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The Frontier in Sierra Leone: past experiences, present status, and future trajectories[1]

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Abstract

Igor Kopytoff revolutionised our thinking on the origins of African ethnic identities by arguing that such identities were formed by and through frontier processes. These were the political and economic processes that came into play when groups splintered from existing populations and migrated into new zones on the edges of, or between, existing population groups and political communities. In this paper, we argue that the frontier remains a vital concept for the understanding of identity in contemporary Africa, and we use ethnographic data from two locations in Sierra Leone – the peninsula around Freetown and the city of Makeni, the capital of the Northern Province. Through a discussion of these cases we argue for both the retention and revision of the frontier concept in contemporary Sierra Leone and in Africa as a whole.

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Introduction

For Igor Kopytoff, writing in the late 1980s, the crucial and indispensable factor in the emergence of African ethnic identities was the frontier and the social processes that occurred on it. The frontier was both the zone of settlement, into which migrating populations would move in search of political freedom and economic opportunity, and the set of processes, which migrating populations had to go through in order to move into and inhabit those zones. On the fringes of established political communities, African frontier zones were formed, and in these areas new experiments in identity formation could take place (Kopytoff 1989 [1987]: 3). In other words, African identities and polities were built by African people as they moved out of old territories and communities and into new frontier zones, where they settled and established their political authority.[3] The processes leading to the creation of new identities on the frontier might begin with dissension and rupture within an existing community or polity, be it a chiefdom, state, or empire, and would then continue with flight by the dissenting faction out of their original community and into a new frontier zone beyond the reach of the political authorities within the original community. Yet, settlers also brought with them the social values and models of political systems of the society they had just left and would build new communities and the identities that went with them on that basis.

Kopytoff's model is a model of ethnogenesis, a model of how ethnic identities and ethnic collectivities come to be in the world. In a world that is still a "world in creolization" (Hannerz 1987), a world still characterised by intense cultural interactions in a diversity of social settings, there is a strong and pressing need to understand how such identities are formed. This ensures the continuing relevance of Kopytoff's work. If the frontier concept is to be effectively used in the new context of twenty-first century Africa, however, it needs to be reconsidered and refined (Korf, Hagmann and Doevenspeck 2013). Kopytoff's seminal work on the frontier dealt largely with the African frontier as it existed in pre-colonial times and in the early colonial era. Since the end of the colonial era, the contexts in which African frontier processes unfolded have changed radically. As we show in this paper, frontier processes are still highly important to the formation of African identities, and at least some contemporary African identities cannot be understood without an understanding of the legacy of the frontier and its effects in Africa today. This paper, therefore, is intended as a contribution both to the redevelopment of the frontier concept as a tool of theory and to the ethnography of Sierra Leone, a West African country where the frontier has been important to identity formation both in the past and today.

In the case of Sierra Leone, frontier processes were both vital to the emergence of identities, and will continue to be highly relevant to their future evolution. In the West African country today, old and new perceptions of the frontier are at work in the definition and mobilisation of contemporary identities. Analysis of the frontier experiences from historical and social perspectives is vital to the understanding of the future evolution of Sierra Leone and more generally of the processes by which identities are shaped in a contemporary Africa. The concept of frontier, in the case of Sierra Leone, also allows us to articulate historical processes with contemporary power relations. Understanding this articulation will allow us to understand not only the ways in which frontier processes drove identity formation in the Sierra Leonean past, but also how that historical experience continues to

[3] Thereby, a relation of subordination is established between firstcomers (or hosts) and latecomers (or strangers). However, this political model is dynamic, as latecomers are progressively integrated into the local society. The social status of each group is renegotiated as new groups arrive (cf. Lentz 2013).

inform and shape the political deployment of identity in Sierra Leone today. This is the case in the Peninsula that forms the hinterland of Sierra Leone's capital Freetown, and the same articulation can also be observed in the city of Makeni, the capital of the country's Northern Province. If the frontier has shaped the past and present of Sierra Leone, then it is also likely, we argue, to shape the country's future. Understanding past historical trajectories of the frontier processes that have shaped Sierra Leonean identity can help to form a picture of the country's future trajectory.

That trajectory, in both the past and present, and almost certainly in the future as well, is decisively shaped by the economic and political processes of globalisation[4] and the cultural transformations they bred. This historical experience has left an obvious legacy in contemporary Sierra Leone. The peninsular area around the capital Freetown was exposed at a very early stage to frontier processes, when in 1787 the Province of Freedom was founded by British abolitionists as a refuge for persons freed from slavery. Other parts of the country were, over the course of the nineteenth century, gradually brought under the expanding hegemony of the British Empire. British administrators and the local (Krio) trading groups needed the British Empire's authority to trade safely in the interior of the country. This led to greater interventions in the interior of Sierra Leone, and finally, in 1896, to the proclamation of a Protectorate over the rest of the territory. This did not mean, however, that frontier processes ceased to operate in the new colony. Indeed, it could be argued that Sierra Leone today, considered as a society and a sphere of cultural interaction, is a palimpsest[5] of successive frontier experiences. These experiences and processes did not end in 1896, but still continue today, even if they do not take the forms they did in the past.

From this perspective, it becomes critically important to include issues of power in perspectives on the frontier. For Frederick J. Turner,[6] the American frontier was a frontier of nation-building (Turner 1920). For Scott W. Hoefle, that frontier was a frontier of exploitation and violence, violence that invariably took the form of "institutionalized violence against the ethnic groups that stood in the way of frontier expansion. The real legacy of the frontier is not that of a nation of vigilantes and superheroes but rather one of ethnic/class violence within the United States and belligerent imperialism abroad" (Hoefle 2004: 277–278). Hoefle sees very similar processes at

[4] 'Globalisation' denotes, for some, the complete and permanent transcendence of nation-states and national identities, and the creation of new, *transnational* networks of social and cultural interaction (Robinson 2001, where the creation of a transnational capitalist class is posited, is a good example of this interpretation of globalisation processes). For others, however, the national level does not disappear in the era of globalisation; rather, the nation-state is reshaped, but not abolished, by globalising forces (Hirst and Thompson 1999). We introduce the concept of globalisation here because the historical frontier experiences of the United States, Africa, and other parts of the world were early examples of globalisation, that is of situations where the social dynamic of local and national communities were determined by the circuits of economic and social life happening at a level beyond both the local and the national – that is at a global level. The historical American frontier, for example, involved not only the human settlement of the American West (and the forcible seizure of that territory from its indigenous population) but also its organisation as part of a national and global economic system. Through that organisation, America's frontier communities became connected to networks that spanned the American continent and connected them to the outside world. Similar processes of network connection can be seen in Africa today, including in Sierra Leone.

[5] A palimpsest is a written or illuminated manuscript from which older inscriptions have been more or less erased, allowing new writings or illustrations to be created over them. However, traces of the past may still be discerned on such manuscripts, making them a suitable metaphor for the ways in which the past influences the present in frontier social situations.

[6] Frederick J. Turner was the American historian who put his country's frontier experience at the heart of American identities (1920). The settler population in early colonial America had originally been confined to settlement enclaves that hugged the Atlantic coast of North America, but had quickly expanded over the eastern mountain ranges and then westward into the prairies and beyond. The challenges experienced in this movement of population had, Turner argued, challenged that population in ways that forced the development of certain cultural traits – traits that Turner held to be distinctively American, and indeed definitional of American identity itself (Turner 1920). In developing his model of African identity formation through frontier processes, Kopytoff drew explicitly on Turner's ideas, albeit arguing that Africa had its own specific frontier experiences distinct from the American case analysed by Turner.

work in contemporary Brazil (Hoefle 2006). There, the penetration of hitherto inaccessible forest areas by settlers and logging corporations has led to the exponential expansion of deforestation and the erosion of the security and rights of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and brought in its wake a wave of violence, both criminal and political.

Hoefle's work warns against the idea that the American frontier experience can, or should, provide a model for developing countries today. Where Turner saw the role of the frontier in American society and the formation of its national identity as progressive and positive, Hoefle sees that experience as a much darker one. In the context of Africa, Hoefle's work reminds us to be alert to issues of conflict and power and the abuse of power in such areas, which have experienced frontier processes that left a lasting legacy (like the Peninsula of Freetown) or which are on the eve of a new wave of frontier expansion (such as Sierra Leone's Northern Province is today).

The role of power and conflict in the shaping of frontier areas requires us to pay attention to the diversity of outcomes of frontier processes – something perhaps underestimated by Hoefle. Migration into a frontier area of Thailand, for example, is seen by two authors as an event that led to a change in local land-tenure rules, from open access to land to delimited and privatised tenure (Feder and Feeny 1991: 268). In a forest zone of Ecuador, by contrast, frontier processes over more than a century had led to several successive episodes of changing land tenure and economic order, which culminated in a transition to the re-organisation of a community's land as a common property resource, a 'new commons' (Ruiz-Ballesteros and Gual, 2012).[7] In the frontier zones of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the development strategies of the two rival regimes both insist on a mandate for central government to impose its will on communities located at the frontier, such as the pastoralist communities of Eritrea's western lowlands (Ogbaharya and Tecle 2010). This antipathy towards pastoralists is part of a wider pattern of state suspicion towards pastoralist communities in East Africa, one that may be counter-productive in terms of development outcomes, but which is strongly rooted in the authoritarian political traditions that characterise many states of that region (Schlee 2013; Abbink et al. 2014).

We cite these diverse cases in order to underline that Sierra Leone, like them, shares in a history that contains frontier processes, but is still unique in its own way.[8] If the task is to understand how ethnogenesis occurred in a frontier zone, and how that continues to affect a society in the present day and into the future, then this in turn requires us to ask the question of how history shaped that zone, and left present communities with the task of building new identities out of the particular

[7] The contrast between such differing outcomes needs to be sought not only in contrast patterns of demographic change and human migration, but also in the differing political contexts that are observable across different cases of frontier expansion. The Ecuadorian case just cited, for example, occurred within a context where economic decline of colonial-era hacienda agriculture was accompanied by changing discourses in national politics, which included a transition towards tourism as a growth industry, and conservation and preservation of the natural environment as a key policy goal of national government in Ecuador (Ruiz-Ballesteros and Gual 2012). This led to a revision of the social contract between the national government in Ecuador and the country's peripheral, frontier regions. The requirements of building an environmentally appropriate tourist industry, among other facts, drove the move towards a new commons that would be based on a system of multilevel governance that would allow for the 'recognition and negotiation of information and knowledge within and across levels' (Ruiz-Ballesteros and Gual 2012: 848; this case suggests that while Hoefle may be right to raise the alarm over the consequences of frontier processes in the Brazilian Amazon, there are similar cases which do not have the same outcomes).

[8] For example, as in the previously cited cases of Latin America and the Horn of Africa, the role of imperialism in forming these frontier zones was crucial. However, colonialism is not the only form imperialism can take, and even during the colonial era in Africa, there were significant differences in the ways in which particular colonial possessions were managed and administered by their respective imperial metropoles. There were significant differences in the mode of administration between colonial empires and within them. This is vital if the distinction between the former Colony and the former Protectorate in Sierra Leone is to be properly understood, a distinction that was crucial to the particular form the frontier experience took in Sierra Leone.

cultural (and other) resources they have at hand. The historical emergence and evolution of identity on the frontier in Sierra Leone began in the peninsular area around Freetown, the region where the Sierra Leonean state was born at the end of the eighteenth century, and whose development has been crucial to the trajectory of the country since its earliest days.

This paper, therefore, begins with a discussion of the nineteenth-century Sierra Leone frontier experience and its impacts on contemporary social processes, particularly with regard to land tenure, among communities of the Freetown Peninsula. We then use the frontier concept in the context of Makeni, the capital of the Northern Province of Sierra Leone. In this town, historically neglected and remote in colonial times, some social innovations are occurring that may herald a new episode of the frontier in Sierra Leone. In the discussion that follows these sections, we place this among the set of frontier experiences in Sierra Leonean history, and discuss what its implications for the future may be. We show that the further development of Kopytoff's model and insights requires a greater recognition of the effects of individual choice and agency on the specific patterns produced by the working out of particular frontier processes. These include but are certainly not limited to those – as described in the following ethnographic sections – produced by renewed land speculation and land disputes, the introduction of multinational capital, or new educational institutions.

Rethinking the Frontier on the Freetown Peninsula

The 'Province of Freedom' – later to become the Colony of Sierra Leone – was founded in 1787. Several groups were involved in the initial settlement (which would later become the Sierra Leonean capital of Freetown), but they all shared, in different ways, one common experience: that of slavery. Many were black people who had settled in Britain after serving on the British side in the American revolutionary war, only to find themselves destitute in that country (Peterson 1969: 20). British abolitionists proposed to resettle them in an environment where they could both live and work, and at the same time combat slavery. This first settlement was destroyed in 1789 by a Temne[9] chief, King Tom. In 1790, both the project and the colony were revived under the chartered Sierra Leone Company, with the same ideals of fighting the slave trade on the West African coast and spreading Christianity and civilisation in Africa (ibid.: 27). Two further groups of settlers joined the colony: the Nova Scotians in 1792, who were former slaves in the American colonies who had won their freedom and some land in return for fighting for Britain, and the Maroons from Jamaica in 1800. Finally, after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807,[10] slaves captured on ships by the British on the West African coast were relocated to Sierra Leone. This wave of freed slaves, called Liberated Africans, soon constituted the largest group of settlers of the Colony.[11] Processes of integration and creolisation between these various groups of settlers led to the emergence of the Krio identity over the course of the nineteenth century (Knörr 2010).

Land was a common preoccupation to both the settlers and the British. The Nova Scotians were dissatisfied with the amount and quality of land given to them by the Sierra Leone Company, while the Company tried to impose a land tax that was never paid by the settlers (Peterson 1969: 30–32).

[9] The Temne are one of the two largest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone and account for one-third of the total population (Statistics Sierra Leone 2013: 4).
[10] Slavery itself was not abolished in the British Empire until 1833.
[11] In the 1848 census, the population of Liberated Africans and their descendants 'born in the Colony' was estimated at 40,243, out of a total population of 46,511 inhabitants (Her Majesty's Colonial Possessions 1849).

Settlers saw the territory of Sierra Leone as a 'free' land, an area where all could settle and start a new life without being constrained by the British. As populations of Liberated Africans were resettled in the colony from 1811 onwards, they found little available land in Freetown and moved south and east to establish new settlements (at this time, although the territory of the Colony covered the entire Peninsula, only a small portion was occupied by settlers). Between 1809 and 1817, new villages appeared in the mountains behind Freetown, such as Leicester and Regent. In 1818 and 1819, Liberated Africans founded, among other communities, Charlotte and Bathurst in the Peninsula mountains, Kent on the Atlantic coast,[12] and Hastings and Waterloo in the east (Luke 1939: 54).

Both the Sierra Leone Company and its successors (the governors of the Colony of Sierra Leone) had hoped to replace the slave trade with legitimate trade and agricultural exports. The first agricultural scheme failed, however, and as the Sierra Leone Company declared bankruptcy, Sierra Leone was declared a Crown Colony in 1807. The successive Governors of the Crown Colony wished to encourage agriculture, but freehold tenure was not granted to the first settlers, who complained that they were free but still depended on the colonial government for legal access to land (Peterson 1969). In 1810, some landholders, who had cultivated their own plots, received grants to encourage their activity (Luke 1939). The land titles thus obtained were later recognised by the administration of the Colony and turned into a form of freehold (Renner-Thomas 2010: 19–20).[13]

The settlers lived under a colonial tutelage that expected them to spread Christianity and 'civilisation' in West Africa. The Company and the Sierra Leone governors stressed the pioneering role of settlers and Liberated Africans in creating a new society free from slavery, but still assumed that this new economic pattern would still involve large-scale agricultural plantations. In their view, frontiersmen, in a situation of free available land, had to reproduce the scheme that had made possible the economic success of the New World. The settlers, however, neglected farming and made clear their preference for trade. In addition to trade, people engaged in small-scale gardening. Neither the Peninsula hills nor the climate were conducive for large-scale agriculture activities, and agricultural experiments failed one after the other. In 1846, the Governor reported:

> "The agricultural returns for the two years 1845 and 1846 show a nearly equal quantity of the various articles of produce raised during each year. No advance, however, has been made in the general system of agriculture of the colony since the date of my last Report. Nor has anyone here turned his attention to the cultivation, on a large scale, of coffee, cotton, or sugar. In fact, unless either the Government or some wealthy person will start such an undertaking, it is useless to expect it will even be attempted by the natives. They have not the means to commence or support it." (Her Majesty's Colonial Possessions 1847: 143)

The British authorities progressively acknowledged that the Peninsula was not a favourable terrain for agriculture and that only a few small items could be exported, such as ginger and pepper. This only meant the end of the first chapter of the frontier around Freetown and the land beyond.

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[12] York was founded in 1819 following a reduction in British military forces and the disbanding of the West India regiments stationed in Sierra Leone. York began with about two hundred of these new colonists.

[13] Caulker writes that "the British administrators were faced with the dilemma of having to decide the direction of development the settlement was to follow, African or European" (1976: 40). He argues that they finally opted for cultural and social foundations based on European standards, in a conservative process.

The frontier of the Colony did not dissipate with the end of the slave trade and the emergence of the Krio group. Social processes on the Peninsula continue to be shaped by both the legacy of the original frontier experience and by various waves of migrations, particularly from the interior of the country. The population of the Peninsula increased throughout the 20th century. Freetown expanded and attracted many people in search of new economic opportunities. On the Peninsula, the fishing industry grew along with the demands of the Freetown market. As a result, in the interwar period, many seasonal fishing migrations turned into permanent relocations of residence (Hendrix 1984). Migration to Peninsula settlements increased during the civil war[14] (1991–2002), as many people sought refuge in safer areas, and in the post-war years due to a new boom in fishing and trade.

Such was the historical experience of the formation of the frontier in what was once the Freetown colony, and is now Sierra Leone's Freetown peninsula, the vital corridor that joins the capital with the interior. The period that followed the end of the civil war in 2002 has opened up a new phase in the country's historical trajectory. In the post-war context, for example, land pressure has become acute in the Western Area,[15] and has led to many tensions between local Sherbro populations, who consider themselves autochthonous, and migrants (see Ménard 2014). Various factors contribute to land pressure. Firstly, an increasing number of migrants claim property, and some settlements that have formed through recent migration now demand political independence from their host community. Secondly, the value of land has increased, which has led to a critical problem of land speculation. Sierra Leoneans living in Freetown or abroad have purchased large amounts of land, and State representatives also try to secure state lands for private purposes, which in some cases has led to conflicts with local inhabitants. In the north of the Peninsula, between the towns of Goderich and Lakka, the deforestation of local hills testifies to hard battles for the acquisition of residential lands. Finally, the programme launched by the government in 2008 for the protection of the Western Area Peninsula Forest Reserve (WAPFoR), which covers most of the Peninsula mountains, has put further constraints on the availability of forest lands. In the following, we explain how land pressure is reinterpreted with reference to the history of the frontier.

Relations between local populations and migrants are embedded within a specific context of legal pluralism, where different normative orders coexist in a single political space (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 2006). This is rooted in the creation of the frontier zone at the foundation of the colony.[16] Historically, the Colony and Protectorate had two different legal systems. In the Protectorate, customary law – or rather, the rules that the colonial power institutionalised as customary – was maintained alongside English law as the most efficient modality of indirect rule. In the Colony, which by contrast was under direct rule, the local customary system was suppressed in favour of English law. The implementation of English law in the Colony had two long-lasting consequences. Firstly, communal land tenure and customary land rights were suppressed in the Western Area: there, the legal framework makes provisions for state property and private property only. As a result, there are no customary authorities in charge of legitimating property rights of specific groups. Settlements in the Peninsula are not part of a chieftaincy system; each of them elects a headman for a three-year mandate. Secondly, the colonial authorities, envisioning the Western Area as a land of pioneers, designated the settlers as 'non-native'. Krios, who populated

[14] A large literature now exists on the causes and consequences of the civil war. See, for example, Gberie 2005.
[15] Administratively, the Western Area includes Freetown and the Peninsula.
[16] In the case of the Peninsula, this concept refers to the coexistence of customary and statutory laws and tenure systems in the Western Area.

the Colony, were classified 'non-native' with regard to land ownership. Under the Provincial Land Act of 1960, non-natives were (and remain) prohibited from purchasing land outside of the Western Area in territories under customary law. By contrast, there are no restrictions on land acquisition in the Western Area imposed on migrants, which constitutes a problematic contradiction in the contemporary legal landscape (Renner-Thomas 2010: 9). On the Peninsula, private ownership increasingly depends on obtaining title deeds, a costly process that only a few can afford. At the same time, local populations have maintained aspects of customary ownership and negotiation.

Legal pluralism plays a role here by positioning groups with regard to specific normative orders. Property is contested through complex processes of ownership legitimation. Ownership legitimation – or the question of who can legitimate ownership and where – is a social and political question, as it ties a group or individual to a specific political community and to a sphere of power and the citizenship rights it confers. Therefore, land disputes become an arena for the legitimation of certain forms of power and authority over others (Lund 2002, 2011). On the Peninsula, the legitimation of ownership varies according to which social group or groups are concerned in the legitimation process. These differences are grounded in distinct historical experiences of statehood, experiences rooted in the historical experience of the Colony as a frontier zone. In land disputes between Sherbro local populations and migrants, Sherbros construct their land claims with reference to customary tenure: customary tenure appears as a marker of their autochthony, which in turn gives them collective rights to land. Migrants, on their side, ground their property claims in the historical specificities of the Western Area as a free land, a land of pioneers, where no specific ethnic group can claim autochthony and where the state manages land issues.

The Sierra Leonean government, faced with an increasing number of land disputes but also approached by many new investors, has encouraged further land privatisation and official applications for the acquisition of state land have to be made directly to the Ministry – including land intended for communal developments. The legitimacy of customary ownership is being challenged by various actors who hold state views on land tenure, such as government representatives, recent migrants, and investors. As government representatives tend to abuse their right to claim 'state land' for their own individual purposes of land speculation, people stress in their narratives the predatory nature of the state – an image that derives from the historical experience of direct rule and the right of the state to acquire land compulsorily.[17] People are particularly wary of government representatives and it is not unusual to hear that "government people just come and put a 'State land' signboard" and that land can be taken without any compensation.

Thus, referring to history becomes a way for Sherbros to express their feeling of being deprived of their collective rights to land. As a result, they tend to take a stand against the legal heritage of the Colony. They claim an autochthonous status under customary law with opposition to this specific historical and legal framework. In 2008 the Ministry of Land and the Deputy Minister of Lands, Country Planning and the Environment officially stated that 'there is no community land in

[17] The Public Land Ordinance of 1898 authorizes the compulsory acquisition of land by the state, provided that the owner is informed and compensated (Renner-Thomas 2010: 116). Yet, no compensation is necessary if the land has remained unoccupied for a period of at least twelve years. Renner-Thomas explains that "the effect of this provision is that a person who is unable to prove beneficial user of his land for the prescribed period may well find himself being expropriated without receiving any compensation, even though he was otherwise in actual possession or entitled to possession of the land in question at the time of its acquisition by the State" (ibid.: 117). Beyond the issue of proving beneficial usage of the land, the definition of 'land occupation' may be problematic.

the Western Area' – a statement that people in Sherbro settlements often repeated to highlight the unfair treatment they have received from the government in comparison to the Provinces, where chiefs are said to be 'custodians of the land'. By this, Sherbros understand land as "a customary communal holding" linked to a specific indigenous identity (Mamdani 1996: 22). Customary tenure becomes the marker of autochthony, often with clear reference to the changes colonialism brought in the area:

> "Before, the government was a community, the communities formed a government. Land inheritance was the only way to get land, along with land allocation by the chief. Land, before, was under chiefs. It changed with the coming of slaves, and everything went under the Colony. They even changed the names of the villages." (Sherbro local authority, 27 December 2011, Number Two)

Land-grabbing by government officials is reinterpreted as an outcome of direct rule. Their attitude becomes linked with the appropriative nature of the colonial regime, as the following statement by a Sherbro elder in Kissi Town shows: "The whole Colony had been bought by the colonial masters. It was theirs. The government thinks it is its own personal land". Direct rule is equated with the strong personalisation of the contemporary state, leading to abuses of power. People often used the present tense, saying "this *is* the Colony" to express the legal specificity of the Western Area. These discourses reformulate in contemporary terms the consequences of the historical legal differences between Protectorate and Colony that resulted in an advantage for the state in land matters.

Among these legal differences, the role of the headmen and their lack of power in contrast to the chiefs are major subjects of grievance. In the Provinces, the title to communal land is vested in the paramount chief or the chief-in-council (Renner-Thomas 2010: 150). It involves notably "the right to control the disposition of land to strangers" (ibid.: 162). By contrast, headmen cannot defend customary claims when land disputes involve state representatives or document-holders. The role of the headman is to preside over private land sales. Any land for which ownership cannot be proved through documentation is legally regarded as state land. In Sherbro discourses, the role of the headman in land matters is contrasted with the authoritative position of chiefs. People contend that documents are not required in the Provinces, as chiefs have the right to legitimise both communal land and individual land-use rights. It is also believed that chiefs can stand against both trespassers and government representatives. The concern that emerges out of these complaints about the lack of power of headmen is the absence of a legally empowered intermediary level between local people and the state. In this context, people present an idealised image of chieftaincy as a system through which chiefs guarantee customary possession and protect the people from the abuses of the central state.

Migrants, in contrast, have developed an alternative discourse rooted in the Sierra Leonean frontier experience. In their words, the Western Area is presented as a land without natives, not bound to customary law, where rights to ownership derive from the ability to obtain land from the State in a legal environment dominated by the necessity to acquire title deeds. The State becomes the legitimating institution with regard to land ownership. Their concept of property and its legitimation coincides with that of the government. Moreover, the relationship between host communities and migrants is not perceived as a system of mutual obligations, but as a situation that

has to be legalised and arbitrated by the State. This conception too clearly draws on interpretations of the Colony's history and legacy:

> "If you want to buy land here, only documentation works because there is only government-owned land here. (…) As headmen, we are only here for a period of three years. In the provinces, the paramount chief is the custodian of the land; he is there for life. There is nothing that goes on without the knowledge of the paramount chief. This is why land issues are not devolved to Local Councils. But here you will work directly with the Ministry of Lands when you want to buy land. (…) Do you know why there are no paramount chiefs in the Western Area? The Creoles had a tradition different from the rest of the country. This is not a province. This is the Western Area urban and rural; the different tribes all meet here, but we still use their system. (…) For instance, Kent: is it a local name? Waterloo, Hastings, Newton, York (…). These are not local names. These are foreign names. In case of land disputes, it is the government that will put a notice that it is State land." (15 March 2012, PWD Compound, headman)

In this statement, the history of the Colony is tied to the experience of the Krio settlers and to the system of direct rule. It provides the headman of PWD Compound with an answer to the question of why the cultural and legal frameworks in the Western Area differ from those in the rest of the country: the Colony was populated by strangers (this is what the recitation of English names refers to), who introduced a legal system by which different ethnic groups could claim equal rights to land. The direct relation between citizens and the State is reinterpreted in a positive light, as a situation that guarantees equal land rights to all. This legal configuration also involves a direct relationship between citizens and the central state. Viewed from this perspective, the state must intervene to regulate relations between citizens. Relations between communities of 'hosts' and 'strangers' are not conceptualised as a system of mutual obligations, but as a situation that has to be legalised and arbitrated by the State.[18]

In both discourses, the historical experience of the frontier is central. Migrants hold the view that the 'modern' state and the rights related to 'modern' citizenship emerged in the Colony. They present the Western Area as a 'free land' not only in terms of physical land, but in terms of rights, opportunities, and the presence of institutions and services. The state is expected to guarantee equal opportunities for all, including access to land, whereas in the Provinces individual rights are considered to be constrained by the framework of customary law. National citizenship is considered to be the result of direct rule, translated in present narratives as a direct link between citizens and the state, unmediated by traditional representatives. For Sherbros, in contrast, national citizenship is the outcome of the recognition of autochthonous rights throughout the national territory. Land is presented as a customary possession, related to the 'bundle of rights' one acquires through belonging to a local group. From this perspective, local authorities are in charge of both legitimating land ownership and defining the nature of their relations with migrants.

Despite these differences in discourse, Sherbros and migrants continue to settle their relations using customary law. Local land disputes are fought on customary grounds for two reasons. Firstly, neither customary landowners nor migrants can easily engage in the costly process of acquiring title deeds. Thus, clearing, planting, or building remain relevant signs of land occupation through which customary ownership can be claimed. Secondly, while some settlements formed through migration now demand political independence, their inhabitants have forged relations of

[18] The terms 'hosts' and 'strangers' are used in the text with reference to the social position of groups in a specific political system that establishes mutual obligations and reciprocation between firstcomers and latecomers.

reciprocation and mutual obligations with the host community to which they were attached. Therefore, political independence does not appear solely as a status granted by the state.[19] It is only fully acquired at the local level, when people who provided land in the first place accept claims to political independence and land ownership as legitimate. Local processes of recognition follow customary patterns. In this sense, the contemporary frontier process – in Kopytoff's terms – through which groups create new polities, continue to be characterised by cultural conservatism.

Although newcomers draw on state legitimacy for ownership legitimation, local negotiations based on customary obligations between hosts and strangers remain necessary to access property. The case of PWD Compound, a settlement populated by newcomers who claim political independence from the two adjacent communities of Mama Beach and Kissi Town, provides an illustration of this point. This settlement was first founded in the 1930s as a temporary base for workers employed by the Public Works Department for the construction of the Peninsula Road. Later, in the 1960s, seasonal fishermen began to join the community. The first boundaries of the settlement were created on a customary basis, after headmen of Mama Beach and Kissi Town had allocated land to the newcomers. The demographic setup of the area changed with recent migrations. As it has become a large town, PWD Compound has recently claimed its political independence and obtained its own headman. Inhabitants changed the name of their town to 'Brigitte Village' – named after the founder of the health centre – and erected signboards on both sides of the settlement. Kissi Town and Mama Beach continue to refuse to acknowledge the existence of these new boundaries.

In the process of creating their own polity, migrants use customary arguments to establish land ownership. Long-term land occupation over generations is considered to legitimate property access under customary law (see Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962). The right of second- and third- generation migrants to access both political and land rights is grudgingly tolerated by host communities:

> "When [migrants] have stayed long in that place, they can claim that it belongs to them. They tell us that they are born here, that nobody should come control them anymore, that they are citizens here. We cannot deny that. Since they have stood up to gain their independence, we cannot do anything about that. But we don't like the way they did it. If they had begged us, we would have given the land with all our heart. But they just took it without asking." (Sherbro fisherman, 9 March 2012, Mama Beach)

Local-term residence grants local citizenship rights, yet people consider that the decision to grant land ownership must follow customary reciprocal obligations that organise relations between landowners and land users. Land users are expected to acknowledge the social and political primacy of landowners and their social debt towards them and therefore to *beg* them for land. This indicates a form of respect and humility that strangers and their descendants need to display towards original landowners. Once these obligations are fulfilled, rights to land ownership can be granted to migrants (this argument ignores or underplays the considerable increase in the value of land in recent years, and therefore conceals the fact that any newcomers would probably have to pay heavily increased prices for any land they might purchase).

[19] Political independence describes the mechanism by which the local authorities of a community ask the central state to grant them the right to elect their own headman. It is a decision mostly based on population numbers. Moreover, the government has contributed in redistributing power between migrants and local populations by allowing people who have resided in a settlement for five years to be eligible for the position of village head.

Essentially, land continues to be regarded as the communal possession of a group. As ‘community land’ is not a legal category on the Peninsula, the securement of communal services has become the main customary symbol of a group’s political sovereignty. A community that lacks social facilities or amenities of its own becomes dependent on the goodwill of its neighbours. Members of such communities are forced to use the infrastructure of other nearby towns, and this places in question the rights of a group to access communal properties in contexts where autochthony is seen as a vital source of status and rights. Thus, although PWD Compound had installed its own leadership, inhabitants needed their own independent settlement to be recognised locally by the other two communities. The construction of communal facilities was the first step towards that goal: the mosque, the church, and the school were built during the last decade. The community’s new name, “Brigitte Village”, was taken from the name of the German woman, who had founded the health centre. This name has political significance, as one of the few health centres in the area is located in PWD Compound. Mama Beach and Kissi Town may also come to depend on PWD Compound’s infrastructural assets.

Finally, a critical step for a community that seeks recognition by other communities as a politically independent settlement is the establishment of a cemetery. Possession of a cemetery is not a legal requirement for political independence under statutory law, but it is the most important local customary symbol, as it allows residents to bury their dead themselves, communicate with their ancestors and claim a status as firstcomers in their settlement. Having a cemetery is thus a founding event: it makes sacred the land on which one settles by connecting firstcomers to the spirits of that land (cf. Lentz 2013). Moreover, funerals in Sierra Leone are usually performed ‘at home’ – where the person is considered to belong. A cemetery indicates that migrants believe that they reside on land of their own. Finally, ‘home’ is also where a migrant should vote (cf. Geschiere 2009: 55). The right to have a cemetery entails the right to local political autonomy, and vice versa.

At the time of research, local authorities of PWD Compound had been negotiating with the local authorities of Mama Beach for access to land for a cemetery. That land had not yet been used and people in Mama Beach and Kissi Town thus considered that inhabitants of PWD Compound still depended on them. Not only did they depend on them to bury their dead, but the absence of a cemetery indicated that they remained in a socially subordinate position vis-à-vis landowners. Members of landowning families, particularly in Kissi Town, had mixed feelings about the cemetery issue. They admitted that the local authorities of PWD Compound, in order to support their claim for political independence, needed to obtain a cemetery. At the same time, the existence of a new cemetery meant that original property-holders would abandon their status as landlords. Moreover, many families bridge between the settlements by way of family ties. Sharing a single cemetery stands as a symbol of such relations, involving both a continuous social hierarchy between hosts and strangers and the sharing of a common ancestral ground. In this context, migrants depend on the social facility per se – the use of the cemetery – and on the spiritual blessings that it conveys. As a result, the cemetery remains the symbol of the social and spiritual ascendance of autochthonous families over newcomers.

The case of PWD Compound shows that despite their residence within a document-oriented legal jurisdiction, both migrants and local populations must rely on customary symbols and social relations if they are to maintain the permanent (re)negotiability of land ownership. The formation of new settlements follows customary patterns with regard to tenure and political authority. For both groups, the frontier continues to be a process of both rupture and continuity – as people break

from an existing community and at the same time reproduce the values and discourses of legitimation of the community they leave. On the Peninsula, this process takes place in a context of land pressure, which means that 'frontiersmen' remain close by and legally part of the same administrative zone – the Western Area. However, locally, their break from existing communities constitutes an important change. 'Strangers' are always to some degree connected to the local society and may acquire political and social rights over generations. Strangers and those who consider themselves autochthones are part of a common social system, in which ethnic and social difference is negotiated in various ways. The process by which migrants choose to take up their rights defines future relations between groups and clearly establishes them as a 'new' group that also has the possibility to create distinct connections with the central state. In this environment, the frontier also appears as a process of competition for various rights.

The Peninsula, as the capital Freetown expands, also presents the characteristics of a booming economic frontier, where land speculation and new investments will shape the future of local communities. Due to land pressure and the growing privatisation of land supported by the government, Sherbro local authorities are increasingly concerned about securing land for both inhabitants and new migrants, including housing and communal facilities. As a result, they put forward arguments about land productivity. Land productivity is vitally important to the concept of the frontier. On the American frontier this was crucial to the legitimation of frontier settlements themselves, and (see the following part of this paper) the need for increased agricultural productivity in the interior of Sierra Leone is key to the frontier question in that region today. On the Peninsula, where the terrain is not suitable to agriculture, chances to make the land productive are enhanced by the attraction of investors to develop industrial, touristic, or other economic projects. The obligation to develop one's land is a well-grounded idea in local communities. Landowners are expected to make their land productive, by clearing, planting, or building a house, which means that it should provide benefits to the community. Similarly, many families have given land to investors who promised to provide social amenities.

However, in many places, people have become disgruntled as a result of the failure of such promises. As early as the 1980s, there were cases where investors had promised to build factories, but had instead used the land provided to them as private beach property. People commented that they had sacrificed their land in expectation of forthcoming investments, which never came, and now they wished they could have it back. In other cases, some projects appeared unsuitable for local inhabitants. For example, in recent years in the peninsular village of Number Two, a member of parliament built a private school where tuition fees were unaffordable by local residents. Similar examples are widespread on the Peninsula. In consequence, Sherbros often refer to the land regulations of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) military junta[20] as the most suitable for the Peninsula. The NPRC government had asked everyone to clean gardens, fields, and backyards, since rebels could hide 'in the bush' to prepare an attack, and declared that land unattended for five years became communal property. This was consistent with customary law, under which local authorities have the right to retrieve land in the event it is not used by its owner. This policy of the NPRC resonated as a validation of customary mechanisms on the Peninsula, where land is sold in a give-and-take relationship, with the expectation that the transaction will

[20] The NPRC seized power in Sierra Leone in a military coup in 1992. In its earliest phase of rule, it seemed to some to promise a fresh beginning for a country exhausted by decades of misrule and corruption, but it was quickly overwhelmed by the persistence of such problems and the escalation of the civil war.

foster economic benefits. Most people remember the NPRC as the regime that gave equal customary rights to ethnic groups with regard to land tenure, and such memories of the NPRC are used to justify local attachment to customary practices, such as the right of firstcomers to control land use. From this perspective, it is considered that private owners and the state merely borrow what belongs to the community. This reverses the rule of statutory law according to which unoccupied and non-documented land belongs to the state. The landowner by default is considered to be the community. Similarly, it is considered that the state and its representatives, as well as investors, have customary obligations when they seize land as their own – that of developing the land.

These arguments, which bring to the fore the role of customary obligations with regard to land, clearly set in opposition two dimensions of the colonial frontier: land appropriation, which is interpreted as the reason for the current seizures of land by the state and of which the economic frontier is considered to be merely a continuation, and land productivity, in which new investors can nevertheless play a role. The frontier and the processes associated with it remain as important in this part of Sierra Leone today as they were in the cases from which Kopytoff built his model. The key role of land scarcity on the Peninsula presents us with a situation very different from Kopytoff's model, however. In the cases cited by Kopytoff, frontier-building populations were able to move to free and available lands, something that is rarely possible in Africa today. The absence of such lands increases the competition for land and the risk of violence. As land in the Peninsula has become extremely valuable, the potential for land disputes to escalate violently should not be underestimated. In 2011, for instance, confrontations occurred between inhabitants of Number Two and security men, who were accompanying a member of parliament for a land survey that local inhabitants considered illegitimate. Involvement in land disputes is generally considered extremely dangerous and life threatening.

In the booming environment of the new frontier buying or selling land can translate into various economic, social, and political assets, as the case of PWD Compound has shown, but such opportunities exist in a highly insecure environment. To exploit such opportunities, one must also rely on one's ability to draw connections to the central authorities in Freetown: securing investments for one's community or documents for one's land usually require close connections in administrations. This is not easy, as the capital remains difficult to access, due to the high cost (in both money and time) of public transportation. Money gained from land sales is therefore often used to acquire private transportation. Most headmen, once elected, buy a car, demonstrating their ability to link up their community with central institutions and social services such as health centres. Access to transportation becomes a key index of development and social mobility, as one revealing episode observed by Menard indicates. In the community of Number Two, an *okada* (motorcycle taxi) driver had exchanged two plots of land for a second-hand bike which suffered from a leaking oil reservoir. He had obviously been cheated, people commented, as the land he had surrendered to acquire this vehicle was probably worth two or three times the price he had paid to the motorcycle's previous owner . People made fun of him when they saw him riding by, and one man said: "He was in [a] hurry of getting [the bike]. He cannot sit on his two town lot and go to Freetown, but he can do it with that." This verdict, delivered in the court of public opinion, attests to the specific economic dynamics taking place in a historic frontier environment. That environment, the Freetown peninsula, is one where present-day social dynamics take the form they do both because of the historic legacy and also because of the presence of contemporary forms of

frontier processes (including the insurgent flows of external capital that drive land speculation, and the necessity for peninsular communities to maintain close links with the institutional and political centre). This is, also, not the only part of Sierra Leone where the frontier past interacts with a frontier present, as we show in the following section of this paper.

Makeni: Sierra Leone's twenty-first century frontier?

The case described above demonstrates how frontier processes leave a legacy that shapes social outcomes well after the frontier as such has dissipated. We now turn to a case where frontier processes are still going on, in Sierra Leone's Northern Province. As this section of our paper (based on fieldwork by David O'Kane) indicates, the ultimate outcomes of those processes remain to be seen, but they are already having an effect in some areas of education, economic development, and the relationship between law and society. Here there are some close areas of affinity between this African frontier case and that of the American frontier theorised by Turner: the expansion of higher education in ways attuned to the specific economic needs of an agrarian frontier zone, for example, or the reincorporation of a community into the legal structures of the state (Mood and Turner 1949). The most important of these points of similarity is the penetration of the area by external capital devoted to the extraction (or in the case of biofuels, the manufacture) of energy commodities. The centre of this activity is Makeni, the capital of Sierra Leone's Northern Province, and home to 83,000 people (Workman 2011). In this section, we show how some current developments in and around Makeni show the ways in which frontier processes are shaping one important area of Sierra Leone, as the country moves into a new phase of social change. Before this can be done, however, it is necessary to describe the particular frontier history of Makeni and the Northern Province.

Makeni is a central node of administration and economic life in the Sierra Leonean north and has experienced rapid change since the end of the civil war (Workman 2011: 54; see also Bolten 2008). Its present condition is the product of a long historical process that has linked, delinked, and relinked the region to the external world. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the hegemony of the British imperial state was gradually extended further and further into the territory that would eventually (after the war of 1896) become the 'Protectorate'. A key factor in this process was the movement by citizens of the colony into the interior, in search of opportunities for trade or religious evangelism. In either case, those involved in these activities demanded protection from the British state, protection which was gradually extended over the whole of the territory. The flag followed trade and preaching, or as Deveneaux (1973: 112) puts it, "Trade was the crucial factor which irrevocably dragged the Colony into the affairs of the north. (…) Thus by a slow but deliberate process, economic relations were tightened between the Colony and the peoples of the interior."

Even after the incorporation into the Protectorate, however, Sierra Leone's Northern Province remained historically neglected by both the colonial and post-colonial governments, but not entirely ignored. During colonial times, the north of Sierra Leone became well-known as a zone of petty commodity production, which helped spur the growth of Makeni as an important economic centre. In the mid-1890s, the British colonial government began constructing a railroad to assist in the commercial exploitation of Sierra Leone's north (Bolten 2008: 34–35). By 1912, this key piece

of infrastructure had been completed (Turay 1973: 12). Connection to the railway had important consequences for the ways in which people saw the city of Makeni:

> "From its early days as a railroad boomtown, Makeni has attracted people looking for a better life, those who have come to *sidom na ton* (sit down in town), literally expressing the notion that one can do so more comfortably in the township than in any village environment, no matter how bad the conditions. They have come to take advantage of regional trade, to seek a higher education or to look for some economic activity during a post-war boom when their own villages had been decimated. All are bound together in an ethos of hope; hope that this place could provide a better future than the places and lives they had left behind, hope that their children and grandchildren could continue to take advantage of the services that living in a provincial capital could provide." (Bolten 2008: 37).

Today, Makeni and the province around it still form a zone where new insurgent flows of capital are reshaping the economic life of the province, where urban centres are expanding, and where new institutions are playing new roles in the life of both the province and the nation, and (in the case of Makeni and the Northern Province) opening up a new chapter in the history of frontier processes in Sierra Leone, one of which is the construction of the University of Makeni.

While the Northern Province did become a centre of trade and business, the provision of educational infrastructure was consistently neglected. When missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church entered the region in the 1950s,[21] they devoted a great deal of their attention to the construction of educational infrastructure. After the conclusion of the civil war, a group of local clerical and lay persons from the Roman Catholic Church developed a project to build Sierra Leone's first private university in the town – the University of Makeni, or UNIMAK. There had long been a Catholic-funded teacher-training college in Makeni, and it was argued that this could become the foundation of a new private university. After several years of hard work (including political lobbying of the parliament in Freetown to legalise private university education), the project began to bear fruit, and the university opened its doors to its first students in 2011. This project has benefitted from the ability of its key leaders' access to global networks from which they can obtain financial and other support (O'Kane 2012). Local networks, however, are not neglected: the university is building relationships with both the mining and biofuels companies that operate in the north, on the one hand, and the rural communities in which much of the population of the north still live, on the other. It also plays a part in local and national political processes, even if partisan political activity is (usually) banned from the campus. During the 2012 election, the third since the end of the civil war,[22] UNIMAK opened its campus to representatives of the main political parties in Sierra Leone. The university also has close links with the Institute of Electoral Administration and Civic Education-Sierra Leone (INEACE-SL), the body charged with overseeing the electoral process. In building a new educational institution, those involved in the UNIMAK project are opening a new phase in the frontier experience in Makeni, and in Sierra Leone. This is especially so when considering the university's relationship to agriculture in the local area.

[21] Most of the rest of the country had long been the territory of evangelists from the Protestant tradition. Only the mainly-Muslim north remained as a potential area of proselytisation for a Catholic church that had not been present in Sierra Leone since the first Portuguese incursions of the 15th century.

[22] This was also the first election since the civil war to be conducted solely by Sierra Leoneans themselves: the previous two elections had been carried out under the supervision of the United Nations.

The University of Makeni has recently been trying to contribute to the development of agriculture in the post-war northern environment. A key part of UNIMAK's activities in this area is its attempt to set up a department of agriculture, which can contribute to the modernisation of Sierra Leone's agricultural sector:

> "The University of Makeni in collaboration with the University of Milan in Italy has just completed a five day training programme with agriculture oriented people at the University of Makeni – Fatima Campus. Speaking at the opening session the Crop Science Officer from the Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Food Security David Koroma commended the University for complementing government's effort in developing the human resource section of the ministry. Mr. Koroma pointed out that it is important to train the middle level manpower in the country, adding, they work directly in the fields and if they are developed in their areas of specialization it will improve agriculture." (University of Makeni 2011)

This press release goes on to describe its agricultural programme as one geared towards the training of young people in general, and women in particular, in new agricultural practices (University of Makeni 2011). In adopting this policy, the university is carrying the trajectory of the frontier experience in northern Sierra Leone forward into an area that would have been recognised by Frederick Jackson Turner, whose thoughts on the later evolution of the American frontier acknowledged the role of university education in shaping the American frontier zones. For Turner, the creation of state universities in the American Midwest in the late nineteenth century represented not just a modernisation of local agriculture, but also a continuation of what Turner (1920) supposed were traits of agricultural experimentation previously displayed by earlier American 'frontiersmen'.

Interview data from a student of this programme sheds more light on this aspect of the University of Makeni. This student, a young man from the Makeni region, had experienced the disruption of his education by the civil war, and had only been able to return to education several years after the war's conclusion. At the time I interviewed him, he was taking courses which would, he hoped, allow him to attend the university as a full-time student. His goal was to become acquainted with modern agricultural science in order to make a better living as a farmer in the Makeni region. He expressed the view that traditional farming knowledge was easily complemented by the modern, scientific agricultural knowledge he was acquiring at UNIMAK. He saw no incompatibility between what he had been taught about agriculture by his parents and family and what he was learning at the university:

> "The difference is not so great. Because they were telling me the time, the hour, the time, the place and what time you should harvest, what time you should plant, and the time what land you should find. But now, they, I have now matured by showing me the time the hour, and the place – sometimes, they first, they first told me that these stones, but looking to plant you know, for what cassava, you should plant sometimes when you make heaps like these stones, you have also put these, but for these they also told me you should, you should not, I should not plant those things. But by developing now, I know where I should not plant and now the difference is that they were, when they were telling me the, the idea is limited, what I mean is small, but now what I have learned, other people as supplement from what idea I got from my parents, and the ideas I got from others, has supplemented me to have more ideas on agriculture."[23]

[23] Interview with Mr. Joseph Turay, November 28th, 2012.

Turner's work on the frontier was conducted during a period when American society was going through extensive and rapid change, changes related to the agrarian question in that country.[24] Sierra Leone is still searching for an acceptable solution to its own agrarian question, a question which includes (but is certainly not limited to) problems of agricultural productivity – hence the University of Makeni's interest in promoting new forms of agricultural practice. For Turner, writing in the American context, the resolution of the agrarian question in the American west required the introduction of new agricultural practices appropriate to that region, and a new wave of state-run universities were, he argued, crucial to this goal. In the context of present-day Sierra Leone, the new private University of Makeni seeks to play a similar role. While we cannot predict the eventual form that Sierra Leonean agriculture will take, we can be certain that it will not slavishly mimic or reproduce the experience of other countries, especially those with vastly different environmental and political conditions.

Another key feature of the American frontier experience was the gradual incorporation of frontier zones into the state's sphere of legal oversight. As a result of the civil war, contemporary Sierra Leone suffers from a severe lack of trained legal professionals, of whom there may be little more than one hundred in the whole country (Maru 2006: 441). The Sierra Leonean NGO Timap for Justice provides alternative means of meeting the need for legal advice and representation. "*Timap*" is the Krio word for "stand up", meaning (in this context) to "stand up" for justice. The group has a branch in Makeni, and a group interview with members of that branch indicated that its members saw their role as to support the community, in a context where that community was rapidly changing. A great deal of their work involved informing accused persons of their rights and tracing the relatives of suspects. By trying to preserve confidentiality, and by not charging 'monies' for their services, they had become popular with the community. This was true in the civil cases they had to deal with – cases of marital problems and land disputes. In the latter cases, title to land and disputes over titles would be the key issues, and co-operation with magistrates would be required.

Land and its control is an issue also raised by the entry of mining companies and biofuels concerns into the province since the end of the civil war. A global boom in commodity prices, and the apparent alternative to hydrocarbons provided by biofuels, has made Sierra Leone attractive as a centre of operations for multinational corporations from both the West and the People's Republic of China. In entering this new phase of economic activity, Sierra Leone is repeating an older facet of the frontier experience, one observable in the history of other frontier zones, including the classic American frontier. In many frontier cases, the settlement or opening up of a frontier zone is followed by the entry of capital into that zone, in the form of corporate interests which seek profits through the reorganisation of territories for economic activity. This may not be necessarily a bad thing, but it does lead to certain changes in the way in which populations in the frontier must manage their interactions with each other and the outside world – in other words, it reorganises the nature of, and the range of, the challenges to which the frontier population must respond.

[24] Turner was writing on the eve of the discovery of modern chemical fertilisers, an innovation that revolutionised agriculture in the developed world. His era also saw the rise of industrial agriculture in the United States, and this had both ecological consequences (the 'dust bowl' of the 1930s) and also political consequences (the rise of agrarian populism as a force in American politics).

Since the end of the civil war, the mining corporations have built their own railways[25] to transport ore out of the country. The African Minerals railway passes through land occupied by no less than seven chiefdoms, on its way to the specially constructed port at Pepel. The local manager at the Makeni African Minerals office told me that the "custodians of the land" were the Paramount Chiefs, who were the owners of the land. 'Owners', here, is an ambiguous concept. For the use of the land, African Minerals pays a surface rent to the Paramount Chiefs, part of which is then passed on to ordinary farmers, with another share being split between a variety of development funds and councils, with the remainder being retained by the chiefs. A relationship with these chiefs was important to the company, an African Minerals employee told me, because "if you go off track, you have problems with the people". What "off track" might mean in this case was left unclear, but is hinted at in this story from one of the Freetown newspapers: the African Minerals company, it reports "has dished out a whooping Le325 million[26]as compensation to some farmers whose crops and settlements are likely to be affected by its operations around Wondugu village in the Tonkolili district, northern Sierra Leone".[27]

African Minerals is only one of many multinational corporations that have been moving into the area in the years since the civil war ended. Sierra Leone has become recently attractive to multinational corporations from both the West and the People's Republic of China, who are seeking new bases of operations. The interest of these corporations in the opportunities that Sierra Leone may offer are rooted in a global boom in commodity prices, and the environmentally-friendly alternative to hydrocarbons that biofuel appears to provide. In entering this new phase of economic activity, Sierra Leone is repeating an older facet of the frontier experience, one observable in the history of other frontier zones: the influx of capital into the frontier zone after that zone has been settled or opened up in some other fashion. This part of the frontier experience, driven usually by corporate interests seeking profits through the economic reorganisation of frontier territories has several historical precedents, including that of the classic American frontier experience which shaped the ideas of Turner and indirectly those of Kopytoff. This aspect of the frontier phenomenon has, in turn, obvious political implications. The settlement of the American west proved to be not only the story of its incorporation into American capitalism, but also its incorporation into the American state and its legal apparatus. The kind of changes involved in such patterns of incorporation reorganise the nature, and the range, of the challenges to which the frontier population must respond. The appearance of these new challenges in turn leaves us with the challenges of revising and extending the frontier concept in a new century where frontier processes appear to be a persistent aspect of globalisation and the reattachment of areas (such as the former Sierra Leonean "Province of Freedom" or the province of which Makeni is the capital) to the global economy.

The Northern Province will continue to be opened to external capital via the intrusion of the mining corporations and biofuels corporations mentioned above. While the policy of openness to capital will continue to be perceived as necessary for the country's development, it already appears that it has the potential to bring adverse consequences in its wake. These consequences include a

[25] These are purely for freight and do not carry passenger traffic. This contrasts with the colonial era, when the construction of railways was a key part of the penetration of the colonial state into the interior.
[26] This was roughly equivalent to €55,000, as of November 2011 (Exchangerates.org.uk 2015).
[27] Premier News (Freetown) Issue 3023, Wednesday, November 2, 2011.

perennial feature of frontier situations – violence. There have already been cases such as that cited in a report by Amnesty International[28]:

> "Over a period of two days in April 2012 the police in the Sierra Leonean town of Bumbuna fired live ammunition at unarmed community members, used chemical irritants described as teargas to dispel protests, raided homes and businesses and threatened numerous individuals. One woman was killed and at least 11 were injured, many as a result of gunshots." (Amnesty International 2012: 3)

This incident drew the following comment from the London newspaper *The Observer*:

> "The disproportionate response by the police – who recently purchased $4.5m of weaponry, including grenade launchers and heavy machine guns – shows that, while the war is receding into the past, human life is still not always highly valued in Sierra Leone." (Akam 2012: 28)

Turner's account of the role of the frontier in shaping American consciousness tended to underplay the role of violence in that experience, shifting it to a metaphorical battle against the natural environment and diminishing the reality of the violent assaults by state and settler against the indigenous peoples of North America. In the North American case, violence was strongly correlated to the wider connections between American capital and the American state (the American civil war was, in part, a contest between North and South for control of the American frontier zone in the west). In Sierra Leone today, new connections are emerging between the national state and international capital. The incident at Bumbuna may prove to be an isolated incident – or it may yet prove to be the harbinger of a new wave of violent incidents on a new Sierra Leonean frontier.

Such an outcome is by no means inevitable. The earlier case of the frontier at work in the Peninsula, described by Ménard, gives a historical precedent for patterns of exchange on the frontier which resulted in the formation of apparently tenacious social relations and the patterns of identity that go with them. It is not yet certain that similar patterns will emerge in Sierra Leone's north, but this only makes it more necessary to revise and redevelop the theory of identity formation on the frontier in Africa. This is especially the case given the likely consequences of global climate change for the country. Climate change (in what is already one of the wettest countries in West Africa) will have variable effects on the distribution of staple crops in Sierra Leone and on the agrarian activities that employ so many of Sierra Leone's citizens (Jalloh et al. 2013). Sierra Leonean farmers are already feeling its effects (Lucas 2013). One likely effect of these changes is to make the northern province of Sierra Leone more amenable to the production of the country's staple food stuffs – if the agrarian context in that province can be opened to new forms of production and new patterns of settlement. As we have already seen, the new alternatives to agricultural employment are the product of frontiers in action, frontiers that involve the expansion of capital in particular and peculiar ways. What are the particular implications of the Sierra Leonean case for the frontier concept as a whole?

[28] In the case of Liberia, a postgraduate researcher from the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology has identified similar patterns of penetration of local communities by global capital producing adverse outcomes for those communities (Maarten Bedert, personal communication). The essential problem is the discrepancy between promised and actual actions.

Discussion: the frontier and identity at a crucial moment in the history of Sierra Leone

For Kopytoff, if the relationship between frontiers and ethnicity in Africa was to be properly analysed, a sort of 'functionalist historicity' was required. This would account for the recurring similarities between African cultures, while at the same time transcending diffusionism, by viewing those cultures as constructed from pre-existing symbolic inventories brought to the frontier by people migrating from the metropole (Kopytoff 1989 [1987]: 34). The apparent contradiction in the idea of a functionalist historicity is only apparent as those relationships are historicised through their formation and reproduction in repeated processes of exchange – exchange of land, exchange of political loyalties, and exchange of identities. We agree that what is at stake here is a process of cultural construction, but we argue, however, that the concept of functionalist historicity must be substantially revised.

In the pre-colonial era, African communities would have regarded their most important economic links as those they formed at local and regional levels, but even at that time transcontinental or global economic links were acquiring ever greater importance in African life Frederick Cooper (2001) has criticised cruder globalisation models on the grounds that they ignore previous historical episodes of African integration into global economic and cultural flows).[29] In the twenty-first century, globalisation renders transnational and global levels of exchange obvious even at the local level.[30] This does not mean that the nation-state is disappearing in any way: the nation-state remains key to both global flows, mediations between those flows, the global levels in which they occur, and the local levels where their effect is felt (Hirst and Thompson 1999).

Africa has always been open to global flows and influences, and it has been open in ways that have often been decisive for its historical development. In today's Africa, frontier zones and frontier processes are again heavily driven by the globalisation processes that open the continent up to exploitation. In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the frontier zone produced by the state's recession from the border areas produces a new situation in which forms of transborder trade are made possible, ones which connect the eastern DRC not only with neighbouring regions, but also with the world economy (Raeymakers 2007, 2010). In the case of the Upper Guinea Coast, the Nimba mountain range straddles the borders of Liberia, Guinea, and Ivory Coast, creating a frontier situation in which various mining companies seek control of local ore through the lobbying of remote national governments in the three Upper Guinea coast states. Near Liberia's border with Sierra Leone, Asian palm oil interests impact on the agricultural land of local communities.[31]

Such transborder and global connections have been a key part of the frontier experience in Sierra Leone as well, and for a considerable period of time. The founding of the 'Province of Freedom' connected the new colony with the patterns of the Atlantic slave trade. The development of

[29] Achille Mbembe, in his *Critique de la Raison Nègre* (2013), argues that the slave trade was the first step towards human commodification, toward the perception of human beings as valued through their economic utility thus identifying the slave trade as the first global capitalist mode. To remind ourselves of the major defining role of the slave trade in the formation of historical globalisation is also to remind ourselves of the innumerable revolts and protests against that trade that ultimately forced not only its abolition but also the opening of a new phase in global capitalism. This in turn should remind us that the global flows we perceive today have particular historical roots that give them particular, and peculiar, characteristics of their own. These peculiar characteristics, in at least some cases, become visible at the frontier.

[30] Globalisation and global flows also give an enhanced role to diaspora communities. In the Upper Guinea Coast region, one example of this is the case of Guinean diaspora members phoning radio shows in Guinea during that country's general strike of 2007 (Schroven 2010: 669–670).

[31] Maarten Bedert, personal communication.

'legitimate trade' and exports in this region was sought by the British as a viable alternative to slave trading. Later, the expansion of local economic ties to the interior began to link new populations and territories to the wider global economy. On the Peninsula, references to the colonial frontier and its consequences on the legal framework of the Western Area constitute a powerful lens through which contemporary land disputes are reinterpreted, including the renewed involvement of the state and of international investors in the region. The idea of the frontier becomes a critical reference point for narrating state-formation and for various identifications. In the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, the re-entry of foreign mining and the emergence of biofuels interests only appears as the latest episode in a long history in which Sierra Leone has been connected and reconnected to the wider world economy.

Those forms of connection and reconnection were created through exchange, and they were part of the wider totality of recurrent exchanges alluded to at the beginning of this section. The most important and significant mode and context of exchange were those which took place over and in relation to land. The problem of land tenure remains vital to the frontier question in Africa in general, in Sierra Leone as much as anywhere else. Land tenure in Africa today is not merely a matter of land but has wider institutional and legal implications due to the greater influence of state law and normative orders. The overrunning of Sierra Leone's interior by a frontier zone that advanced outward from the Freetown colony brought the interior under British hegemony. What it did not do, however, was to revise the land tenure systems that existed, and continue to exist, in what was once the "Protectorate" (Njoh and Akiwumi 2012: 211–212). Today, there are signs that the entry of new economic actors – the biofuels and mining corporations referred to in the previous section of this paper – into the Northern Province may have an effect on the land tenure system.[32] This entry of new actors may well form part of a broader global pattern of 'land grabbing'. In the Western Area, local populations criticise the legal system inherited from the Colony. In a legal environment dominated by statutory law, customary claims of ownership become tied to discourses of identity. Land-grabbing has been described as a 'new war' that opposes diverse sets of actors, including global actors who enter the local societies through the local economies. In an Africa where land remains far more than a mere economic resource, but is also one of the fundamental symbolic sources of individual and group identity, any threat to older systems of land tenure organisation is at the same time a challenge to identity.

The ensuing implications for models of the relationship between frontier processes and African identity demand that we move beyond Kopytoff's original model. For Kopytoff, the African frontier was a conservative phenomenon, at least as far as African identities were concerned. He explicitly contrasted this with the experience of the frontier as it was represented by Turner, who had claimed that, in America, the frontier was a revolutionary phenomenon that drove and demanded the emergence of a new national identity. Turner's frontier was a tidal frontier, one that involved the steady expansion of a political order into a new area, the space opened up in the American west. Yet, Kopytoff's African frontier was very much an 'interstitial' frontier, one in which populations on the move founded their new frontier communities in the spaces between already existing polities. The expansion of the frontier that began in Sierra Leone in 1787 was quite different. It spread to lands that became part of the Protectorate. Frontier processes continue today, in a new form, produced by a continued renegotiation of the relationship between the metropolis and the peripheral frontier (Korf et al. 2013: 45). In the case of Sierra Leone, the ethnography

[32] This, at least, was a proposition put to O'Kane in Makeni in 2012 by a local member of the Roman Catholic clergy.

presented here testifies to the existence of various peripheral frontiers and various ways of negotiating relations with a 'centre' – be it local, national, or global, all these levels also implying a historical view of the frontier. In the final section of this paper, we draw some conclusions about the ways in which these renegotiations are happening in Sierra Leone and the implications this has for the country's future evolution.

Conclusion

Sierra Leone's present frontier experiences are inscribed upon the work of previous generations and their frontier endeavours –something that will continue into the future. This highlights the complexity of the frontier concept as it is used in practice in present-day Sierra Leone, and, we would argue, other contemporary African frontier contexts as well. This in turn implies the need for a much more nuanced deployment of the frontier concept in general. Hoefle, as we noted above, tried to bring a nuanced approach to frontier thinking by raising the destructive aspects of the frontier experience in the United States, and he may well be correct to warn that comparable events are occurring in the Brazilian Amazon as that region is opened up to external settlement (2006). Even in other Latin American countries, however, it is by no means certain that the opening up of new frontiers will inevitably take the form of either the classic US experience or that of the Brazilian Amazon today. The penetration of remoter areas of Ecuador by capital in the form of the tourist industry appears to be producing an emergence of 'new commons' rather than the revision of land tenure making it conform to liberal individualist principles, as would be expected in the case of a simple reproduction of the American experience (Ruiz-Ballesteros and Gual 2012).

What does this imply for the understanding of the African frontier today and in the future? As we have seen in this paper, the frontier has been a key factor in the evolution of Sierra Leonean identities, from the inception of the Freetown colony until today. Not only this, but frontier phenomena can still be identified in the West African country today, even if the classic frontier as such has dissipated in Sierra Leone. Since the end of the civil war, there have been major shifts in the patterns of Sierra Leone's political and economic life, as new groups of people settle in the Peninsula and the interior of the country is opened up to new economic forces and new social patterns.

The ethnographic cases described here show that frontier processes continue in Sierra Leone and have consequences for both economic and social life. Critical to both of the cases presented in this paper is the importance of renegotiating people's relationships with the political order. In the Western Area, the idea and historical experience of the frontier is reinterpreted in a different setting: defined by land scarcity, the involvement of international actors, and changing relations between communities and the state. Local populations and migrants engage in land disputes, and in so doing use differing conceptualisations of citizenship and renegotiate group identities and rights with the state. Hence, frontier processes on the Peninsula involve a battle over the nature of the state and of authority itself. These have always been highly relevant to the development in Sierra Leone, and will continue to be in the future. In Sierra Leone's frontier palimpsest, the role of the past is most evident on the Peninsula. Past experiences of frontier life are important in Makeni, but it is here that a new pattern of frontier interaction is emerging. Here, too, issues of power and control are subject to debate and negotiation. The particular local configuration of these negotiations is shaped by the particular local histories of the peoples and communities of Makeni

and the north. Those peoples and communities are more and more aware of looming futures, both good and bad that await them. This is not a deterministic or fatalistic perception, rather it is the product of a set of influences and causal factors that, as on the Peninsula, will make certain modes of deployment of Kopytoff's frontier 'cultural inventory of symbols and practices' possible or even necessary, and which will reduce or eliminate the likelihood of other modes of deploying those cultural symbols. Just as the fading of the classic Turnerian frontier in the American west did not eliminate the frontier as a factor in national identity in the United States, the end of the classic pre-colonial African frontier identified by Kopytoff and others did not eliminate the frontier as a factor in the shaping of ethnic and national identities in colonial and postcolonial Africa. Not only did the historical legacy of the pre-colonial frontier remain stubbornly present in Africa, but the patterns of economic and political life in colonial and postcolonial Africa produced new forms of frontiers, with new consequences for identities and the societies which contained them. In the twenty-first century, new frontier processes are emerging – and in Sierra Leone as elsewhere in the continent they will add their own contribution to the remaking of identity in Africa.

Map 1: Sierra Leone, province borders (including David O'Kane's field site Makeni)

Map 2: Sierra Leone, Freetown Peninsula (including Anaïs Ménard's field sites)

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