

School's Out: strategies of resistance in colonial Sierra Leone

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Koyeima government school was established in 1930 to give practical and technical training to chiefs' sons in Sierra Leone. This was the colonial government's view of the project. The reality proved to be different, and was an example of the resistance shown by Africans to the British view of what 'their place' was. The school was aimed at boys from the rural Protectorate area of Sierra Leone, rather than the better-educated elite of Freetown. The colonial government's strategies to use the school as a means to reinforce and continue colonial rule of the Protectorate were disrupted when the boys walked out of school to demand better conditions. This strike action was part of a larger movement by Africans in Sierra Leone to take control of education to better themselves, rather than promote colonial interests.

While colonial rule is often associated with force and policing, colonial powers also had to provide basic infrastructure to their colonies in order to maximise their return. This included not only roads and transport to extract goods, but also government offices to ensure stability and order. Employing native people in colonies not only saved on wages costs, it also provided a veneer of self-determination and democracy, along with an invaluable link to existing power networks and traditions. Schools were an integral part of this system; providing the literate workers for low-level positions in the administration. By looking at the history of a school in one of the smallest

countries in West Africa, Sierra Leone, and the resistance of school students to the imposed education system we can draw out the role played by colonial education in the implementation of colonial rule.

European contact with Sierra Leone was among the earliest in West Africa, with Portuguese explorer Pedro de Cintra mapping the area in 1462.⁶⁶ By the 1700s it was an important slave-trading hub with the market's base located on Bunce Island, in what would become Freetown harbour. But, in 1787, Sierra Leone became the location for a radical plan to settle the 'Black Poor' from London. These settlers were mainly descendents of former slaves who lived in poverty in England, supported by the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor. The first attempt proved unsuccessful, but the recently established Sierra Leone Company was able to establish a settlement, Freetown, in 1792. The Company was styled as a philanthropic endeavour, but its owners refused to grant the settlers freehold of their land, leading to an unsuccessful revolt in 1799.⁶⁷ Despite this inauspicious beginning, thousands of liberated slaves were settled by the British in Freetown, which became one of their first colonies in West Africa in 1808.⁶⁸ The settlers brought there were not native to the area, but had their origins in all parts of Africa and became known as the Krio people, with their own language⁶⁹ and distinctive culture. They controlled trade along the coast, and became part of the movement to 'civilise' West Africa, alongside the colonial powers.

This colony was not what was to become modern Sierra Leone. It extended only over the capital city, Freetown, and its environs. The British were reluctant to expand the size of the colony and take on additional responsibility. But, they also felt a need to thwart French expansion in West Africa and increase trading in the hinterland. The Brussels Act of 1890 had given the colonial powers free reign to expand their empires, using the 'civilisation' of Africa, and particularly the eradication of slavery as a

66 Peter Kup, 1961, *Sierra Leone 1400-1787*, Cambridge University Press, London, p. 5

67 Leo Spitzer, 1974, *The Creoles of Sierra Leone: Responses to Colonialism, 1870-1945*, University of Wisconsin Press, London, p. 9-13

68 Peter Kup, 1975, *Sierra Leone: A Concise History*, David & Charles, London, p. 167

69 Krio, translation Creole, is based on English and African languages and is now widely spoken throughout Sierra Leone.

justification. The British feared the Colony was too tiny to survive and would become an isolated enclave surrounded by the French. And so a slow, careful expansion of 'influence' began. But it became clear over the course of 1890 to 1896 that disturbances in the area required more drastic action. The 'sphere of influence' had left the boundaries of British control difficult to establish. This, combined with the adoption of a more pro-active and aggressive policy at the Colonial Office, led to the declaration of the rest of Sierra Leone as a Protectorate in 1896.⁷⁰ The declaration allowed the British to gain control of this vital trading area, without the responsibility of creating a colony.

So, from the beginning of its life as a colony of the British government, Sierra Leone was effectively divided in two by different forms of rule. This divide between Colony and Protectorate was pronounced; socially, culturally and economically. It was not to become a settler colony, like Kenya, instead the 'settlers' were the Black Settlers, Europeanised ex-slaves of African descent who inhabited the Colony. The Protectorate was seen as an opportunity, not only to stymie French expansion in the area, but also to extract resources and conduct trade. In order to accomplish this, it was necessary to exert sufficient authority over the area to ensure traders' safety and to transport goods. However, with no white population to settle or support there was little incentive to invest heavily in infrastructure. Rather, it made better business sense to attempt to run the colony with as little investment as possible, achieving the maximum return.

The Protectorate was ruled indirectly, through the existing chieftain system, and a Hut Tax was imposed in 1898 in order to pay for administrative costs. This led to an uprising led by Bai Bureh⁷¹ in the north, and a secret society, the Poro, in the south. The revolt was easily put down by the British, and colonial records show that they believed it to be led and instigated by Bai Bureh alone. A report commissioned by Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, concluded that the revolt had been inspired by the new collection of taxes⁷² and was part of a wider dissatisfaction and anger

70 John Grace, 1975, *Domestic Slavery in West Africa*, Muller, London

71 Bai Bureh, a Temne leader, is still revered as a hero in Sierra Leone.

72 Sir David Chalmers, 1899, *Report of the Insurrection in the Sierra Leone Protectorate*, London

over the declaration of the Protectorate itself.⁷³ The Colonial Office attempted to suppress this conclusion and instead promoted the view that it had been caused by British attempts to quell slavery in the area, thus casting the British colonial project in a more acceptable, 'civilising' light.⁷⁴ This propaganda linked up with earlier claims to be civilising Africa, bringing light to darkness. Missionaries saw the acme of this process to be the conversion of Africans to Christianity, while governments saw an opportunity to create nation-states run on orderly European lines. This promotion of humane imperialism can be seen in the humanitarian rhetoric used at the Brussels Conference of 1889 where the 'Scramble for Africa' was organised and planned.

The British had to balance the desire to be seen publicly as a scourge of slavery and barbaric practices with the need establish trust and confidence with the chiefs of the Protectorate. They adopted a policy of 'standing aloof' from issues like slavery. Official policy was not to become involved in individual cases or enforce owners' rights, though reality on the ground proved different. In addition to this legal detachment, little investment was made by colonial authorities in the Protectorate, particularly in education and infrastructure. The Protectorate area was taken to facilitate trade, and was soon being exploited for its natural resources: iron and diamonds. It became an extractive colony, and there was little incentive to install a complex infrastructure. Instead authority was concentrated into particular areas. The British maintained 'islands of interest' in the Protectorate, following the natural lines of valuable mineral deposits.

This created an unusual system of power and control. Foucault, for example, argues that power is diffused through modern European states using the example of a capillary system bringing blood to extremities. However, in a colony like Sierra Leone, the colonial power was more like a localised virus. It was concentrated in a particular area and only spread for its own survival and advantage. Cooper argues that this was a common

73 Arthur Abraham, Bai Bureh, The British, and the Hut Tax War, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1. (1974), pp. 99-106.

74 Danial Magaziner provides an interesting account of the conflict over the Chalmers Report in Removing the Blinders and adjusting the view: A case study from early colonial Sierra Leone, *History in Africa*, Vol 34, 2007, p 169-188

feature of colonial power; to establish islands of influence, related to their interests, such as mining or agriculture.⁷⁵ Thanks to this distribution, colonial power was applied unevenly, what Guha calls “dominance without hegemony”.⁷⁶ There was no absolute control over the whole of Sierra Leonean society, and no desire to take up such complete control. In the modern era, anthropologist Ben Jones argues that the state in developing countries can become outward-facing, dependent on foreign aid and so disinterested in rural affairs.⁷⁷ It seems by looking at the colonial state in Africa, we can see a similar process. The attention of administration is directed towards those activities which feed into the interests of the foreign power.

However, the needs of administration compelled the government to take some control of education from the missionary schools which had multiplied in Sierra Leone. Missionary schools trained freed slaves to read the Bible and become part of the Christian mission.⁷⁸ But the demands of the colonial administration required more literate Africans to work in low-level clerical positions. The “open-ended academic education” offered by the missionaries was deemed to be too demanding of the Africans “mental development”.⁷⁹ Aside from these benevolent concerns about the limitations of African minds, the main aim in limiting education for Africans was to prevent an educated elite forming, which would challenge colonial rule and develop political resistance to the British government. Even without an overt resistance or rebellion, the build-up of an educated elite creates an

75 Frederick Cooper, *Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History*, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, 1994, No. 5, pp. 1516-1545.

76 Quoted in *Ibid*, p 1531

77 Ben Jones (in press, 2008). *Stateless Society: Rural Developments in eastern Uganda*, International African Library for the International African Institute, Edinburgh University Press and Fountain Publishers, Kampala

78 Kingsley Banya, *Illiteracy, Colonial Legacy and Education: The Case of Modern Sierra Leone*, *Comparative Education*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1993), pp. 159-170

79 Richard A Corby, *Bo School and its Graduates in Colonial Sierra Leone*, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 15, 1981, No. 2, pp. 323-333, p. 32: Paulo Freire (1970) argues no literacy is politically neutral freighted as it can be with the assumptions of the establishment, and so it could be argued that providing some, but not adequate, education helped the British consolidate their rule.

imbalance in the power relationship established by colonial rule. When a colonial power seeks to 'civilise' or to educate colonised people for its own needs the essentialised difference between coloniser and colonised fades. It is best illustrated by Homi Bhabha's argument that gradually the colonised person acts as though "white but not quite".⁸⁰ This puts colonial rule itself into question. How can colonial rule be justified once the people are 'evolved', 'educated' and, most importantly 'civilised' like a European?

For this reason, at first colonial education was limited to the area around Freetown, and concentrated on the existing elite of Krio people. But as the British colonial government expanded its influence over the Protectorate the demands of the administration increased and it was necessary for them to provide education to create a greater pool of workers for the regime. It could also be argued that the increasing power and education of the Krio people was a threat to the stability of the colonial order, and the people of Protectorate were viewed as a means to shift the balance of power. The demands of the British system of indirect rule exacerbated these needs. By 'sub-contracting' the bulk of administration to the traditional chiefs and native rulers, the British government could maintain its colonies 'on a shoestring'. It expected that each colony would be self-sufficient.⁸¹ By shifting the burden of local government onto the native population, the British could minimise the number of staff they needed.

They admitted Africans into the central colonial government, but with a strict bar on advancement. The government schools served to fill these vacancies with literate, qualified candidates. This policy was publicly acknowledged at the time. A *Times* article of 1928 states;

*"Our educational policy in West Africa is the logical deduction and corollary of the idea of 'trusteeship'."*⁸²

80 Frederick Cooper, 1994

81 This policy was continued until the establishment of the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund in the 1940s.

82 *The Times*, Tuesday, Oct 30, 1928; pg. xiv; Issue 45037; col A, Education In West Africa. Insistent Demand., Adaptation To Native Environment. (By the Right Hon. W. Ormsby-Gore, M.P., Chairman of the Colonial Office Advisory Committee on Education in Tropical Africa.).

These aims were served by limiting the education received at the schools. As Ormsby-Gore says, “Education must be adapted to the genius and requirements of peoples in their own environment.”⁸³ For African graduates to be content with occupying the lower echelons of colonial rule (and getting paid considerably less) it was important that they were not more highly educated than their British superiors.⁸⁴

One of the first schools set up by the government with these aims was Bo school.⁸⁵ It established some of the basic principles future government schools would adopt. The instruction consisted of a mix of academic subjects and practical skills, in order to prepare the future chiefs for implementing British development plans for the Protectorate. The school was located in a rural area to avoid the boys becoming ‘citified’ and contemptuous of rural life. The training also included moral training and reinforcement of ethnic identity. By retaining elements of the pre-colonial polity, the authorities attempted to usurp and utilise the existing methods of control and authority.⁸⁶ The layout of the school mimicked a typical native village, again to keep the boys ‘grounded’ in their place in rural village life. Food and clothing followed the traditional rural style, rather than the Westernised style preferred by the elite in Freetown.⁸⁷ The archival records of the school’s working show how the government attempted to keep the boys connected with their home villages and life. It did not represent an opportunity for advancement or education for ordinary people. Boys were selected by chiefs to attend the school, and so most were chiefs’ sons or the sons of local dignitaries. This template was followed in the development of the new government school at Koyeima.

83 *Ibid*

84 Richard A. Corby, *Educating Africans for Inferiority under British Rule: Bo School in Sierra Leone*, *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 34, 1990, No. 3., pp. 314-349.

85 For details see Richard A Corby (1981) and (1990)

86 Thomas Spear, *Neo-Traditionalism And The Limits Of Invention In British Colonial Africa*, *The Journal of African History*, 44, 2003, p 3-27 Cambridge University Press

87 TNA, CO271/11, Sierra Leone Royal Gazette, 29th September 1905

The British established Koyeima School in the Bo District of Sierra Leone in 1929 and recruited boys from Njala to attend. The school was part of the attempt to increase education in the Protectorate area, codified in the Education (Protectorate) Rules of 1930. Mr Greenhill described it to the Governor as;

“in the nature of an experiment and intended to inaugurate a policy of providing facilities to the natives of the Protectorate for obtaining practical and technical training.”⁸⁸

The Governor noted that the establishment of the school had gone well, with little disagreement over the appointment of the key members of staff.⁸⁹ And, at first, the school seemed to be running smoothly, receiving favourable reports from visitors to the colony in late 1929.⁹⁰ On the 17th of May 1930, though, the experiment appeared to have failed. Lord Passfield at Government House in the UK asked the Governor to report on events at the school, showing how seriously the school was regarded as part of the colonial mission. Governor Byrne reported that 30 Temne boys had left the school and laid complaints before Provincial Commissioner of the Northern Province. In response the Governor sent Mr Blackmore, the Depute Director of Education, to investigate and he visited with Lady Byrne in January 1930. By that time, Mr Keigwin was acting as Principal in the absence of the Director of Education. On his visit to the school the Governor found the situation acceptable, reporting that the boys seemed happy. But the archive contains a copy of the letter sent by the boys. The letter outlines their complaints; arguing that not only did the Koyeima school offer less privileges than the school they had been persuaded to leave, but the standard of teaching was poor, the manual work required harder and the teachers rude and abusive. According to the boys, and later confirmed by the Director of Education, at Njala they had been offered free transport to and from school.⁹¹ They also had access to adequate medical

88 TNA, CO267/630/13, Letter to Governor Byrne from MA Greenhill 20th June 1930

89 Mr Moss from Agricultural Dept, Mr Edminson as Organiser of Industries and Rev AT Sumner MBE (the only African) as Vice Principal.

90 Mr Stockdale, Mr Hooper (Sec of the Church Missionary Society) and Professor Labouret.

91 TNA, CO 267/630/13 Enclosure 1, despatch dated 17th May 1930, Letter to the Provincial Commissioner, Maburaka, 3/11/29 from the 30 Temne boys

facilities while at Koyeima they had to visit the wife of a government official, which some boys found embarrassing.⁹² In terms of education, at Njala they had regular daily classroom time, with time set aside for 'practical' activities. However, at Koyeima, they were engaged in hard manual labour, while their time in the classroom was irregular and inadequate, averaging only 2 and a half days a week. As the boys themselves said; "Our prospect for real education beyond severe manual labour is remote." Even worse the teachers used excessive corporal punishment and abusive language.⁹³

The Director of Education dismissed the letter in a brief note, written at the request of the Governor. He brushed off the complaints, stating that the school was no harder than similar establishments in the Gold Coast, and had only been running for ten weeks, so it was impossible for the boys to judge. The Director of Education omitted some key facts in this report. While the school was only **open** for ten weeks, 80 boys had been working there for up to nine months, to build the facilities. The Director's report was also belied by a more reasoned and detailed response from Mr Blackmore, the Deputy Director of Education.⁹⁴

Mr Blackmore, after interviewing staff and pupils, came to the conclusion that the boys had been harshly treated and some compromise and reform was necessary. In their letter, the boys had offered a detailed compromise solution. In summary, they wanted more hours in classroom.⁹⁵ This indicates their understanding of the colonial system. By offering up a compromise, and following the protocol of contacting the Provincial Commissioner, the boys were playing the game by the book. They were keen that their act of resistance should give a result in their favour and so, instead of walking out and not returning, they sought redress through the administration. By resisting the oppressive regime of the school through strike action, they did not mean to destroy the education system, or even their unsatisfactory

92 TNA, CO 267/630/13 Enclosure 3, Report from Mr Blackmore, Deputy Director of Education, 16th April 1930

93 TNA, CO 267/630/13 Enclosure 1

94 TNA, CO 267/630/13 Enclosure 3

95 The boys suggested from 7:30 to 11:30am at least five days a week, with fieldwork limited to the afternoons from 2 to 4pm.

school, but rather to mould it to better fit their own expectations and ambitions. Richard Corby and Kingsley Banya, through surveys of education in Sierra Leone have shown how Sierra Leoneans viewed the British schools as a means of advancement.⁹⁶ The British had attempted to create an education system as a means of control and to support the colonial system. Sierra Leoneans saw it as an opportunity to gain a Western education, and progress into government and professional careers.

However, correspondence at the level of the Colonial Government shows that this form of resistance, no matter how it was framed, was seen as an unacceptable rebellion against authority. The Governor's report to London indicated that he believed the rebellion would spread through other schools, if not immediately quelled. He blamed the incident on the insubordination of the Protectorate people. He saw it as a blow to the increasing British control over the area.⁹⁷ In their own terms, the boys were doomed to fail. The colonial government was never going to deliver the Western education they wanted. The power disparity was too sharp for the parties to come to compromise. While some changes were made when the school re-opened and it continued to attract students, the general policy and aims of the education system remained the same: to create a literate and docile workforce for lower-echelon administrative posts and malleable chiefs. And while, as Corby has argued, some went onto use their education to resist British rule, like so many other African countries, Sierra Leone was left with almost no educated elite to take up the reins of government upon its independence in 1961.

The education system in Sierra Leone was seriously and adversely affected by the colonial era and the system was perpetuated by the post-independence government. The country remains affected by one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world.⁹⁸ This short incidence of resistance against the imposition of the colonial ideal of a school that would pay for itself, that would concentrate on the manual labour and practical work

96 Richard Corby, *Educating Africans for Inferiority under British Rule: Bo School in Sierra Leone*, *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 34, 1990, No. 3, pp. 314-349; Banya (1993)

97 TNA, CO 267/630/13, Letter from the Governor to the Colonial Secretary, Whitehall

98 Sierra Leone ranks 171st out of 177 countries for illiteracy rates. United Nations Development Program *Human Development Report 2007/2008*: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008/>

involved in empire-building in rural areas, and would limit the opportunities of its students was not a success story. In the end, education remained a tool for the colonial government to use, and access to even this remained limited almost entirely to the sons of the local rulers.