Rebellion and issues of inclusion, exclusion, and reconciliation have a long tradition on the Guinea/Sierra Leone Coast. This paper focuses upon three slave rebellions of the late eighteenth century and during the heyday of the Atlantic slave trade and relates them to contemporary periods of regional turmoil and political dysfunction. Analysis of these rebellions, while very different in scale and consequence, suggests that rulers and landholders contributed significantly to both the causes and the momentary successes of these rebellions and that only when traditional landholding rights became endangered were landholders willing to resolve differences between themselves, reach consensus, and join forces to suppress rebels.

The history of the coastal borderlands between Guinea and Sierra Leone, in contrast to most regions of the Windward Coast, has been blessed with documentation regarding slave insurrections from the earliest European records. While much of that data has been interpreted with reference to Atlantic-based slaving commerce or to an ancillary analysis of local populations and rulers, some—when taken within the context of larger social, political, and economic upheavals, and forced migrations—lead to significant insight into the events sweeping through subject societies or groups in the region. This paper focuses on three rebellions that occurred on the coast of Guinea-Conakry during the last decade of the eighteenth century and relates those to themes discussed in accompanying papers: 1) the role of local rulers in processes of social and political integration (or disintegration) and conflict; 2) the experience of the transatlantic slave trade with regard to the concept and strategies of inclusion and exclusion; 3) the role of traditional institutions in processes of integration and conflict; and 4) continuity and change in the role of local authorities under circumstances of long-term violence and in processes of integration. These events from the eighteenth century are now more than 200 years
in the past, and one might be tempted to dismiss what little remains from that early period that might influence the present or provide understanding of current problems of integration, reconciliation, or inclusion. Still, the historian within me encourages me to review the past and to search for links to the more recent past if and when those occur. Indeed, an examination of recent events suggests new avenues of analysis for earlier rebellions and attempts to bring social and economic change in the distant past.

Several observations might be made concerning the documented sources regarding these early rebellions. Original informants are found in at least three forms. One consists of those who personally observed these instances of conflict or were sufficiently present and left records in published or other form. This group generally considered arguments of whether slave-trading in particular and slavery in general were socially or economically sound institutions (Matthews 1788; Watt 1794; Afzelius 1796; Macaulay 1793–99; Winterbottom 1803; Testimony of Dalu Mohammed 1809). A second group of informants were those from whom European writers obtained their information—assuming authors themselves did not have this first-hand knowledge. Within this category were spokesmen who were African rulers or luminaries, literate and often educated Europeans who were in government employ, illiterate European or Eurafrican merchants resident on the coast, and other Africans who were able to communicate with Europeans and pass on information to them (Wadstrom 1789; Smith 1802, 1805, 1806; Bright 1802; Mouser and Mouser 2003a; Butscher 1815). A third source includes those persons or groups that were voiceless who left no record except that of their actions, actions that may have been described by others in a self-serving manner. We might also add to this list those historians and scholars of other disciplines who have used and ignored evidence as they so chose (Nowak 1986; Mouser 1996, 2007; Mouser and Brocks 1987; Mouser and Mouser 2003a, 2003b; Rashid 1998, 2000, 2003; Barry 1998).

The rebellions described in this paper range from major uprisings to minor insurgencies, but all involve questions related to the control of one’s personal destiny or future, attempts to redefine relationships maintained with those who held land and labor or controlled their uses, or conflict resolution that ended the rebellions. Less certain, however, are the long-term consequences and questions of integration and reintegration which are the focus of this collection of papers. All