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Establishing control: the Krio elite and the transformation of labour relations in colonial Sierra Leone, 1868-1919

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Summary

This thesis examines the efforts by the Krio elite in Sierra Leone to control the colony's economic and political system by establishing control over the nascent wage labour force in the period between 1868 and 1919. The main argument is that control over labour Krio elite was indispensable to the ambition of the Krio elite to turn Sierra Leone into a self-governing or even a politically independent entity.

As the Krio elite itself lacked the capital to independently hire and control large numbers of wage workers, it depended on the colonial government. After consolidating a measure of influence within the colonial system by the 1860s, the members of the Krio elite were increasingly excluded from positions of power and responsibility within the colonial hierarchy. The cultural nationalism that emerged in response to the exclusion of the Krio was accompanied by attempts to create an economic base for an independent Sierra Leone. Establishing control over wage labour was a crucial precondition for this ambition.

The colonial government proved unable to enact largescale reforms of labour relations. The demand for wage workers grew, both in Freetown and abroad, creating a demand for migrant labour from Sierra Leone. This provided workers with the means to evade government control over their labour. Wage labour never supplanted slavery and tributary labour in the production and transport of cash crops for export. Nor did the colonial government manage to gain control over the flow of migrant labour, curtail frequent job hopping, or set uniform wage rates.

Meanwhile various groups of workers began to organise themselves in different ways. Casual day labourers organised strikes, sometimes drawing on the *porroh* secret societies to provide means of collective organisation, at other times basing their claims on their status as workers and breadwinners. The colony's artisans strove to join the ranks of the Krio elite. They sought to enhance their social standing alongside their economic position by enforcing a strict hierarchy between master artisans and their apprentices and journeymen. By 1919 the grievances of the artisans and the Krio elite coalesced around the colonial government's discrimination against educated Africans, paving the way for more intense cooperation between artisan unionists and the Krio elite during the Interbellum.

Chapter 1 discusses the extensive literatures on the development of wage labour in the colonial context, the relationship between the colonial government and wage labour, and finally the responses of western-educated African elites to marginalisation. Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology and sources employed.

The rest of the thesis is organised into two chronological sections of three chapters each. The first group of empirical chapters, which consists of Chapters 3 through 5, discusses the period 1868-1895. Each of these chapters discusses one of the following three social classes: the Krio elite, the artisans, and the labourers.

Chapter 3 offers an analysis of the first attempts by members of the Krio elite to formulate a labour policy, which would have served to enhance the economic power of the Krio elite as well as alleviate the consequences of the long economic crisis that gripped the colony in the 1870s and 1880s. In Chapter 4 the attempts by the artisan class to organise a labour movement of their own are discussed. The artisan class found itself torn between their position as workers and an aspiration to join the Krio elite, with whom the artisans shared a cultural and educational background. The artisans tried to resolve this tension by attempting to instil a solidarity among artisans, which rested on a strict hierarchy between master artisans and their apprentices and journeymen to enhance the exclusivity of their trades and to restrict the oversupply of artisan labour. Chapter 5 examines the position of wage workers in the colony. Although slave labour still prevailed in the hinterland, the demand for unskilled workers in Freetown increased, particularly because of various government-funded construction projects. This process, in turn, contributed to the emergence of collective organisation, culminating in the largescale strike of 1892.

The second group of chapters, consisting of Chapters 6 through 8, is organised thematically and covers the period 1896-1919. Chapter 6 documents the continued press debate on the labour question, collective organisation in Freetown during this period, and the effects of the institution of a *de facto* colour bar in the railways. The latter development brought the Krio elite and the artisans together over a shared sense of exclusion by the colonial government, which was expressed during the largescale 1919 railway strike.

Chapter 7 provides an account of the attempts by the colonial government to economically develop the Protectorate. Experimental plantations, efforts to mechanise the processing of the Protectorate's agricultural exports, and the construction of infrastructure all demanded labour. Yet, labour often remained scarce and the colonial government remained dependent on the chiefly elite for labour. The Protectorate's economic successes between 1896 and 1913 was largely fuelled by household and slave labour, which were often intertwined in domestic slavery. Moreover, crossovers emerged between wage and slave labour, in which slaves took up wage labour in Sierra Leone or abroad and the proceeds went in whole or in part to their owners. Labour relations in the Protectorate were a complex mix of slave, wage, and tributary labour.

Chapter 8 consists of a study of migrant labour to and from Freetown. It pays attention to individual workers and their motivations, as well as the political and policy implications of migrant labour. The latter evinces the tension between the colonial government's work to retain labour in the colony and the desire by employers abroad to employ migrant labour from Sierra Leone. The growing demand for wage labour on the west coast of Africa, coupled with the seeming abundance of labour in Sierra Leone, which local employers and government were eager to retain to control wages, made Sierra Leone an attractive source of labour for British colonial governments in Africa, private companies, and other actors like the government of the Congo Free State.