upper Guinea Coast region and secret society membership is often a prerequisite to attain positions of political power. Indeed, the secret society often decides who can become chief – even where paramount chiefs have to be elected by public suffrage today, like in Sierra Leone. Similarly, politicians on the regional or national level often need to assert their membership in Poro and the secret society's support for their candidacy (Højbjerg 2007, 2008b, cp. de Jong 2007 on the Casamance region). It is well known that Liberian presidents from Tubman to Taylor (1944–2003) underwent initiation into Poro as well as other secret associations in order to expand the legitimacy of their office. They were Americo-Liberians, a group residing fairly exclusively in the capital and having weak links to the rural-based secret societies of the interior. Similarly, presidential candidates in Sierra Leone support and sponsor initiation into Poro and Sande as signs of support and allegiance to the most influential secret societies in the country.

Female candidates to Sierra Leonean paramount chieftaincy have in some cases been initiated into Poro, which is otherwise reserved for men.[6] However, women in the position of chiefs, both historically and in the present, can be found mainly in southern Sierra Leone and in Liberia and rarely in the more Muslim-dominated areas of northern Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Senegal.

Despite such regional variation concerning secret societies' forms of political expression, a common theme throughout the region and different periods of time is their assertion of gerontocracy in general and of the way (social) age and associated rights are controlled – much to the general disadvantage of the (socially and chronologically) younger women and men. This has led to secret societies' public humiliation and official banning during Guinea's early postcolonial period and to their being widely criticised in the analysis of war-causes in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

[6] A prominent example is Madame Yoko (1849–1906), who was a Mende leader, initiated into Poro, and became a successful chief and politician in Sierra Leone. Contemporary debates on female chiefs are discussed below.

Territory, Religion, and Authority: two examples

Creation myths and stories of territorial conquest also result in another form of authority that is more focussed on political life – chieftaincy. While local terminology and extent of authority may differ across the Upper Guinea Coast, this leadership institution is nearly omnipresent. As discussed above, it has undergone changes and has adjusted to new challenges. Two ethnographic examples from Forécariah in Guinea and Freetown in Sierra Leone will illustrate in more detail how local authority and religious beliefs are intertwined.

In Forécariah, local leadership is asserted by an intricate web of oral tradition, religious leadership and political institutions that are tied to the nation-state. The dominant version of history grants landlord/first-comer titles to one particular family. The same history links their political leadership to another family which asserts religious authority and includes members who take over the office of the imams of the main mosques in the area. These two families form a corporate group in the context of oral tradition and contemporary performances of political and religious rituals. They propagate a comparatively conservative interpretation of Islam which is otherwise not present in contemporary coastal Guinea and is being directly associated with the area's conquest by the aforesaid corporate group. The performance of Muslim piety is important to express religious, moral, and political superiority over the autochthonous population of the Mmeni and other ethnic groups that live there as clients or late-comers (Schroven 2010a: 80ff).

With the founding families being represented as a corporate group in local history, they affirm each other's and their own positions. Public events and religious holidays are central for this re-assertion of power and authority, such as the celebration of *Tabaski* (or *Eid al Adha*[7]) (Schroven 2010a: 90ff). The mobilisation of the town's population for ministerial visits also reveals the double mandate of political and spiritual leadership this corporate group holds (Schroven 2010a: 190ff). In both instances, the significance of the two families leads to the re-affirmation of the community's founding myth and, by extension, of the local leaders' authority.

Beyond the manifestation of leadership, the family's internal and external networks led to their political and economic domination of the region during (pre-)colonial and post-independence times. Personalised (and at the same time formalised) connections to the national capital through political parties and government institutions resulted in family heads being able to locally speak and act in the name of the national government and the state. Today, they are predominantly elected into local councils and also represent Forécariah in state institutions. It seems that despite changing governance structures, the leading families have managed to maintain some part of their previous influence vis-à-vis the state and continue to assert their authority on the local level (Schroven 2010a).

The relations between the local political arena and the national capital with its government institutions show how extensive and flexible political space is with regard to local authority in Forécariah. Oral tradition, and especially the foundation myth, enable relations to be malleable for high-ranking members of the founding families. Their authority in conflict resolution also draws on religious and spiritual resources. Their safekeeping of the region against outside attacks during the neighbouring civil war in Sierra Leone and during the national strikes in Guinea 2007 asserts their key role for the community's overall wellbeing (cp. Schroven 2010a).

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[7] *Eid al Adha*: the Feast of the Sacrifice at which Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son when God ordered him to is remembered. It is also called *Tabaski* in many parts of West Africa.

In the Sierra Leonean capital Freetown, secret societies can broadly be distinguished into old and new. The most important old societies are the Masonic Lodges that were brought along by the first settlers and that are connected to international parent organisations. Agugu and Hunting Societies are linked to Yoruba sources, with the former being a men's only organisation and the latter open to both sexes. While these two secret societies were relatively accessible to the less well off in the past, they progressively became more exclusive, just like the Masonic Lodges. Their exclusiveness resulted in big sections of Freetown's fast-growing population being excluded from secret society membership, which in turn was linked to systems of local governance and the distribution of economic and political resources. This led to the formation of newer secret societies called Odelays, which are a cross between the older Huntings and Agugu. Nunley (1987) asserts that the evolution of Odelays in the mid-20th century was a response to the realities of overpopulation in Freetown due to a surge in migration from the interior and the resulting, poor living conditions and economic prospects. Odelays therefore became a social receptacle for the socio-economically disadvantaged in the city. While today Odelays are established in the urban secret society body, formations of new secret societies continue, which can take new forms and address other issues (King 2012). This shall be discussed below with the example of Firestone.

The two examples – corporate landowning lineages and urban secret societies – represent different contemporary articulations of traditional authority, involving hierarchical relationships that are commonly linked to patrimonialism. While these relationships are demanded, reinforced, and continuously justified, they also fix individuals into dependent positions even if, as a group, they become important actors, as will be shown for the case of youth and for the Freetown-based secret society Firestone.

Global Discourses and Translations in Local Governance

Next to the slow changes and adjustments of chieftaincy and secret society discussed above, the interplay and translation of global models of socio-political rights, participation and good governance in local contexts effect changes in local governance.

The models offered by international agencies (education, autonomy, employment, and agency) to replace the traditional forms of intergenerational relations are seldom well adapted to local realities. They often lead to frustration and pessimism, a desperate search for *ad hoc* solutions, a disregard for traditional norms and values, an overuse of improvising skills to overcome the hardships of everyday life, and to migration. Their major impact has been to challenge gerontocratic values and structures. In urban contexts, otherwise established age-set organisation is becoming less functional (Trajano Filho 2010). Therefore, young people no longer act as a corporate group in their relations with the elders. This opens a space for challenging the gerontocratic system of authority. As corporate lineage-groups no longer work in urban settings and the extended family cannot offer what their children demand and aspire – to be full adults – pervasive intergenerational tensions become more acute. These tensions have been identified as contributing factors to the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Richards 1996; Utas 2003). As Shepler reminds us, the fundamental questions concerning these intergenerational conflicts are not new, and are not new to this region either (Shepler 2010). Global discourses are, however, a new dimension shaping the conceptualisation of generations vis-à-vis each other as well as their interaction.

It is likely that international rights discourses, together with lived war experiences, have influenced contemporary ethnic identity formation and claims to recognition. For example, victimisation, autochthony and citizenship, power and nation-building constitute recurrent, interrelated themes in contemporary Mandingo historical memory both in Liberia and southeast Guinea. Recently collected historical narratives suggest, first, the presence of a collective (re)interpretation of the place of marginalised Mandingo in the reshuffled political culture of Liberia on the background of the recent experiences of political marginalisation, genocide, loss of property and exile. Second, these narratives constitute a charter for claims to civic (citizenship, voting, elected offices, etc.) and economic (land ownership, jobs) rights. Third, the moral value of heroic memories of the past serves as a means to recreate communal life and inform local conflict resolution (Højbjerg 2008b, 2009, 2010, 2013a). The eruption of collective violence in the town of Voinjama, in northwest Liberia, in February 2010 shows that such glorifying memories of past political power also harbour the danger of sustaining future conflict (Højbjerg 2013b).

Since the end of the war in Liberia in 2003, both large- and small-scale initiatives aimed at the physical and social reconstruction of the country have been undertaken. These projects have received an extra boost since the election of President Johnson-Sirleaf and her success to raise funds from both multi- and bilateral partners and NGOs that entered the country (just as in the case of Sierra Leone) to implement international instruments seen fit to assist with what is termed war-to-peace-transition – like disarmament and reintegration programmes, truth commissions and courts to try the major war criminals (Sierra Leonean Special Court[8]).

Besides irregularities in these programmes, such as unpaid salaries, there was also a constant threat of renewed violence on the part of dissatisfied, former rebel groups. The individual reintegration trajectories of former combatants have taken many different roads within the internationally facilitated demobilisation programmes (Bedert 2007) and former fighters not participating in them have also been affected by their emphasis on security sector reforms, public awareness campaigns, etc. (Coulter 2009; Rinçon 2010; Schroven 2006).

Such cases reveal that authority – of an individual, an organisation, or a state – is embedded in a network of social and institutional interaction, by means of which it is socially and politically contextualised, enforced, or weakened (cp. Schroven 2010a).

Decentralisation Policy: fiscal decentralisation and its effect on differing legitimacies

The region of the Upper Guinea Coast has been under the influence of international governance reform and restructuration projects. These include political and fiscal decentralisation to give more power to (newly established) local government bodies. Such decentralisation policies are not always fully and willingly implemented by central governments. In some countries, governments follow procedures but their effects cannot always be perceived in local political settings. Guinea, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Liberia are examples where governments follow donor initiatives towards decentralisation but feed finances into patrimonial structures.

Decentralising policies may in fact have an unintended centralising effect, for instance, when resources are channelled through the central government, thereby strengthening rather than modifying the latter's influence. While the principle of subsidiarity is officially intended to move

[8] The Special Court of Sierra Leone is a hybrid court, set up by the Sierra Leonean government and the United Nations to prosecute those who bear the greatest responsibility for the war crimes committed during the Sierra Leonean civil war (1991-2002).

decision-making to local levels, thereby empowering local governance bodies, the latter remain dependent on the central state for resources. One such instantiation is the establishment of local councils and the election of their members. These councils are responsible for raising certain kinds of taxes. As a consequence levying taxes becomes a matter of negotiation between established and new local institutions, as observed in Kenema and Kailahun districts of Sierra Leone (Ménard 2008). The relationship between these institutions can at times be cooperative and competitive (cp. Fanthorpe 2005). Formally, spheres of decision-making between traditional leaderships and local councils are separated. Nevertheless, local councillors' decisions, especially for project implementation within a community, need to be validated first by traditional authorities. Paramount chiefs can be elected to attend local council meetings. Despite having no voting right, they maintain a strong influence over decision-making through networks of patronage, as a large majority of elected councillors are also part of the circle of traditional authorities and involved in client/patron relationships. This overlap explains why, in many instances, local councils are perceived by local populations as the reshuffling of the same men in two different local institutions, entailing distrust in the local councils' election process. The practice of these new institutions illustrates how the state is transformed by traditional elites at the local level to access specific resources, in this case jobs and money. However, other actors, like youth and women associations, have been taking the opportunity to access the same resources by making use of (membership in) these new local councils. The coexistence of such new political actors and traditional leaders results in new political contestations and competitions on the local level.

Local councillors try to gain a sphere of influence by channelling resources directly from NGOs or for government projects or by selling communal land to investors, which were previously only chiefs' prerogatives. However, paramount chiefs tend to play on legal contradictions between the Local Government Act and the Chiefdom Government Act, particularly on tax collection. Deprived of any specification on how taxes should be divided, the council and the chiefs have to make sharing agreements. Except in diamond-mining chiefdoms, the precepts are often divided designating sixty per cent for the chiefdom and forty per cent for the local council. Even the tax collection procedure differs. The paramount chiefs collect taxes through an established group of people, whereas the council employs tax collectors. Tax payers tend to trust the latter less than traditional authorities because they barely have any information about how local councils work and what their administrative duties are. Even though powers are formally devolved to local councils (e.g. citizens can now be issued a passport at the local council), their legitimacy and authority is not yet established with the local population. For instance, trying to give a reason for the indolence of local councils in implementing decisions, an informant from Kenema mentioned that "the decision has to be taken at the top [Freetown], then it comes back to the local council level. That's why it needs so much time to get a decision implemented." At the local level, the idea of an omnipotent centre, both abusive and distant, directing the local councils, tends to overlook the interactions between traditional authorities and national politics, it emphasises patronage at the margins, and confines the state's practice to the national level.

Decentralisation may be the common term that embraces different processes of devolution of fiscal and political powers. However, the latter may have different effects in different places. In contrast to the experience of tax-payers in Sierra Leone, Guinean citizens relate differently to the newly founded councils and their tasks. Prospective candidates for a council need to be well-respected by local landlords to win popular support in elections, after which they may be able to

influence things in ways different from those of village elders who are more closely tied to landlord-stranger allegiances. The possibility to win elections is influenced by other factors as well. State representatives like the sub-prefects and the communal secretaries influence choices by giving information on candidates' formal eligibility. When a district in the western part of Forécariah Préfecture split up after years of struggles for the recognition of their mutual independence, the communal secretary and the president of the local council together with some councillors embarked on a three-day journey to 'identify' two new councillors, i.e. representatives of the respective districts. 'Identification' was the term used in these examples. District chiefs are voted for by village elders rather than by the whole population, in an understanding that local councils would work like a system of direct representation. In Kaliah, an informant explained the situation as follows: "Now that there are rural councils again just like under Sékou [Touré], everyone should be represented, all the districts."

With the ambition of doing everything right, public servants seem to have merged ideas of direct representation of a previous model of governance and the contemporary decentralisation model propagating representative democracy. When asked about the motivation for the selection-practice instead of employing popular suffrage to elect the councillors, the council's president argued that personal ties between representatives and elders would safeguard against embezzlement of tax income and also raise trust amongst the population. The high tax yield of that area in comparison to others in the Préfecture seems to afford his point some justice. The question of accepting tax collectors is key in this area and linked to both their authority and legitimacy, as this comment (in Forécariah) on local councillors reveals: "Sometimes I think they [the councillors] become people who eat with both hands as well. They are not landlords (…). They can do as they please as they have no responsibilities to no one."

The idioms used here are very strong. People accused of eating with both hands are usually regarded as those overstretching the accepted level of embezzlement that they otherwise have leeway for. The use of the term here indicates that the level of perceived embezzlement is higher than had been anticipated. In this line of argument, over-embezzlement would be very well possible because the actors concerned were not integrated into a larger body of 'accountability' that could regulate this consumption. By contrast and according to this argument, landlords would have such a 'moral community' to keep their level of embezzlement in check (cp. Le Meur 2006). A re-configuration of financial re-distribution systems along the lines of the state-sponsored decentralisation programme inadvertently leads to a lack of trust and the perceived potential of stakeholders' over-embezzlement.

Taken together, international decentralisation as translated into the Guinean and Sierra Leonean fiscal procedures discussed above, seem to counteract established power configurations that assure morale, responsibility, and trust.

Youth and Gender in Local Elections

The establishment of district and town councils in Guinea and Sierra Leone (but not yet in Liberia eleven years after the end of the war) has brought new and officially elected political actors, namely district and town councillors, into the local arena who all draw on different resources to assert their authority. These can be based on kinship, land rights, or religious status and thus lead to multiple mandates of authority in one and the same person and hence to shifts on the local configuration of power. In the wake of decentralisation since the 1990s, local-level elections and

the institution of such self-governing bodies has been globally proliferated and also reached into the rural areas of the Upper Guinea Coast. While formal elections to these councils took place, the actual staffing was often influenced by central governing bodies, landlords, and town elders (Schroven 2010a). In Sierra Leone, instituting council elections was a political tool to render the countryside governable after the war (Fanthorpe 2001, 2006; Jackson 2007). In the Sierra Leonean case, elections shifted some political weight away from the chieftaincy system that had been charged with instigating some of the civil war's grievances as shall be discussed in the following examples from rural Sierra Leone and Freetown.

Local elections have not yet taken place in many parts of Liberia, but the government has brought to the fore councillors with very different personal and professional backgrounds, amongst them former warlords. Whether these types of politicians will gain a more permanent foothold in local politics remains to be seen (Højbjerg 2008b).

These established political actors can be candidates and, upon election, combine in their person various forms of authority: contemporary notions of election-based democracy, traditional authority due to their descent from landowning or chiefly families, and a professional expertise as public servant or party member (cp. Schroven 2010a). In such a case, state-imbued authority is intricately intertwined with other kinds of authority that can potentially be much more relevant on the local level than references to a central government or an internationally propagated idea of democratic participation.

Generational models are also changing with the push of democratic and egalitarian ideals spread by NGOs and globally circulating models. Abiding by the requirements of the international community, the Sierra Leonean government put youth issues on the forefront of post-conflict politics. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) government elected in 2002 created a new Ministry of Youth and Sports and initiated the Sierra Leone National Youth Policy in 2003 (Ministry of Youth and Sports 2003). The National Youth Policy defines for the first time a 'youth' category that has specific needs and duties in a post-conflict environment. On the one hand, it aimed at giving new opportunities to people who, during the civil war, had been deprived of many facilities like education, employment, material, and psychological stability. The age bracket (between fifteen and thirty-five) accommodates various populations who had 'lost out' on the necessary opportunities to make a living. On the other hand, the 'youth profile' established by the National Youth Policy clearly states the dangers of leaving out a population consisting of "largely illiterate, school dropouts eking [out] a living from petty trading, narcotic drug peddling, prostitution and theft" (ibid.: 3), hence underlining the need to control a population who had proved to be subversive and dangerous during the war and to integrate it into mainstream society.

The Youth Policy's definition partly echoes the Mende notion of dependency. The Mende concept of 'dependent' or *i nyaa va* ("he/she's for me") is opposed to the notion of independent individuals or *taa kba lova* ("he/she's for him/herself"). "Being for someone else" expresses the fact that relations of dependence are present all the way up, from landlords to local chiefs, paramount chiefs and government representatives. They shape relationships between women and men, juniors and seniors (Ferme 2001). Dependent people coexist with 'big men', who possess enough money and land to maintain dependents. Being an *i nyaa va* is relative to a specific social position from which some individuals will not manage to break away because they lack wealth and political voice within their community. Social position evolves with age for those who find the resources to make a living by themselves. Yet, in a post-conflict area, the opportunities for youth to

improve their situation are low. The notion of 'youth' is therefore not detached from local social realities. However, the global concept of 'youth' as implemented by the National Youth Policy, has been transformed and reinvested by young people at the local level in such a way that it accentuates the effects of the war and of post-war society on Sierra Leonean youth.

The three main political parties in Sierra Leone have been claiming these past years to offer young people better political opportunities, but their claim has not been substantiated by according political action. Local party aspirants use the youth empowerment 'discourse' to gain legitimacy and a new support basis. Nevertheless, the youth rhetoric seems to effect that more young people run as independent candidates in elections, although the financial burden to register as such is huge. For example, in local government elections in 2008 some of these youths defined themselves as politically independent although their place within local social networks was one of dependents towards patrons.

This may be understood both as a sign of their resentment of (established) political parties and their ambition to bypass the established system of patronage in which they are otherwise bound by clientship. On the political stage, these young people achieved a level of independence by financing their own candidacy. This example shows how political practice and rhetoric are transformed at the local level as a result of both post-conflict policies and egalitarian ideals that oppose the patron/client dependency pattern so prominent in the region.

King (2007) notes that 'youth' as a category embracing both men and women is relatively new in Sierra Leone. Women literally earned the label 'youth' mainly through their success in fighting alongside men on all sides during the civil war (Coulter 2009; Schroven 2006). Some of them attained chronological adulthood on the battlefield. The war also afforded some the means to accelerated socio-economic adulthood because of material and non-material resources, which they had acquired from the war economy. Just as in Liberia, at the end of the war, many ex-combatant girls and women could not sufficiently reintegrate into their communities because they saw them as having transgressed women's roles by becoming combatants (Coulter 2009; Schroven 2006). This encouraged their migration from rural areas towards urban centres, the capital Freetown offering a particular form of integration via the urban-based secret societies.

One such secret society, known as Firestone, gives women institutional recognition for three reasons. It draws the bulk of its membership from circumstantial youth, i.e. all those characterised as marginal and powerless (see below); secondly, the organisation has a sector which amalgamates its secret society core with the non-secret society, called "Firestone *Youth* Development and Cultural Organisation". Thirdly, Firestone Secret Society was central in the processes of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of ex-combatants, including women. Firestone Secret Society sanctions ensured that their identities as ex-fighters were erased or at least ceased to be all-defining for their new life in Freetown. As members of an Odelay, these youths became not only collectively active in politics by being "voting banks" (Das and Poole 2004) for parties or particular politicians. They also became a weight in local and national elections that can make or destroy politicians' careers.

In post-war Sierra Leone, youth has emerged as a socio-economic cluster that includes all those who are marginal in socio-economic terms. It thereby transcends and at the same time bridges gender and generational classifications. In light of ethnic diversity, religious differences, the effective divide between Freetown and the country's interior, as well as the varying educational standings of marginal urban actors, youth has become the major emotional unifier. Circumstantial

youth in Sierra Leone is a sub-national category of identification and a mobilising force. For many people living on Freetown's socio-economic and geographical margins, youth is also a survival strategy (King 2012; cp. Abbink 2005).

In the case of Liberia and Guinea, youth is yet an unknown political entity for local elections. While Liberia has not yet held local elections, in Guinea they are predominantly taking place in urban settings and here the existence of competing political parties may be the major novelty in the coming elections rather than the question of youth mobilisation.

With Sierra Leonean elections changing in significance for youth as a political player, the participation of women has also become a contested issue. While equal gender rights are pushed for by international actors, adaptations thereof are occurring on the national and local levels. Women can now officially become town councillors, mayors, and also paramount chief since these offices are elected by popular suffrage. However, as paramount chiefs are not only political but spiritual leaders as well, they are required to be members of Poro. As this is so, a lot of popular protest arose when women put forward their candidacy for the elections of paramount chief. Many women and men claimed that women could not fulfil this office properly because they could – or rather should – not become members of the male secret society, Poro. Hence, although women are eligible in terms of their citizenship rights, their candidacy for the election of paramount chief is contested as a result of locally established concepts concerning the legitimacy of power.

There are famous historical examples of 'big women' and female paramount chiefs in the region, such as Madame Yoko and Madame Yaewa in the late 19th and beginning of 20th century. They and other women like them were members of landowning families who turned out to be politically and economically successful. They were also initiated into Poro in order to become paramount chiefs, sometimes following in their husbands' or fathers' footsteps (Day 2012).

While most female paramount chiefs were and are based in the southern, Mende-dominated part of Sierra Leone, the contemporary debate on gender equality is taking place across the country. It is supported by international institutions, which seem to accentuate and accelerate local demands for social change and a transformation of male-dominated and gerontocratic structures. The contemporary debate concerning female paramount chieftaincy refers to historical power configurations of landowners and their traditional spiritual and political leadership, on the one hand, and to contemporary discourses of women's rights based on their citizenship, on the other. In this combination and with the background of current changes taking place in configurations of power more generally, globalised gender discourses may well accelerate women's chances for political participation.

Conclusion

The above considerations reveal how malleable traditional authority is and how practices of local leadership are intertwined and affected by changes on the nation-state level and by external influences. Considering the *longue durée* of the local institutions discussed above, these outside influences have already integrated the colonial and postcolonial state and we therefore focussed our attention on more recent events and interventions and contemporary re-configurations of power.

As the paper argued in the first empirical section, concepts and practices of governance have been changing over time. These processes are slow and employ traditions, history and religion to varying degrees in order to legitimise established and more recent modes of governance. Such

moderate changes on the local level are today met by powerful influences exerted by actors beyond the nation-state-level – global discourses through UN- and NGO-interventions in the societies of the Upper Guinea Coast. In the wake of the regional wars in the 1990s and 2000s, intergovernmental agencies and NGOs have exerted their influence in Sierra Leone and Liberia, contesting what has been considered traditional forms of authority and sometimes changing the way local rule is organised and legitimated. As discussed in the second empirical section, these influences accelerate, accentuate, or counteract the changes already occurring within local and national contexts and contemporary local leadership needs to navigate these changing demands for authority and legitimacy.

Concepts and practices of traditional authority and local leadership in the Upper Guinea Coast region have been malleable and flexible enough to be adapted to colonial and postcolonial regimes rather than being substituted by the latter. They have also adapted to war and post-war situations in various ways. However, powerful impositions of change channelled from the outside may also trigger profound change rather than creative adaptation, especially where they concern such domains of the social and political organisation in which more established and 'traditional' concepts and practices have come under severe contestation within a given society – for example as a result of having been experienced as causes of conflict and war, as incapable of protecting people from violence, as divisive and subjugating forces. Because the meanings of newly emerging configurations of power for those who 'merge' them against the background of previous such configurations, current local demands, and new global concepts and models of governance only become apparent when they are explored as socially and historically contextualised in a given local setting and as dimensions of the social dynamics as part of which they occur, we also take into account the impact and repercussions of specific historical experiences on the processes and practices under study.[9]

[9] For more detailed elaborations on our approach to processes of integration and conflict see Knörr and Trajano Filho 2010 and Schlee 2008.

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