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## Global and local models of governance in interaction: configurations of power in Upper Guinea Coast societies

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### ABSTRACT

This paper studies emerging power configurations in Upper Guinea Coast societies which result from contemporary interactions of global and local models of governance. With empirical data on shifting meanings of chieftaincy and control of land, changing tax regimes and the rising importance of youth in domestic politics, modifications of legitimate authority across time are contrasted with the effects of international interventions and global discourses on socio-political change. Some of these interventions accelerate, others accentuate or counteract processes of change within local power configurations. Only by carefully considering the innate malleability of local concepts of authority, history, and tradition can contemporary processes of change be identified as either mere reconfigurations or genuinely new configurations of power.

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This paper discusses emerging power configurations in contemporary Upper Guinea Coast societies, which occur in relation to changes and reconfigurations of local leadership and traditional authority and as a result of the interaction of global and local models of governance. New configurations of power emerge in mutual exchange with previous such configurations and integrate the latter to varying degrees.

We conceptualise such processes as dimensions of social interaction, which are connected with specific processes of identity formation and categories of identification (like the nation, ethnic group, social class, etc.) (see Højbjerg et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup>

An understanding of power configurations therefore requires that the roles of traditional leadership and other forms of local leadership are examined in consideration of changes occurring in social relationships and identity formation on the local level and of external influences on the latter.<sup>2</sup>

The first empirical section of this paper highlights how political authority is intricately intertwined with historic perceptions, territory, and religious lives in legitimising local governance today. These elaborations also serve as the background for the second section in which changes in local leadership are discussed. Some are caused by migration, such as war-related displacement and rural-urban migration, others by international interventions aiming at socio-political changes within specific countries. Whatever the reason, population composition changes necessitate adjustments in a community's socio-economic

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and political make-up. How these different forms of interaction and social and discursive practices bring about change and affirm or alter the position of established actors will be elaborated by analysing ethnographic examples from across the region – which spans from Western Côte d’Ivoire in the East, via Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau to Casamance (Senegal) in the West – with a focus on Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. This region’s particularities will be discussed and cross-referenced with historic and contemporary notions of state and nation, colonial and postcolonial histories, spiritual and religious beliefs, as well as changing social and political dynamics as a result of regional and local conflicts. These processes are interconnected with the (re)construction and (re)configuration of different categories of identification. Hence, the following debate also reflects on the potentials and limits of identity-related malleability.

## Political authority and local leadership along the Upper Guinea Coast

### *Patrimonialism in context*

Patrimonialism<sup>3</sup> is often used as a short-hand in Africanist and political science literature and the media to describe a form of political regime as one major cause for the region’s many civil wars and lack of economic development. Looking beyond this abbreviated reading of the Weberian ideal-type of patrimonial authority or Eisenstadt’s ‘modern neopatrimonialism’ (1973) that the term is often equated with in debates of African states, we argue for a more nuanced approach to actors in their interactions with various local configurations of power that for our analytical purposes have been summarised under the notion of patrimonial authority. It is less a qualification of a political regime but a complex interplay of reciprocal relations that encompasses following those in authority just as checking on them (cf. Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009).<sup>4</sup> We understand the perpetual shifting of configurations of power as a specific characteristic of patrimonial authority that needs to be contextualised in *long durée* explorations of local and regional socio-political dynamics to identify the motivations, causes and effects, as well as the various actors involved and to understand the much-debated role of state or international interventions.

In Upper Guinea Coast societies patrimonialism is based on a system of landlord-stranger reciprocities within and across local communities that serves as a means to incorporate outsiders and newcomers into existing communities and to create mutual dependencies between the ruler and his followers in the governance of the mass of subjects (slaves, women, young males) (see Knörr and Trajano Filho 2010; cf. Brooks 1993, 2003; Ferme 2001; Mouser 1980). Patrimonialism is closely linked to social and religious values and operates in state and non-state contexts (e.g. Murphy 2010; Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009; Sall and Smith 2004). Patrimonial structures have no dysfunctional effect in and of themselves and may function to stabilise social structures. In modern nation-states, in which traditional corporate groups have lost much of their structuring force patrimonialism often goes along with corruption, embezzlement and nepotism especially at the state level. This is partly due to the fact that large parts of income of the state-elites have been extraverted over the course of the twentieth century, limiting their dependency on socio-political or economic support from within the countries themselves (Bayart 1999). When the closely-knit networks created by corporate groups such as lineages or age-sets are replaced by loosely-knit networks of clientship in an *ad hoc* fashion, social systems tend

to become unstable, the effects of which may lead to different reconfigurations of power and power assemblages. Therefore, it is important to discern under which conditions configurations of power are being (re)defined and applied to new social and political relationships and under which conditions they exert socially stabilising or destabilising influences.

### ***Chieftaincy reconsidered***

Without question, chieftaincy has changed throughout its history. In precolonial periods, the region had known territorial principalities and theocracies next to more acephalous systems. They were partly competing with principalities over trade relations and religious questions. With the establishment of colonial empires by the British, French, and Portuguese, the flexibility of these local and regional ruling bodies was restricted. While so-called direct and indirect rule varied across the colonies, European intervention included altering and fixing territorial delimitations and jurisdictions as well as the establishment of new hierarchies such as village chiefs, town chiefs, and paramount chiefs (Geschiere 1993). While in some areas, chieftaincy was invented to fit the overall ruling practice in the colony, in most parts of the Upper Guinea Coast region it met older ruling systems. In such cases ruling practices of chiefly or landowning families changed to incorporate the colonial state into their basis of authority (Howard 2005; cf. Lentz 2000; von Trotha 1996).

This legacy was addressed differently in late colonial and recently independent states. Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example, largely maintained hierarchical chief-paramount chief relations and, in the case of Sierra Leone, formally included the paramount chiefs into the parliamentary system, amidst debates of candidates' and their families' eligibility. While in (pre)colonial times competing branches of landowning lineages could agree to alternate the position of (paramount) chiefs, this arrangement is complicated by (national) party politics and parliamentary membership today and upsets the sensitive balance of power in some chieftaincies (Fanthorpe 2006; Ferme 1999).

Guinea also knew colonial chieftaincy systems but dealt with them differently. Formally they had already been abolished a year before independence, with chiefs and their families being charged as collaborators of the colonial state. Chieftaincy and other institutions like secret societies were deemed traditional, holding the country back from socio-economic development and 'modernisation'. However, while these institutions were formally abolished, their existence and the authority of individuals representing them was not eradicated (Højbjerg 2007). In the context of democratisation policies in the 1990s, persons belonging to ruling families gradually re-emerged as political leaders in parts of the country, many of whom are now officially accepted as local elders, a recognised position in rural governance acts. Simultaneously, these individuals are often highly successful in winning local elections and therefore become part of the democratically backed local governance bodies, too – hence, a combination of old and new forms of authority emerges that draws on the same group of people (Schroven 2010a; cf. Lund 2006).

### ***Linking territory, kinship, and historical memory***

Traditional authority is commonly understood as evolving in the context of (local) histories and institutions like extended families, lineages, village elders and, for the Upper Guinea

Coast, (gendered) membership in secret societies (Poro, Sande).<sup>5</sup> All these social entities constitute corporate groups and belonging to them is, in various contexts, the prerequisite for being considered a proper social being and claiming benefits from patronage relations such as landlord-stranger-relations.

Local leaders are usually members of first-coming families with land titles, also referred to as landlords or ruling families. Due to their position in extended families or lineages, they influence large groups of people and thereby wield power over land and resources. However, the status of firstcomer is contestable and the kinship group it is assigned to may shift over time. Oral tradition may grant the title of firstcomer to a certain group, but once another group comes into the territory and asserts its power it may claim the title of firstcomer and landlord as its own, often by way of altering perceptions of the past.

Such shifts in firstcomer status are not merely historical contestations but contemporary processes that reveal how dynamic local leadership is and how relevant history is to local perceptions concerning the legitimacy of power. They show that historical imagination in the form of oral tradition is highly significant in shaping distinguishable and even opposed perceptions of ethnic groups and their ways of relating to each other, peacefully and violently. Oral history constitutes a way for people in war-affected communities to justify and try to come to terms with war through reference to the past both as lived experience and transmitted knowledge. Just as importantly, local settlement narratives serve to legitimise local competition over land and political leadership (cf. Konneh 1996; Simon-Lorière 2010). Telling history is thus part of an on-going experience and social practice.

Local leadership in the Guinean town Forécariah is asserted by an intricate web of oral tradition, religious leadership and political institutions that are tied to the nation-state (Schroven 2010a). The dominant historical narrative grants landlord/firstcomer titles to one particular family. The same narrative links this family's political leadership to a second extended family's religious authority, making this the family of Imams of the local mosques. With these two founding families being represented as a corporate group based on oral tradition and contemporary performances of political and religious rituals in local history, they affirm each other's positions. Public events and religious holidays are central for this re-assertion of power and authority, such as the mandatory celebration of *Tabaski* (or *Eid al Adha*). Beyond the manifestation of spiritual leadership, the families' networks led to their political and economic domination of the region during (pre-)colonial and post-independence times. Today, they are elected into local councils and other state institutions. It seems that despite changing governance structures, the leading families have managed to maintain some part of their previous influence vis-à-vis the state and continue to assert their authority at the local level.

Højbjerg's (2007, 2010) comparison of local recollections of the past by Mandingo and co-existing ethnic groups in south-eastern Guinea and north-western Liberia points to a significant difference in scale and agency of people's self-perception. 'Forest people', on the one hand, tend to stress autochthony in small-scale settlements, i.e. their status as firstcomers and landowners. The Mandingo, on the other hand, stress their tradition of large-scale political leadership that references the historic Mandé and Malinké empires, their economic role in the history of the Liberian nation-state, and their religious role as propagators of Islam. These different forms of historical narratives, links to territory, and

type of leadership appear incommensurable and can, as the case of the Mandingo across the region reveals, be exploited by political entrepreneurs in times of crisis.

Similar differences of perspective on the firstcomer status can be found in Sierra Leone. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century different groups of liberated slaves arrived in what had been established as the Province of Freedom by British philanthropists and which was declared a British crown colony in 1808. These disparate groups passed through a process of creolisation, developing an identity as Krio (Fyfe 1962; Fyfe 2006; Knörr 1995). The Krios used to cultivate a rather exclusive identity fashioning themselves as an educated, Christian, urban-based, 'civilised' elite that emphasised the differences rather than the similarities between themselves and 'the natives' (Cohen 1981; Knörr 2010a; Knörr 2010b). Hence, whereas in many other colonial and postcolonial contexts creole populations had unifying effects across ethnic boundaries, the Krios were largely perceived of as a colonial leftover rather than a symbol of postcolonial nationhood in Sierra Leone, widening the gap between Freetown and the Krios on the one hand and the Provinces and the indigenous people on the other (Knörr 2010a, 2010b, cf. Knörr 2007, 2014; Ménard 2015).<sup>6</sup> As one consequence, Krios are up to the present day not entitled to buy land beyond the Freetown Peninsula. Today such restrictions based on ethnic identities are seen by many as incompatible with modern citizenship. New conflicts over land and territory have also flared up with tens of thousands of former refugees having settled permanently in Freetown and on the Peninsula. Contestations over autochthony and first-/latecomer status arise on both sides – the Krios arguing they were 'here' (on the Peninsula) before the newcomers, the newcomers arguing the Krios were latecomers 'here' (in Sierra Leone). Whereas the Krios situate their territorial status primarily within a local context, the newcomers situate theirs within a primarily national context, namely the Sierra Leonean nation-state.

### ***Religion, secret societies and their ties to the land***

Religious and spiritual leaders like Christian priests and Muslim imams also serve as councillors to chiefs or elected town councils. Imams are highly respected dignitaries in large parts of Guinea and their authority in socio-economic and political matters of family and community life is not questioned.

Other leaders in the local arena may emerge from (state) bureaucracies – people who are posted to a particular locale for professional reasons and then become part of the local elite. Their authority arises from their professional position, which often provides them with access to public funds and ties to the (bureaucratic) centres of the government (Schroven 2010b).

Ties between spiritual leaders and political office are highly significant in the context of the so-called secret societies, into which members are initiated according to gender. These secret societies are associated with binary characteristics, such as the visible/invisible, front/back, and the idea of power sources as hidden, or as 'underneath', rather than on the top or surface of phenomena (Ferme 2001; Murphy 1980, 2010). Leaders in these societies are predominantly women and men who belong to landholding lineages and thereby acquire a 'double mandate' within the power configurations in their community. The local and extra-territorial political role of (some) secret societies seems to have increased in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire during the war as well as in Guinea. Cases in

point include the Hunters' associations (e.g. Hellweg 2011; Leach 2004) and the Poro Society (Højbjerg 2007). However, there are also reports that youths in rural areas of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia have contested elders' and secret society leadership before, during and after the wars (Gilfoy 2014, 5; cf. Boersch-Supan 2012; Richards et al. 2005; Shepler 2010b).

Membership in secret societies is closely tied to political leadership in large parts of the Upper Guinea Coast region where it is often a prerequisite to attain positions of political power. Indeed, the secret society often decides who can become chief – even where paramount chiefs have to be elected by public suffrage today, like in Sierra Leone. Similarly, politicians on the regional or national level often need to assert their membership in Poro and the secret society's support for their candidacy (Højbjerg 2007, 2008, cf. de Jong 2007 on the Casamance region). Liberian presidents from Tubman to Taylor (1944–2003) underwent initiation into Poro as well as other secret associations in order to expand the legitimacy of their office. Similarly, presidential candidates in Sierra Leone support and sponsor initiation into Poro and Sande as signs of support and allegiance to the most influential secret societies in the country.

Female candidates to Sierra Leonean paramount chieftaincy have in some cases been initiated into Poro, which is otherwise reserved for men.<sup>7</sup> However, women in the position of chiefs, both historically and in the present, can be found mainly in southern Sierra Leone and in Liberia and rarely in the more Muslim-dominated areas of northern Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Senegal.

Despite such regional variation concerning secret societies' forms of political expression, a common theme throughout the region and different periods of time is their assertion of gerontocracy in general and of the way (social) age and associated rights are controlled – much to the general disadvantage of the (socially and chronologically) younger women and men.

### **Global discourses, international interventions and their translations into local practices of governance**

The interaction and translation of global models of good governance – involving, amongst others, the ideals of political participation, gender equality and personal autonomy – effect changes in local practices of governance. Their major impact may well be the challenging of gerontocratic values and structures. In urban contexts, otherwise established age-set organisation is becoming less functional (Trajano Filho 2010). As corporate lineage-groups no longer work in urban settings and the extended family cannot offer what their children demand and aspire – to be full social adults in the urban environment of a nation-state context – pervasive intergenerational tensions become more acute. These tensions have been identified as contributing factors to the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Richards 1996; Utas 2003). As Shepler reminds us, the fundamental questions concerning these intergenerational conflicts are not new, and are not new to this region either (Shepler 2010a). Global discourses are, however, a new dimension shaping the conceptualisation of generations and their interaction.

It is likely that international rights discourses, together with lived war experiences, have also influenced contemporary ethnic identity formation and claims to recognition. For



example, victimisation, autochthony and citizenship, power and nation-building constitute recurrent, interrelated themes in contemporary Mandingo historical memory both in Liberia and Southeast Guinea. Recently collected historical narratives suggest, first, the presence of a collective (re)interpretation of the place of the Mandingo in the contemporary political culture of Liberia on the background of recent experiences of political marginalisation, genocide, loss of property and exile. Second, these narratives constitute a charter for claims to civic (citizenship, voting, elected offices, etc.) and economic (land ownership, jobs) rights. Third, the moral value of heroic memories of the past serves as a means to recreate communal life and inform local conflict resolution (Højbjerg 2008, 2010).

Since the end of the war in Liberia in 2003, both large and small-scale initiatives aimed at the physical and social reconstruction of the country have been undertaken. These projects have received an extra boost since the election of President Johnson-Sirleaf and her success to raise international funds to implement international instruments seen fit to assist with what is termed war-to-peace transition – like disarmament and reintegration programmes, truth commissions and courts to try major war criminals (like the Sierra Leonean Special Court).

Besides irregularities in these programmes, such as unpaid salaries, there was also a constant threat of renewed violence on the part of dissatisfied, former rebel groups. The individual reintegration trajectories of former combatants have taken many different roads within the internationally facilitated demobilisation programmes (Bedert 2007). Fighters who did not participate in them have also been affected by their emphasis on security sector reforms and public awareness campaigns on citizenship rights (Coulter 2009; Rinçon 2010; Schroven 2006). Such cases reveal that authority – of an individual, an organisation, or a state – is embedded in a tight network of social and institutional interaction, by which it is socially and politically contextualised, enforced, or weakened.

### ***Fiscal decentralisation policies and their effects on legitimacy***

The region of the Upper Guinea Coast has been under the influence of international governance reform and restructuration projects. These include political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation to give more power to (newly established) local government bodies, which are not always fully implemented by central governments. Guinea, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Liberia are examples where governments follow donor initiatives towards decentralisation but continue to channel finances into clientelistic structures. While the principle of subsidiarity is officially intended to enable local decision-making, thereby empowering local governance bodies, the latter remain dependent on the central state for resources. One such instantiation is the establishment of local councils and the election of their members. These councils are responsible for raising taxes. As a consequence levying taxes becomes a matter of negotiation between established and new local institutions in Sierra Leone (Ménard 2008). The relationship between these institutions ranges from cooperative to competitive (cf. Fanthorpe 2005; Ferme 2003; Perrot and Fauvelle-Aymar 2003). Formally, spheres of decision-making between traditional leaderships and local councils are separated. In practice, however, things are different. In Sierra Leone, local councillors' decisions need to be validated first by traditional authorities. Paramount chiefs can be elected to attend local council meetings. Despite having no voting right, they maintain a strong influence over decision-making through



networks of patronage, as a large majority of elected councillors are also part of the circle of traditional authorities and involved in client-patron relationships. This overlap explains why local councils are often perceived by local populations as the reshuffling of the same men in two different local institutions, entailing distrust in the local councils' election process. The practice of these new institutions illustrates how the state is transformed by traditional elites at the local level to access specific resources, as, in this case, jobs, money and reputation. Youth and women (associations) are increasingly accessing the same resources by making use of (membership in) the new local councils. The coexistence of new political actors and traditional leaders results in new political contestations and competitions at the local level.

The realities of what is unanimously termed decentralisation – meaning the administrative processes of devolution of fiscal and political powers – vary greatly. Guineans relate differently to the newly founded councils and their tasks than Sierra Leoneans. Prospective council candidates need to be well-respected by local landlords to win popular support in elections. They may then be able to influence things in ways different from those of village elders who are more closely tied to landlord-stranger logics than to administrative procedures at the state level. State representatives like the sub-prefects and the communal secretaries influence choices by sharing information on candidates' formal eligibility. When a district in the western part of Forécariah Préfecture split up after years of struggles for the recognition of their mutual independence, the communal secretary and the president of the local council together with some councillors embarked on a three-day journey to 'identify' two new councillors, i.e. representatives of the respective districts who could get the task done. District chiefs are voted for by village elders rather than by the whole population, in an understanding that local councils work like a system of direct representation.

### ***Youth and gender in local elections***

The establishment of local councils in Guinea and Sierra Leone has brought new political actors, namely elected councillors, into the local arena who all draw on different resources to assert their authority. These can be based on kinship, land access, or religious status and can unite multiple mandates of authority in one person and hence shift the local configuration of power. In the wake of decentralisation since the 1990s, local elections and the institution of such self-governing bodies has been globally proliferated and also reached into the rural areas of the Upper Guinea Coast. While council elections take place regularly, the actual staffing is often influenced by state bodies on prefecture-level, landlords, and town elders, with the latter predominantly involving themselves and key family members (Schroven 2010a).

In Sierra Leone, instituting council elections was a political tool to render the countryside governable after the war (Fanthorpe 2001, 2006; Jackson 2007). Elections shifted some political weight away from the chieftaincy system that had been charged with instigating some of the civil war's grievances, as shall be discussed in the following examples from rural Sierra Leone and Freetown.

Generational models are changing with the push of democratic and egalitarian ideals spread by NGOs and globally circulating models along the Upper Guinea Coast. Abiding by the requirements of the international community, the Sierra Leonean government

initiated the Sierra Leone National Youth Policy in 2003 (Ministry of Youth and Sports 2003). This Policy defines for the first time a 'youth' category that has specific needs and duties in a post-conflict environment. It aims at giving new opportunities to people in the age bracket of 15–35, who, during the civil war, had been deprived of basic facilities like education, employment, material and psychological stability.

The Youth Policy's definition partly echoes the Mende notion of dependency. The Mende concept of 'dependent' or *i nyaa va* ('he/she is for me') is opposed to the notion of independent individuals or *taa kba lova* ('he/she is for him/herself'). 'Being for someone else' expresses the fact that relations of dependence are universally present, from landlords up to central government members. They shape relationships between women and men, juniors and seniors (Ferme 2001). Being an *i nyaa va* is relative to a specific social position from which some individuals will not manage to break away. The social position advances with age for those who find the resources to make a living by themselves. Yet, in a post-conflict area, the opportunities for youth to improve their situation are low. The notion of 'youth' is therefore not detached from local social realities. However, the global concept of 'youth', as implemented by the National Youth Policy, has been transformed and reinvested by young people at the local level in such a way that it accentuates the effects of the war on Sierra Leonean youth. For example, in local government elections in 2008 some of these youths defined themselves as politically independent although their place within local social networks was one of dependents towards patrons. This may be understood both as a sign of their resentment of (established) political parties and their ambition to bypass the accepted system of patronage. On the political stage, these young people achieved a level of independence by financing their own candidacy.

This example shows how political practice and rhetoric are transformed at the local level as a result of both post-conflict policies and egalitarian ideals that oppose the client-patron dependency pattern so prominent in the region. 'Youth' as a category embracing both men and women is relatively new in Sierra Leone (King 2007), as it is across the region where governments try to address the growing numbers of youths and in the wake of demands for gender equality need to formally include young women. The status of many women changed throughout the civil wars and some argue that in their post-war marginalisation, they are linked to the also marginalised category of 'youth', otherwise mostly seen as male (Coulter 2009; Schroven 2006; Shepler 2010a). Just as in Liberia, at the end of the war, many ex-combatant girls and women could not reintegrate into their communities because the latter saw them as having transgressed women's roles by becoming combatants, single mothers or traders (Coulter 2009; Schroven 2006). This encouraged their migration towards urban centres. As youth has emerged as a socio-economic cluster that includes all those who are marginal in socio-economic terms, it transcends and at the same time bridges gender and generational classifications. Circumstantial youth in Sierra Leone is a sub-national category of identification and a mobilising force across ethnic, religious and regional divides. For many people living on Freetown's socio-economic and geographical margins, youth is a survival strategy (King 2012, cf. Abbink 2005).

A particular form of youth integration and mobilisation in Freetown is offered by the relatively new and urban-based secret societies such as the Odelayes whose formation began with the growing urban population in the mid-twentieth century (Nunley 1987).

One such organisation is Firestone. It draws the bulk of its membership from circumstantial youth, i.e. all those characterised as marginal, and also gives women institutional recognition in various ways. As members of an Odelay, these youths became not only collectively active in politics by being 'voting banks' (Das and Poole 2004) for parties or particular politicians. They also became a weight in local and national elections that can make or destroy politicians' careers, accentuating youth as a political identity that is not new but that has yet again pushed into the limelight, both in Sierra Leone and across the continent (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000).

With Sierra Leonean elections changing in significance for youth as a political player, the participation of women has also become a contested issue. While equal gender rights are pushed for by international actors, adaptations thereof are occurring on the national and local levels. Women can now officially become town councillors, mayors, and also paramount chiefs since these offices are elected by popular suffrage. However, as paramount chiefs are not only political but spiritual leaders, they are required to be members of Poro, the major male initiation society. A lot of popular protest arose when women put forward their candidacy for the elections of paramount chief. Many women and men claimed that women could not fulfil this office properly because they could – or rather should – not become members of Poro. Hence, although women are eligible in terms of their citizenship, their candidacy for the election is contested as a result of locally established concepts concerning the position's authority. This challenging combination of arguments for and against women's political participation reveals the creativity of the local discourses (Moran 2012). With the background of current changes in contemporary power configurations, globalised gender discourses may well accelerate women's local chances for political participation.

## Conclusion

Traditional authority proves to be highly malleable in light of contemporary challenges in Upper Guinea Coast societies, with local leadership and patrimonial authority being intertwined and affected by changes on the nation-state level and by external influences. Considering the *longue-durée* of the local institutions discussed above, these outside influences had already integrated the colonial and postcolonial state into patrimonial structures and we therefore focused on more recent events, interventions and contemporary reconfigurations of power.

As the paper argues in the first section, concepts and practices of governance have been changing over time. These processes are slow and employ traditions, history and religion to varying degrees in order to legitimise established and more recent modes of governance. Such moderate changes on the local level are today met by powerful influences in the form of global discourses through international interventions in varying forms, encompassing UN and NGO peace and development work, international norms and regulations as well as economic collaborations. In the aftermath of the regional wars and conflicts in the 1990s and 2000s, intergovernmental agencies, international financial institutions which tie credits to governance reforms and so-called civil society engagement, as well as NGOs have exerted their influence, contesting what has been considered traditional forms of authority and sometimes changing the way local rule is organised and legitimated.

As discussed in the second section of the article, these influences accelerate (as in the case of Sierra Leonean youth's socio-political engagement), accentuate (the demand for more gender equity in public life), or counteract (de-legitimisation of local financial regimes in Guinea and Sierra Leone) the changes already occurring within local and national contexts. It is remarkable that the objections to authority often continue to be linked to the logic of patrimonial authority. In fact, in many cases it is not the system as such that is being criticised, but the moral crisis within it. Elders or patrons are criticised or even attacked not for being in positions of authority, but for not fulfilling their obligations towards 'their' clients.

Concepts and practices of patrimonial authority and local leadership in the Upper Guinea Coast region have been malleable and flexible enough to be adapted to colonial and post-colonial regimes rather than being substituted by them. However, powerful impositions of change channelled from the outside may also trigger profound change rather than creative adaptation, especially where they concern such domains of the social and political organisation in which more established and 'traditional' concepts and practices have come under severe contestation. To understand the processes and practices of governance the impact and repercussions of specific societal contexts and historical experiences need to be taken into consideration because the meanings of newly emerging configurations of power only become apparent – to outsiders and insiders alike – when they are explored as socially and historically contextualised.

## Notes

1. For more detailed elaborations on our approach to processes of integration and conflict see Knörr and Trajano Filho (2010) and Schlee (2008).
2. We understand traditional authority as authority (of an institution, organisation, regime), which is legitimised by referring to tradition, i.e. practices and beliefs, which are conceptualised and passed down as being rooted in the past and having a special symbolic meaning. Whether what is portrayed as tradition has a factual or 'invented' long history is often irrelevant for those conceptualising and passing it on as such (Shils 1981; Hobsbawm 1999).
3. We employ patrimonialism as a descriptive tool based on ethnographic research conducted by ourselves and other anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists and historians. It has been argued that the concept of patrimonialism is a Western construction imposed on African reality. We think that the concept of patrimonialism as a Western construction is more of a Western construction than the concept of patrimonialism as such. It may be helpful to note that the concept has also been employed to describe political resource distribution processes for other regions of the world, e.g. Southeast Asian, Central Asian, Mediterranean and South American cases.
4. In our investigation we focus on patrimonial structures not on state-level, but on local levels, while acknowledging that these ties may at times encompass regional and national actors in local and national configurations of power (cf. Charrad 2011).
5. A vast body of literature deals with the social and political functions and meanings of secret societies and the culture of secrecy in Upper Guinea Coast societies. See, for example, Little 1965, 1966; Ellis 1999; Højbjerg 2004; Ferme 2001; Combey 2013.
6. See also Kohl (2009, 2012) who deals with creole populations in Guinea-Bissau and shows how they – other than the Krios – played an eminent role in the battle for independence and in the construction of transethnic identities and postcolonial nationhood.
7. A prominent example is Madame Yoko (1849–1906), who was a Mende leader initiated into Poro, and became a successful chief and politician in Sierra Leone.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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