A SAUCY TOWN? REGIONAL HISTORIES OF CONFLICT, COLLUSION, AND COMMERCE IN THE MAKING OF A SOUTHEASTERN LIBERIAN POLITY

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Abstract

Liberia was settled during the nineteenth century by freed blacks, mainly from America, whose power was broken by a coup in 1980. Focusing partly on one polity, Sasstown, I explore the history of southeast Liberia up to that point. Sharing languages and cultures with their neighbours in today’s western Ivory Coast, the peoples of the region helped to shape the Liberian state. They were in demand by West African colonial governments as migrant labourers—kroomen. They also often fought against the settlers, who refused them political participation. Was this a very violent area before the settlers came? How can we understand its undocumented past?

I: Preliminaries

In this chapter, I outline the making of a polity, Sasstown, in Grand Kru County, southeastern Liberia, a region with common linguistic and cultural affinities, and common coastal histories, extending eastwards into Côte d’Ivoire, conventionally to the Bandama River (Maps 1 and 2). Sasstown is one example from a region with broader, indeed national and global connections that I also sketch out. This history includes the making of national boundaries, and is one that can remind us of how wide and manifold the links have been along the ‘Windward Coast’ of Upper Guinea and the wider world.

Liberia is an entity in which the experience of the northwest should not be conflated with that of the southeast. Much of the country’s very recent history centres on the former, not the latter, and a regional focus helps to explain why. I use my own first-hand experiences in the region and therefore retrace the story only as far back as 1980.1 Moran

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1 I did fieldwork in Sasstown and other towns in the 1970s, with later additional visits, including the capital in 1980 and briefly in 1986/7. I also worked in the national archives and on oral histories that I had collected. I have consulted other archives,
(2006) includes a complementary study focused on Glebo people in Maryland County and gives some more recent data. We both point out how different the social organisation and history of the Kruan peoples of the southeast have been from those of the ‘Mande cluster’ of the northwest. The commonalities of the Republic of Liberia’s experience are many, but were often created as a reflection of the southeastern regional conditions that I describe.

Wider historical analysis also shows that we should be chary of claims that there are specifically Liberian cultural, political, or economic characteristics that explain its recent violence and suffering. ‘Violence’ has indeed become a standard media attribute for Liberia, often with grotesque and horrible connotations. But it is a term used in complex ways, as many recent anthropological studies also reveal. Moran entitles her book *Liberia: The violence of democracy* and I return to her arguments below. One recent analyst of violence persuasively argues that Balinese cockfights and the graceful rituals of Java could presage the mass horrors and killings in Indonesia; “song, oratory and chant are fundamental to the ritual production of (Ilongot) imagined violence” (George 2004, 38). I look at my fieldwork findings in this light.2

Liberia briefly became a news item in 1980, when a military coup in Monrovia, its capital, overturned the Liberian government, killing first the president and then many of its senior members. It was apparently led by indigenous soldiers, ‘country boys’, against men mostly descended from the black American settlers who first arrived on Liberia’s coast in 1821. However, there had been many earlier armed conflicts between ‘aborigines’ and settlers, and very significant ones were centred in southeastern Liberia. I look briefly at the Sasstown war against the government in the 1930s, and cross-refer it to a precedent conflict with the Liberian settlers in 1915–17 (Sullivan 1985, 1989, Tonkin 1978–79, 1981, 2002). In this context too, I try to consider what ‘conflict’ and ‘violence’ may have connoted for the inhabitants particularly those of the Society of African Missions (SMA) in Rome and Ireland, since the Catholic mission in Liberia began in Sasstown. I am grateful to them and to the grant givers—Birmingham University, The Nuffield Foundation and the then Social Science Research Council—who supported the research.

2 My thanks to Mats Utas whose questions made me think further about the apparent absence of reference to violence in my and my contemporaries’ research (see also Utas (2003)).