

Sierra Leone and the 'Stranger Problem'

In this paper I shall look at some aspects of self-identification among people of Sierra Leone. This may be done using economic, religious or ethnic criteria, and it is on the latter that I wish to concentrate here. The main axes along which I shall pursue my discussion are (briefly as this has been well documented elsewhere) the Creole-Provincial dichotomy, and the Sierra Leone national identity as it has developed to identify against 'stranger' populations. The presence of certain sectors of the non-Sierra Leonean population is perceived as a problem and I am to show what factors contribute to the attribution of the 'problem' that is posed by the presence of these groups who are seen as 'strangers'. I do not wish to enter into the recent discussions on the concept of ethnicity and its use as an analytic device (for this see Barth, 1969; Cohen, 1974; Ardener, 1974; Glazer and Moynihan, 1975) but a brief statement of my own opinion will be useful.

Ethnicity pertains to racial or cultural differences between people; individuals see themselves as belonging to a particular ethnic group by virtue of a perceived common origin. The objectivity of ethnicity, "the condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group" (Glazer and Moynihan 1975, p.1) and the assumption that ethnic groups are biologically self-perpetuating units with shared cultural values that distinguish them from other such units in an objective way, are notions that I do not hold with. There are really no objective criteria by which one can categorically distinguish between ethnic groups whose essential feature is that they "generate an apprehension of 'otherness' among non-members". (Ardener 1974, p.28). Ethnicities do, as Ardener and Barth say, demand to be viewed from within, that is by the actors themselves who see themselves as being essentially different from others.<sup>1</sup> Self-identification can and does change over time and according to context, and people allow themselves a wide scope for asserting which cultural features are relevant or significant to their distinctiveness. Visible differences may form the basis of distinction, for it is easy (for example) to tell a Lebanese from an African, a Sierra Leonean from a Nigerian, or (though less easy for us) a Mende from a Fula or Temne. From the point of view of my discussion relating to Sierra Leone it so happens that the physical, visible differences between groups is a help to people in identifying the 'stranger problem', but mere physical differences do not always warrant the designation of belonging to another ethnic or cultural group. For example a family of European descent, born and raised in Freetown were considered by themselves and indigenous Africans as being Sierra Leonean, for their behaviour and expectations (their 'mentality' if you like) were seen to be more akin to that of a Sierra Leonean than a 'European'.<sup>2</sup>

It is with these ideas in mind that I will now turn to Sierra Leone and a consideration of the way people identify themselves in opposition to others.

Sierra Leone is a small country with a population of 2,180,335 (1963 census) and exhibits considerable ethnic and cultural diversity. The population comprises eighteen indigenous tribes, plus the Creoles (descendants of liberated and repatriated African slaves) and a sizeable number of Lebanese, 'Europeans' and other non-indigenous Africans, the largest

group of the latter being Fulas from Guinea. The capital city, Freetown, has a population of about 200,000; it is a cosmopolitan city with all ethnic groups represented to some degree.

The Colony of Sierra Leone was founded in 1787 as a settlement for freed slaves. These people coming from very diverse origins attained a common Creole identity through their similar experience of education and Christianity under the influence of missionaries and philanthropists. Their close association and identification with western, specifically British, values led them to assume an air of cultural superiority over the tribal peoples of Sierra Leone, which is maintained to this day. In 1896 the British extended their rule into the hinterland which they administered separately from the Colony as the Protectorate of Sierra Leone. Education of the tribal peoples in the Protectorate had the aim of keeping them "tribal, uncreolized, unsophisticated and unspoilt". (Porter 1963, p.68). The 1931 census tells us much about the colonial view of 'Sierra Leoneans' and the relative importance of different groups: dividing the population of the Colony and the Protectorate separate categories are given for English, Welsh, Scottish, French, Sierra Leonean, Mulatto and African Native Tribes, etc. Their category 'Sierra Leonean' is in my understanding Creole, not even all people of the Colony. Even today implicit in many Creoles' discussion of the good Sierra Leonean character is the limitation of 'Sierra Leonean' to Creoles. The Provincials (that is the 'native' tribes) are thought of as 'other', and in this particular case inferior.

The Creoles, who dominated trade in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, became a hindrance to the British aims of economic exploitation of the Protectorate, and with encouragement from the British, Lebanese traders soon took control over wholesale and retail trade in the country. Thus the Creoles' economic power was eroded. The political and administrative power they had held and looked forward to enjoying in the event of Sierra Leone becoming independent was lost when the dual system of administration of the Colony and the Protectorate ended under the 1947 constitution which decided that political control should be largely in the hands of the tribal peoples who formed the numerical majority. When Sierra Leone became independent in 1961 the government (the Sierra Leone People's Party under the leadership of Milton Margai) was predominantly Mende. Since 1968 the ruling party has been the All People's Congress under the leadership of Siaka Stevens, a Limba. This party representing the northern part of the country hopes to restore the unfavourable bias that the S.L.P.P. had by favouring the south. In 1971 Sierra Leone became a Republic with Siaka Stevens as President.

In spite of the Creoles' tremendous decline in terms of economic and political significance, they have, as I mentioned above, maintained a close cultural affinity with western and particularly British values, and have retained the social superiority that their association with western influences gave them. They "still set the standards for the social development of the rest of the population", and as Harrell-Bond says:

"The attitude of the Provincial towards the Creoles was very much like his attitude towards the white men. While he resented their dominance, he also envied their achievements and measured his advance by the standards which they set ... Although Provincials resent the

attitude of the Creoles, their behaviour suggests that they have accepted their inferior status vis-a-vis Creoles. Today, although political control is held by Provincials, Creoles continue to set the standard for prestige and status. They act as advisers and fill most of the important government posts." (Harrell-Bond, 1975, p.34)

The sharing of many cultural values among Provincial tribes of Sierra Leone (promoted for example by the easy means of communication in the country and the sharing of common features such as the Poro and Bundu secret societies for men and women) make the Creole-Provincial dichotomy the most important one to draw in Sierra Leone. This is not to deny that ethnic and cultural differences are felt between the Provincial peoples and ethnic or tribal stereotypes held of each group go part way to illustrating this. For example the Temne are portrayed as being sullen and enjoy provoking trouble (palavers); the Limba with their penchant for palm-wine (mampalma) are seen as being "backward and uncivilised". Broadly speaking cultural differences can be seen to fall along a north-south line. The southern, predominantly Mende, area has had more contact with European 'civilising' influences, and Christianity is the dominant religion; the northern part of the country, with the Temne and Limba being the largest tribal groups, is predominantly Muslim and more traditional.

Within Sierra Leone people focus their basic identity on their tribal affiliation, and the Sierra Leone identity has developed principally as a means of identifying against white or 'stranger' populations. The Lebanese, the Fula and 'Europeans' provide us with good examples for illustrating on the one hand the political nature of ethnicity (ethnic or national identity) and on the other hand for identifying the 'stranger problem' which Sierra Leone has seen itself as having for several years.

Simmel states that the position of the stranger in a group "is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself". (Simmel, 1950) While this is doubtless true to an extent, in the Sierra Leone context the classification of someone as a stranger is nearly always used in connection with a perceived problem. I want to show how the Lebanese and the Fulas constitute part of this 'stranger problem' while the 'Europeans' as a group do not. Simmel states that strangers are often traders and as an extension from this, traders are often seen to be strangers. (Ibid. p.403). This is certainly true in the case of Sierra Leone and is axiomatic to the 'problem' caused by the Lebanese and Fula presence.

There has been a Middle Eastern population in Sierra Leone, as in much of West Africa, since the late nineteenth century. These people came to trade, often starting off as wandering hawkers. In 1921 there were 177 Syrians (most of these early migrants came from that part of Syria that is now the Lebanon) in Sierra Leone, in 1931 there were 413 and by 1963 there were 3,301, of whom 813 lived in the Western Area (the former Colony) - mainly in Freetown - and it is fair to say that though there are Lebanese traders in most towns in the Provinces the majority of the rest live in the Kono, diamond mining area. As Harrell-Bond says, many Lebanese now consider Sierra Leone as their home and indeed many were born there. (Ibid. p.280) Yet they cannot hold Sierra Leone passports and most will consider themselves to be

Lebanese rather than Sierra Leonean; they associate socially with other Lebanese and maintain close links with their homeland. Inter-marriage between Lebanese women and African men is virtually unknown and is rare between Lebanese men and African women.<sup>3</sup> Their domination of wholesale and large-scale retail trade has, since Independence, led to the Lebanese being considered as an element of the 'stranger problem'; the apparent appropriation of wealth by 'foreigners' who, it is felt, will not use it to Sierra Leone's advantage is seen to be a threat and a problem. Simmel talks of the 'objectivity' of strangers, who are at the same time involved with, yet indifferent to, the host population. (Ibid. p.404). The Lebanese are particularly easy targets for hostility being both physically identifiable from the Africans and also obviously affluent.

It was in the 1950s that the presence of strangers was first articulated as a problem. During the 1950s the diamond boom in Kono region led to the immigration to that area of many thousands of people in search of a living, if not a fortune, from illicit diamond mining. Most of these people were African, from other parts of Sierra Leone and neighbouring West African countries, but many Lebanese also moved in and soon came to dominate the market in diamond dealing, becoming very wealthy. At this time all hostility towards 'strangers' was directed against the Madingo, and all other African migrants who were collapsed into the term 'Madingo'. Newspaper articles of the time talk frequently of "The Madingo Problem" or "The Stranger Problem". One article entitled "The Madingo Problem" reads: "However a crocodile lives in water he cannot turn into a fish. And as a result, you cannot expect the Madingoes to seek the interest and welfare of the economic development of this country". (Sierra Leone Daily Mail 8/6/1956).<sup>4</sup> In a speech to his people a Kono chief exhorts, "every Kono man, woman and child" to joint together to "drive all strangers from Kono". (Shekpendeh 29/10/1958). There was some feeling that it was perhaps unfair to single out the Madingo as targets for hostility, as not all the strangers were Madingo, and also because not all Madingoes were strangers. A Madingo writes that Madingoes are all fellow West Africans and it is impossible to distinguish them by place of birth - ... , so "Why worry the Madingoes?" (Daily Mail 23/7/1956). Another letter begins "I am no Madingo by tribe", but they should not be singled out for abuse; anyone wearing a gown is automatically taken to be Madingo, and anyway Madingoes have lived in Sierra Leone and intermarried with the Mende since the nineteenth century. (Daily Mail 7/5/1956) Another letter says, "(we) should be proud to have an enterprising African people like the Madingo helping to build a new future for the people of Sierra Leone". (Daily Mail 30/4/56) The violence and lawlessness in Kono in the mid-50s was obviously a great worry to the British who proposed drastic measures; Governor Dorman gave three weeks notice for the removal of all strangers ("foreigners who have 'invaded' the country") from Kono: "We are going to find you and remove you." (Daily Mail 2/11/56 which gave a report of Dorman's speech at Sefadu, Kono district). In three weeks it was estimated that about 25,000 people left the area - most of them going to Freetown. The London Times reports the expulsions with approval: "The ordinance forcing (them) to quit is timely," for they "descended in a joyous swarm" living in squalid conditions; the ultimate sufferers are "those Sierra Leoneans who have not joined in the spree." (The Times. London 27/11/56).

It is worth noting that at the height of the troubles in Kono and while hostility towards 'strangers' was at its strongest, Lucien Genet, a white man of French descent though born in Sierra Leone was elected Mayor of Freetown: "... he is looked on not as a stranger". (Daily Mail 10/11/56)

The Lebanese also were not regarded as strangers, though lack of official hostility towards them did not go completely unnoticed as one or two letters to the press show - people asked why they were not given the same treatment as the Madingoes. While they expropriated considerable wealth at the expense of the Africans and the colonial territory as a whole, they doubtless did not pose as much of a threat in British eyes as the Madingoes did with their life of poverty, squalor and ill-health. As Dunn has shown in his analysis of colonial achievements in Ahafo, Ghana, the initial ventures of 'civilising' often had as much to do with the exorcism of colonial anxieties about the dangers of 'matter out of place' as with the fostering of local goals. (Dunn & Robertson 1974 p.96-7). The British favour of the Lebanese throughout the colonial period inhibited the articulation of the Lebanese 'stranger problem' during this time, as can be shown by the Kono example. It was not until Independence that Sierra Leoneans were able to fully give voice to their feelings against the Lebanese and their economic activities.

Nowadays it is the Fula who are seen to be at the heart of, and are the largest component of, the 'stranger problem' and they are the focus of much animosity. As with the Madingoes in the 1950s many Fulas were actually born in Sierra Leone, yet today they are definitely thought of as aliens. Their distinctive facial features make them easily distinguishable from other, Sierra Leonean, peoples, so the 'problem' is a visible one that all can point to. The Fula population has increased rapidly in recent years; in 1921 the Fula numbered 6,001 in the Protectorate and less than a thousand in the Colony, and in 1963 there were 66,824 in Sierra Leone as a whole of whom 6,533 lived in Freetown. A household survey conducted in Freetown in 1968 shows that while the ethnic composition of the city has not changed much since the 1963 census, the percentage of Fula has increased from 4.1% to 9.8%. Their numbers are large and increasing but are also being magnified out of all proportion in support of the idea of there being a 'Fula problem'. One headline exclaimed, "One Million Foolahs (sic) now in S. Leone?" (The Times 2/9/76); another estimate given at about the same time was that there are 150,000 Fulas in the country (The People 14/8/76), while the Guinea ambassador in a speech urging the return of all Guineans to their homeland where they are needed to aid the economic development of Guinea, put the number of Fula as 30,000 (Daily Mail 28/8/76). The 'Fula problem' is really a 'Guinea problem', though most of the Guinean migrants to Sierra Leone are Fula, and their distinctive physical appearance provides a visual focus for the 'problem'.

In the last few years many thousands of Guineans have migrated to Sierra Leone to find employment; the currency in Guinea is virtually worthless, food and many other commodities are rationed and there are few opportunities for employment. Sékou Toure (Sheku Turay), the president of Guinea, was an M.P. in French Guinea during the Kono crisis period in the mid-1950s. At that time he pleaded for "unity among all Africans", and felt that, "economic conditions were more favourable to Sierra Leoneans than those 'imposed' on the people of Guinea by the French who did not allow them to exploit their own resources". (Daily Mail 26/9/56).

It seems as though many people in Guinea today feel that Toure's policies, albeit with a different supporting ideology, do not differ much in effect from those of the French. Migrants may come to Sierra Leone for a short time to earn money with which to buy goods to take home: "These Guinea girls come for a few months. They arrive with one set of clothes, no shoes and no address. They stay with men for a home and for money. Then they buy clothes, soap and onions to take home". (personal communication.) Other migrants may stay several years or even a lifetime. The Fula find employment mostly within the informal sector of the economy. Freetown has a high rate of unemployment with 30.8% of adult males and 76.2% of all adult females not in wage employment, (1963 census), though as Hart says, basic employment figures hide the fact that so many people are employed in the 'informal' sector - that is they are non-wage earners. Writing of Frafra migrants in Accra he finds that "non-wage employment is a dominant feature of the urban opportunity structure". (1974 p.328). Many Fulas are petty traders or are employed in the service sector as taxi-drivers, messengers or house-servants. It is felt that their economic activities are ones which any Sierra Leonean could do, and as there is high unemployment the Fulas are seen to be taking work away from indigenous migrants. People worry that "the influx of strangers and their bad business practices will lead to frequent increases in the price of essential commodities." (The People 24/9/76). Of course, if one side of the coin of the 'Fula problem' is the entrepreneurial activities of these migrants, the other side, seen by the Creoles, is the laziness of provincial Sierra Leoneans: "our problem is that the only people trading on the streets are Lebanese and Fula because Sierra Leoneans are too lazy to do it". (personal communication.) Hart distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate economic activities, the latter being one of the major sources of income. The "saturation of criminals and low disapprobation of crime in slum areas," make it easy to engage in activities such as drugs dealing, prostitution or theft. There is a lot of crime in Freetown (particularly theft and burglary; prostitution is not a criminal offence but is socially disapproved and certainly in some areas has connections with the criminal 'underworld'); crime is associated with the presence of many unemployed migrants in the city. The Guinea ambassador, urging the return of Guineans to their own country said "Some Guineans in Sierra Leone have been tarnishing the image of their country especially those involved in burglary, robbery, housebreaking and prostitution". (Daily Mail 28/8/76).

The economic problems for Sierra Leone posed by the presence of many Fulas does have a social dimension which is also exaggerated, adding to the severity of the 'problem'. "What of the Social Problems and hazards they import too? They give birth like ants. They have exhausted all the drugs in our Hospitals. They bring with them also contagious diseases, which today they spread among Sierra Leoneans. They also have with them prostitutes flooding the street corners especially in Freetown and the big cities of the provinces". (Sierra Leone Times n.d. ). The unequivocal attribution of prostitution to Guinea girls ("All Guinea girls are prostitutes", and "Most rarray-girls are from Guinea") could well be a reflection of the stereotype of Guineans in general and Fulas in particular. In view of the fact that socially unattached women are often considered to be prostitutes it is easy to see how Guinea girls fit into the context of the 'stranger problem' as rarray-women (prostitutes).

While the Lebanese and the Fula are both seen as components of a perceived 'stranger problem' in Sierra Leone, 'Europeans' are not. As Harrell-Bond says:

"Attitudes which one might have thought would have been provoked by the political and economic domination have been directed almost completely against the Lebanese and Syrians rather than the British. This is explained no doubt by the fact that the economic competition between Lebanese and Syrians and the Africans was much more direct. Even today the belief in the superiority of British culture remains almost unchallenged." (Ibid. p.280)

Occasionally one does read and hear about the problem of expatriates, but any animosity against them is always directed against individuals and refers to specific events. For example: "Unless we take steps to ensure that these floating expatriates are put exactly where they really belong, they will continue to flood this country, much to our embarrassment." (We Yone 1/9/76). This quotation is taken from an editorial discussing the apparently dubious presence of one man, "who stays in this country on the thin hope that he is about to win a big law-suit". (ibid). During the summer of 1976 there was a big scandal in Freetown over apparent discrimination against Africans at one of the city's most exclusive clubs, the Hill Station Club, "that monumental relic of colonialism". "Like the colonial relic that it is, the club has been a kind of cult where Sierra Leone and Sierra Leoneans are insulted at will, and where the germ of Jim Crowism has been allowed to take deep root for far too long". (We Yone 1/8/76). Even in this case hostility was directed against individuals and a particular incident. As Simmel says, strangers are never seen as individuals, but always as strangers of a particular type, with no doubt a stereotyped image that is often given to 'others', (ibid. p.406).

One significant white or 'European' presence in Sierra Leone is the United States Peace Corps, about whom ambivalent feelings are held. In 1976 there were over 200 Peace Corps volunteers in the country, and the numbers had been much higher in the previous two years when all the volunteers from Ethiopia were sent to Sierra Leone after the coup in 1973. I was told that at that time problems concerning the relations between the Peace Corps and the indigenous population were exacerbated to a tremendous extent, and while I was in Sierra Leone in 1976 there was ill-feeling towards them. There is disapproval over the way they dress, the local belief that they take drugs excessively (though I cannot say whether the 'drugs problem' that is seen to be increasing among Sierra Leonean youth is in any way correlated with this belief), and their indiscriminate use of the Krio language. This latter point often upsets educated people, many of whom feel that Krio, though it may be their native tongue and is the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, is just a pidgin-English and somehow inferior to English. There may be correlates here with the situation in the Cameroons where the peace Corps were considered in some way inferior because they did not speak the 'good' English of the colonial administrators and the like. (E. Ardener personal communication). However, like the 'European' population, the Peace Corps do not constitute a part of the 'stranger problem'; they do not have an economic stake in the country and hence pose no visible threat to Sierra Leone. Most 'Europeans' perform jobs that would not be open to Sierra Leoneans - they are, for example, representatives of foreign companies, diplomatic missions or Church organisations. The University of Sierra Leone

at Fourah Bay College has several expatriate teachers and here many of them felt that there was some animosity towards their presence from African teachers wanting a more complete Africanisation of the academic staff. In some surprising cases a 'European' was welcomed in his job - for example many of the large factories (most of which are partly government owned) employ a 'European' manager. I was told by Sierra Leoneans (Creoles) that these enterprises were far better off having a white, expatriate managerial staff: "If a black man did the job they would go bankrupt". (personal communication). The rationalisation for this statement was that a 'European' standing outside the Sierra Leonean society would not be pressurized for favours in a way that a local man would be.

Hence, while an individual Peace Corps volunteers may have no problems in his or her relations with Sierra Leoneans, the Peace Corps as a whole is disliked, exemplifying as it does a moral corruption or inferiority, and because, like individual Europeans, they break the code of politeness in their relations with Africans. The Lebanese and the Fulas, posing as they do, an economic threat to the country constitute a problem to the nation which has been articulated as the "Sierra Leone 'Stranger Problem'". The Fulas living and working in the public eye as it were allow for social judgements to be passed on them and in their case the basic economic problem is given a social dimension. The Lebanese who isolate themselves both socially and physically (most of them living in large houses in the more fashionable part of town) are not seen to add social to the economic problems caused by their presence.

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#### Footnotes

- (1) This point of agreement is made in articles which otherwise follow differing arguments and lines of approach to the topic.
- (2) 'European' or 'expatriate' are terms used to describe all people of western European and American descent, in other words the majority of white people in Sierra Leone. While 'expatriate' is a term used by both Africans and 'Europeans', the term 'European' is used solely by Africans.
- (3) Khuri (1968) says that African-Lebanese marriages have decreased in number since Lebanese women started migrating to Sierra Leone. Lebanese men do not take marriage to African women seriously... they see it as an "illicit sexual act" and divorce is common.
- (4) All newspapers referred to are Sierra Leonean unless otherwise stated.

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