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- Note: MIRCB: *Mémoires de l'Institut Royal Colonial Belge*. Section des sciences morales et politiques. Collection in 8°.
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LANDLORD AND STRANGER: CHANGE IN TENANCY RELATIONS IN SIERRA LEONE

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THE relations between a stranger who leaves his home to settle in a distant chiefdom in Sierra Leone and his landlord have for centuries been guided by customary rules. They are of interest to the anthropologist studying contemporary society, and to the historian who can sometimes elucidate from them otherwise obscure incidents in the past. In this article we describe the landlord-stranger relationship as it exists in Sierra Leone today, then give examples of how it has been applied at earlier periods.

Initial occupation and utilization of sections of rain forest by hunter-horticulturalists of various tribes seem to be the primary bases of land tenure in Sierra Leone. Referring to Mende country, Little writes that 'access to farming land and rights to its occupation and use for purposes of farming, derive from membership of certain families or descent groups, who claim to have made the first settlement in the country'.¹ In Temne country traditional history indicates a similar basis. Subsequent immigrants of the same or another tribe had to secure the permission of the initial settlers to hunt, farm, or practise their particular trade. Thus the first chief of the Kolifa area, Masa Kama Koranko, gave permission to one Pa Bambara, a Kamara, to hunt the southern part of his domain and settle if he wished. To strengthen his position, Pa Bambara married a daughter of Masa Kama, and ultimately some of their descendants founded the chiefdoms of Mayoso, Mabang, and Mamunta, all subordinate to Rowala. As time went on and more immigrants arrived, each family or lineage group went to the chief of a new area, gave him a gift and requested bush for brushing. Usually the chief referred them to a lineage head who had adequate resources and who would accept them as stranger-tenants. Thus Ishe Mele (=Kamara), an early settler in the southern part of Kolifa Mayoso, assigned sections of bush to several immigrant families who settled villages there. Unfortunately there are no details of the terms of agreement between Ishe and his strangers, if indeed the rights and obligations of the two parties were made explicit. Traditional accounts do mention gifts (*lambe* in Temne) to the landlord and strongly suggest that most immigrant groups married into the landlord's lineage so as to gain security of tenure. It is apparent also that immigrants did not at first enter

¹ K. L. Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone* (1948), 82.

into the political life in their area and that disputes involving them were settled by the landlord.²

In more recent years, however, migrants settling in new areas have been forced to agree to the landlord's terms in order to gain rights to land-use. The initial *lambe* (*famalu* in Mende) varies in amount but is usually small. Once a family head is approached, he consults his kinsmen and if all agree a sacrifice is made to the ancestors and the terms of agreement set up. In one Temne case the stranger had to give one bushel of husk rice after harvest, refrain from harvesting oil-palms and certain fruit trees on the land assigned him, and help brush the landlord's farm. These obligations are the marks of tenancy. Although not formally stipulated, the stranger-tenant ought to visit his landlord frequently—a mark of deference, give occasional small gifts—a mark of subordination, and tell others of his landlord's generosity—a mark of good manners and social *sewir-faire*.

The relationship is more than a simple economic agreement, however, and it is on a person-to-person basis. Temne informants stressed that prospective tenants would be accepted only if they were 'well mannered', 'not ungrateful', 'honest', and 'likeable'. Compatibility is important³ since the tenant's household will become, in some cases, virtually a part of his landlord's, and friction in interpersonal relations creates a difficult situation for all. The tenant cannot permit anyone outside his immediate family who was not party to the agreement to farm; others must make their own arrangements with the landlord. If both parties fulfil their obligations, the tenant will be allotted land year after year by his landlord, although theoretically the arrangement is reviewed at the end of each farming season. Should either party to the agreement die, his successor, as family head, must renew the arrangement. Second-generation tenants, particularly those who are children of women from the landlord's lineage, are in a stronger position for, among Temne at least, land-use-rights can be secured from the mother's lineage.⁴

The landlord too has obligations towards his stranger. In a broad sense he is regarded as a patron and something of a 'father-figure'. An unmarried tenant looks to his landlord for help in amassing the bride-wealth necessary for marriage, for advice, and for mediation in the event of a minor dispute. Should the tenant need money for tax or food or seed rice to tide him over a bad year, the landlord will be 'begged'. Under Mende and Temne law the landlord serves as advocate for his tenant in the Paramount Chief's court, and he is held accountable for his tenant's actions towards others. Thomas writes⁵ that 'when a stranger incurs a debt, the man who

² Dorjahn, Unpublished field-notes, 1954-5.

³ This is not to say that economic considerations do not enter into a prospective landlord's thinking. A man short of labourers will take almost any tenant so as to gain help in making his farm.

⁴ A Temne man looks first to his father's patrilineage, *makas*, for land and then, if need be, to his mother's patrilineage, *makara*.

⁵ N. W. Thomas, *Anthropological Report on Sierra Leone* (1916), 170. It is inferred that grantor and landlord are synonymous.

grants him land is his surety, and, if necessary, the chief pays the debt from the funds of the grantor'. Often the landlord will serve as guardian for his stranger's children, especially if the stranger has no patrilineal kinsmen resident near by.

With the growth of urban areas, the landlord-stranger relationship has developed new facets. While it is true that those farmers already considered secured land on which to build a house and garden as well as bush for farming, it was the latter that was of paramount importance. Little has noted that if a stranger 'moves away, any houses he has built become the property of his landlord. He may, however, remove and take away with him doors, windows and any other fitting'.⁶ House land in villages has little economic value, but as urban areas build up, land values rise and in theory the landlord retains his traditional rights to land upon which his strangers build houses. In the early 1950's in Magburaka, one enterprising landlord tried with partial success to seize houses erected by his tenants so as to rent them out for profit. (The constellation of rights and obligations that traditionally formed the landlord-stranger relationship has been reinterpreted.) Banton⁷ explains the high turnover in place of residence by the tribal inhabitants of Freetown in terms of

... bad landlord-tenant relations and the effects of a generally rising level of rents. Often a landlord moves tenants out after a time, ostensibly to effect repairs, and then lets the premises again at a higher rent. If a tenant is allowed to stay long in a house he may acquire, or claim, a moral right over tenancy. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that most immigrants are used to much lower housing standards than those of the Creoles and are less likely to care for a property when it is not their own. A Creole student... advanced this view in observing: If any landlord wants to get rid of his house in a short time, he only has to let it to natives.

The illicit alluvial diamond-mining centred in Kono District in the early and middle 1950's attracted large numbers of adult males from all areas of Sierra Leone and most other West African territories. These too came to be called 'strangers', and at least initially the immigrant miners went to the chiefs and headmen of Kono as 'landlords'. But the circumstances of diamond-mining were new, and in some villages the 'strangers' seem to have outnumbered the natives. In time, some miners became quite wealthy and this wealth plus their sometime numerical superiority enabled them to evade the more onerous disabilities of strangers. It should be pointed out, however, that at least some chiefs demanded 'license fees' and 'fines' of miners that were highly questionable. Returned miners in the Kolifa area said that supervisors (headmen) of gangs in one instance had to pay two pounds per miner per fortnight and that this was collected by Native Administration messengers who gave no receipts.⁸ When the headmen of

⁶ Little, *op. cit.* 93.

⁷ Michael Banton, *West African City* (1957), 91 and 93.

⁸ This suggests, of course, that what was collected never was placed in the Native Administration treasury.

large gangs refused to pay, violence followed and legally constituted authority broke down. The strangers, in this case, came to predominate, even setting up their own 'government', independent of the legal administration and oblivious to their obligations under the landlord-stranger relationship.⁹

* * *

The coming of Europeans of several nationalities to Sierra Leone in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries posed many problems for the Africans resident there. In coastal Sierra Leone and the adjoining country there were only two fortified slave-trading posts of the type built on the Gold Coast—Bence (later Bance, today Bunce) Island in the Sierra Leone river, and York Island (virtually abandoned after 1714) in the Sherbro river. Elsewhere Europeans who came to trade did not congregate in forts. They settled as individuals in towns and villages on islands or along the river-banks, under the protection of the king or chief who ruled there.

Slave-traders were welcomed, for they brought trade goods otherwise unobtainable. Kings were anxious to have them in their towns. They also wanted to keep them there, and prevent them taking their trade to another king's territory. So it was in the king's interest to see that they were secure and comfortable, and that they got an adequate return from their trade.

There are indications that the Africans viewed the relationship established with the trader as basically that obtaining between landlord and stranger-tenant. Mathews, who traded in the Sierra Leone area in the 1780's, describes several aspects of this pattern as set forth above:

... when the adventurer arrives upon the coast with a suitable cargo . . . he dispatches his boats properly equipped to the different rivers. On their arrival at the place of trade they immediately apply to the head man of the town, inform him of their business, and request his protection; desiring he will either be himself their landlord, or appoint a respectable person, who becomes security for the person and goods of the stranger, and also for the recovery of all money lent, provided it is done with his knowledge and approbation. This business finished, and proper presents made (for nothing is done without), they proceed to trade either by lending their goods to the natives, who carry them up into the country, or by waiting till trade is brought to them.¹⁰

This system enabled Europeans to trade safely on credit. If debts were unpaid the landlord paid them and recovered the loss by selling the debtor or his relatives.¹¹

The landlord took full responsibility for his stranger.

⁹ For a discussion in an official source, see the 1935 Report on the Administration of Provinces, 4.

¹⁰ John Mathews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone* (1788), 142-3.

¹¹ Thomas Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone* (1803), 1, 127-8.

... All Europeans who settle in this country place themselves under the protection of some chief whom they style landlord and when the establishment is large as at Bance Island and the Isles de Loss the title is considered as an honour. The duty of the landlord is to plead your cause with the country chiefs. Every palaver comes to him and the protegee [sic] seldom hears of it till it is adjudged. Receiving annually a trifling present, his interest leads him to watch over that of his protegee [sic], and to prevent every species of imposition.¹²

According to Dr Winterbottom, Surgeon to the Sierra Leone Company 1792-6:

... a traveller or stranger, as they call him, is scarcely accountable for any faults which he may commit, whether through inadvertency or design, the host being considered as responsible for the actions of his 'stranger'.¹³

Thus the stranger was guaranteed protection from molestation, even immunity from the consequences of his crimes, once he had secured a landlord.

At first sight the stranger seems to have had the best of the bargain. But the landlord benefited too. He had the benefit of trade. He levied regular duties on the stranger: rent, customary presents, and sometimes a commission on sales.¹⁴ He could also exclude his strangers from local politics. Having given up responsibility for their actions to their landlords they could have no responsibility for the government of the country. So political questions were decided by the natives themselves, for even wealthy non-European strangers were excluded. Zachary Macaulay, Governor of Sierra Leone in the 1790's, wrote of an approaching kingship election: '... Signor Domingo and Pa Bunkie, though they have a great deal to say at Palavers, can decide nothing, being strangers, that is to say not born here'.¹⁵

Nevertheless the rule seems to have been relaxed sometimes, perhaps for an influential, powerful stranger. In 1803 the kingship of the Bulom Shore, opposite Freetown, was vacant. The Sierra Leone Company, which then controlled the Colony of Sierra Leone, had some land there, and the Governor discovered that in consequence 'we had the privilege of naming the new king for the place'.¹⁶ But this seems to have been exceptional.

Though the Sierra Leone Company, like all aliens, had a landlord, the government in Freetown would not allow him the full customary landlord's rights. If there were disputes within the Colony the landlord was not allowed to mediate them, as he claimed to be entitled to do. When the landlord died, no new agreement was made with his successors. The

¹² Zachary Macaulay Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, Macaulay's Journal, 30 July 1793.

¹³ Winterbottom, *op. cit.* 214.

¹⁴ Nicholas Owen, *Journal of a Slave-Dealer* (ed. E. Martin), 1930, 69.

¹⁵ Zachary Macaulay's Journal, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ Public Record Office—W.O. 1/352, letter enclosed in Macaulay, 5 Sept. 1803.

Company claimed that under treaties of cession made in 1787 and 1788 the land they occupied had been ceded in perpetuity, and that they had no need to make a new treaty with each successive landlord as local custom required.¹⁷ This dispute over the obligations of landlord and stranger was one of the causes of the war which broke out in 1801 between the Temne and the Colony.

After 1807 when the British Parliament illegalized the slave-trade, slave-trading for the transatlantic market ceased in the area immediately adjoining the Colony; during the next sixty years it was gradually put down in the whole country. Trade in produce, at first timber, then palm produce or ground-nuts, replaced it. Produce traders settled down like the former slave-traders under a landlord's protection as strangers. Most, however, were not Europeans but recaptive Africans and their descendants (the Sierra Leone Creoles) from the Sierra Leone Colony.

A case which came before the Sierra Leone courts in 1867 depicts the familiar situation of landlord and stranger. A Creole trader complained to his landlord of an unpaid debt. The landlord reported it to the king of the country, and the trader was allowed to plunder canoes belonging to the debtor's village.¹⁸ Here, however, the trader was allowed to act himself, a sign that the stranger was no longer so dependent on his landlord as formerly. Indeed as the number of Creoles increased, the landlords found it increasingly difficult to keep them out of local politics. After the Hut Tax War of 1898 in which many Creoles were murdered, and their number up-country greatly reduced, the landlords probably recovered some of their lost power.

The system also worked in Freetown. Traders who brought produce from up-country were strangers who sold their produce through a Freetown landlord, whose rights became established by custom, though they were not officially recognized by the government. In the 1840's when canoes arrived, Freetown people would gather on the shore and rush into the water as they approached. The first to touch a canoe had the right to be landlord and the stranger was obliged to sell his produce through him and pay him a commission.¹⁹

Many Muslim traders, chiefly Fula and Mandinka from the remote interior, came regularly to Freetown to trade in the nineteenth century. Rather than have European or Creole landlords, they went to countrymen of their own who were settled there permanently for the purpose. These Muslim landlords took full charge of their strangers while they were in Freetown, lodged them, guided them through the intricacies of Europeanized city life, and arranged their trade. For this they took often extortionate commissions which the government tried, without much success, to regulate.²⁰

¹⁷ Public Record Office—C.O. 270/5, minute of Council, 20 July 1797.

¹⁸ Public Record Office—C.O. 267/290 Blackall 6, 14 Jan. 1867 enc.

¹⁹ Public Record Office—C.O. 267/192 Macdonald 104, 4 June 1846.

²⁰ Public Record Office—C.O. 267/301 Kennedy 133, 23 June 1869 enc.

Thus a set of relationships between landlord and stranger that arose in a tribal setting where immigrants sought to gain rights to hunt, farm, or follow their trade, has been adapted and reinterpreted in various new situations in the course of history. Traditionally the stranger was in a subordinate position and his inferior status was marked in various ways. With the coming of traders, both European and African, these strangers were able sometimes to ameliorate their position, especially when, as in the cases of the Sierra Leone Company, the wealthier private traders, and the illicit diamond-miners, they were sufficiently powerful to challenge or influence the indigenous political authorities. In Freetown and the developing urban areas up-country, the landlord remains today in a position of authority, the stranger-tenant often being exploited. Recent developments in the use of leases and contracts, legally binding, promise further alterations in this old pattern.