

Chief or Big-Man Politics in Post-War Sierra Leone?

Kars de Bruijne 

Abstract: Marshall Sahlins claims that individuals with personal power, influence, networks, and control over their followers within the political sphere are actually “big-men” rather than “chiefs.” Big-men derive their authority from personal maneuvering, whereas “chiefs” obtain their authority from semi-hierarchical, formalized, and de-personalized rule. De Bruijne argues that those individuals who are perceived as “big men” in post-war Sierra Leone might be better understood as “chiefs.”

Résumé : Marshall Sahlins affirme que les individus ayant un pouvoir personnel, une influence, des réseaux et un contrôle sur leurs partisans dans la sphère politique sont en fait des « grands hommes » plutôt que des « chefs ». Les « grands hommes » tirent leur autorité de leurs manœuvres personnelles, tandis que les « chefs » tirent leur autorité de règles semi-hiérarchiques, formalisées et dépersonnalisées. De Bruijne soutient que les individus qui sont perçus comme des « grands hommes » en Sierra Leone d’après-guerre pourront être mieux compris en tant que « chefs ».

Resumo : Segundo Marshall Sahlins, os indivíduos que detêm poder pessoal, poder de influência, redes de contactos e controlo sobre os seus seguidores na esfera política

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são, na verdade, “grandes homens”, e não tanto “chefes”. Os “grandes homens” obtêm a sua autoridade através de estratégias pessoais, ao passo que os “chefes” obtêm a sua autoridade através de um sistema semi-hierárquico, formalizado e despersonalizado. De Bruijne, pelo contrário, defende que, para compreender devidamente os indivíduos que são vistos como “grandes homens” na Serra Leoa do pós-guerra, é preciso encará-los como “chefes”.

Keywords: big-men; chiefs; institutions; Sierra Leone

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Introduction

This article explores a question that was originally developed by Marshall Sahlins regarding persons with personal power, influence, networks, and control over their followers within the political sphere. Sahlins claims that such individuals should be termed “big-men” rather than “chiefs.” Big-men derive their authority from personal maneuvering, whereas “chiefs” obtain their authority from semi-hierarchical, formalized, and de-personalized rule (1963:288). This article shows that those individuals who are perceived as “big men” in post-war Sierra Leone are better understood as “chiefs.”

General Tamba appears to be such a typical big-man. Before Sierra Leone’s civil war, he served the one-party state government. Then he jointly plotted a successful coup (1992) and a few years later switched sides to support the newly elected government (1996). A year after that he joined another successful coup (1997). After being chased away by Nigerian-led forces, he organized a rebellion (1998). Then he again switched his allegiance to the next newly installed government (1999). After the war, he was imprisoned for plotting a third coup (2003). In 2007 he was released, and he again crossed the aisle, but now for a key position in the secret service. Tamba is a political survivor, a skilled maneuverer with countless personal connections, great interconnected networks, and national fame.

The life histories of figures such as Tamba are often explained from a big-man perspective. These readings are popular in the post-war literature on Sierra Leone for three reasons. First, in the deliberate destruction of state institutions, some see the rise of a shadow-state in which personalized big-men networks seek to control resources (Reno 1995). Second, the subsequent post-war literature viewed a reconstruction process as merely a facade of some deeper “real politics” (Allouche 2017; Conteh & Harris 2014; Jackson 2007; Chabal & Daloz 1999). Various authors have used the framework of “bigmanity” to demonstrate how wartime figureheads have trumped formal structures (Utas 2012a; Christensen 2012; Söderberg Kovacs & Bjarnesen 2018; Themnér 2017). Finally, and apart from the (post-)war literature,

decades of micro-studies on Sierra Leone (Bulte, Richards, & Voors 2018; Jalloh 2018; Ibrahim 2019; Tangri 1978) present processes and people that are reminiscent of Sahlins' description: "whose big-man status [is] the outcome of a series of acts that elevate him above the herd and attract a coterie of loyal, lesser men" (1963:289). The country seems to be a favorable microcosm for the would-be big-man.

But there is something peculiar about Tamba's life story. In 2016 everything changed when Tamba's co-ethnic and patron Sam Sumana was removed as vice president. Consequently, Tamba was purged from his high office in the secret service. But in addition to losing his job, all of his connections turned sour; a Lebanese big-man took the general to court over allegations concerning Tamba's house. Tamba lost the case, and his house was bulldozed after an election despite the mobilization of a dozen men to protect it. Government soldiers retaliated, and Tamba went into hiding. This raises a very thorny question: why did his personalized big-man status not protect him against this turn of events? Why did losing formal office have such a negative impact?

There are other reasons to call into question the "big-men" readings of Sierra Leone politics. Recent empirical applications of bigmanity in Sierra Leone present unexplained anomalies that require deeper interrogation into the nature and prominence of the big-man theory.

First, nearly every study on big-man politics in Sierra Leone involves individuals who also hold formal office. Figures such as Leatherboot and Bomblast (both ex-combatants), Charles Margai, Salomon Berewa, and Tom Nyuama (politicians) all had prominent party and state positions (Christensen & Utas 2008; Christensen 2012; Utas & Christensen 2016). Likewise, Maada Bio, Eldred Collins, and Hinga Norman (ex-combatants) held office both during and after the war (Themnér 2017:ch. 6). Even local big-men such as "Adamou" and "Ali Gunpoint" (Bangura & Kovacs 2018:129) held local party positions. Just like Tamba, these are examples of big-men who apparently also qualify as "chiefs."

Second, formal institutions in Sierra Leone are strong rather than weak. Not that institutions such as the paramount chieftaincy, local councils, constitutionality, elections, and bureaucratic reconstruction lead to the adherence of democratic practices; they are deliberately manipulated, corrupted, ineffective in providing public goods, and usually serve personal interests (Jibao & Prichard 2015; Labonte 2012; Jackson 2005, 2007; Fanthorpe 2001). But these institutions are effective in generating personal resources and allowing those in power to persecute their opponents and strongarm the presidency. Ministers and departments are able to execute power where and how they wish (Ibrahim 2015). The military and the police can be employed to intimidate and control (Albrecht & Jackson 2014). Political party membership is required for any office, and party association is a prerequisite for basic needs such as access to fertilizers, health care, seeds, loans, credit, resources, and support (Conteh 2017). The reading of absent/ineffective formal structures and a resulting space for the big-man may have

been useful after the war, but this approach needs revision: how do strong formal institutions interact with big-men in Sierra Leone?

Hence, this article explores whether a big-man perspective in post-war Sierra Leone has perhaps blinded us from fully considering the power and influence of formal institutions. It re-evaluates the role of formal institutions in reinforcing, shaping, and determining personalized big-man power.

Whereas many consequential individuals in Sierra Leone obtained personalized power during the war in ways that are reminiscent of Sahlins' "big-man," their power has institutionalized into formal state structures and party outfits after the war. The "new" reality is that state and party institutions are central in making new big-men and in determining and structuring the composition of and interactions within big-man networks. They "constrain or enable" political actors and suggest "complementary relations between informal actors and effective formal institutions" (Helmke & Levitsky 2004:728). Hence, institutionalization "has accentuated a longstanding feature of Sierra Leone's patrimonial politics, in which kinship and informal networks [shape] the configuration of the political class" (Conteh 2017:31). Formal institutions increasingly shape, constrain, structure, and "configure" the political class.

Big-man theory centers on three core claims: personalist power, highly fluid networks, and a heterogeneous network composition. This article, however, demonstrates that power is not only personalist but is almost always institutionally embedded. The vast majority of important big men in Sierra Leone occupy formal positions, either in the party or the state. This has two effects. First, the overlap between personalist power and formal office limits network fluidity; the movement of the big-man at the top of the hierarchy is increasingly constrained. Second, while networks are heterogeneous, they are not produced by overlapping social identities—Sierra Leone's political class is homogenous (Osei 2021)—but by an institutional political logic; the very strong two-party structure requires a heterogeneous network to cast a wide net of followers and to outcompete opponents. These findings contradict big-man theory.

In order to support this argument, I rely on two innovative empirical sources. The first is a database of hundreds of Sierra Leone big men, their characteristics, and their networks. As Mats Utas claims, "It has so far not [been] possible to draw up complete master charts, it is a tough enough task to describe [...] Big Men" (2012b:11). The database contains over 1100 individuals from all social spheres, offices, and behind the curtains. Moreover, the article relies on over two years of political anthropology, of which ten months were spent extensively "hanging out" in the country (Geertz 1998; Utas 2003) with big-men from the All People's Congress (APC), the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), various other parties, national and local institutions, and informal outfits. This resulted in over 120 formal interviews with national figures; over 60 interviews with local figures in Kambia and Kono; and, finally, 15 in-depth and multi-round interviews with very senior elites (such as party leaders and senior ministers).

This article is organized in the following manner. It starts with the three main claims of big-man theory and then proceeds to data collection and methodology. The subsequent sections assess the empirical support for personalism, fluidity, and heterogeneity and develops institutional arguments. The last section ends with a conclusion and a discussion on the wider reach of the argument.

Three Claims of the Big-man Theory

The concept of bigmanity comes from Sahlins' observation of two types of individuals in Micronesia: "big-men" and "chiefs." Sahlins observed that "chiefs" had obtained their position from heredity and/or social hierarchy (for example, paramount chiefs who are born into their families, or unknown diaspora figures who suddenly become ministers; see also Allen 1984:20; Lederman 1990). Conversely, "big-men" emerged through personal maneuvering: "They do not succeed to, nor are they installed in [positions of leadership] [...] rather they emerge through a series of acts that elevate a person above the common herd" (Sahlins 1963:289).

Weak, failing, or altogether absent formal structures facilitate the emergence of the big-man. Mimmi Soderberg Kovacs claims that with "weak or absent state structures, alternative forms of informal governance usually thrive" (Söderberg Kovacs & Bjarnesen 2018:11). Utas argues that "big-man power should be seen as an alternative form of governance where the national state does not reach, or where local forms of governance do not have sufficient sovereign power" (Utas 2012b:8). In addition to "Big-man" (Sahlins 1963; Medard 1992; Utas 2012b; Daloz 2003), terms such as "Warlords" (Reno 1998; Billon 2008; Cerny 1998; Duffield 1998; Keen 2000) and "Warlord Democrats" (Themnér 2017; Söderberg Kovacs & Bjarnesen 2018) denote the same phenomenon.

There are three core elements of big-man theory. First, personalism is the basis of a big-man. Recent accounts highlight personal connections and social relations that trump heredity and hierarchy (Sahlins 1963; Daloz 2003; Utas 2012a; Medard 1992). The literature on Sierra Leone has produced many examples of "big-men": central persons from landowning families (Allouche 2017:229), those with positions in the secret society (Bulte, Richards, & Voors 2018:48; Ibrahim 2019) and paramount chiefs (Conteh 2017; Tangri 1978). Likewise, military figures such as Leatherbooth, Eldred Collins, Akim, Bomb Blast, Adamou, Tom Nyuama, and Maada Bio leveraged their personal war fame and networks for political positions (Christensen 2012; Utas & Christensen 2016).

But this "proof" is elusive. Most of these individuals who might be termed "big-men" also hold formal office. Most studies have also made their selection on a dependent variable (already important big-men) with little reflection on why only some big-men have risen above the herd. This leaves Sahlins' central question unexplored: did certain individuals rise above the herd because of

personal maneuvering, or because they (also) held formal positions? The literature seems to be inconclusive at best.

A second component of big-man theory is that big-man networks are supposedly highly fluid. Sahlins argues that successful big-men are increasingly unable to satisfy the demands of all of their followers, which pushes the followers to seek protection elsewhere (Sahlins 1963:292; Daloz 2003). Recent accounts claim that big-man networks are “nervous systems” that are “unstable, changing and constantly adaptable” (Utas 2012b:13–14). In Sierra Leone, the evidence for this claim is stronger. Recent studies indeed find that followers tend to be connected to more than one big-man (Agbiboa 2018) and frequently shift their allegiance when someone better emerges (Casey 2015; Utas & Christensen 2016) or the accumulated debt of the “big-man” to his followers becomes too large (Utas & Christensen 2016; Sahlins 1963). In Sierra Leone, the fluidity of networks may be particularly observed within party networks and is known as the phenomenon of “cross-carpeting” (Lamin 2012; Utas & Christensen 2016).

Yet, these findings require closer inspection as well; there is no actual data on shifting networks, little insight into why, when, and which individuals jump ship, and no real consideration of the insight that “chiefs” can also have fluid networks. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that fluidity follows the following mechanisms: first, a jumping network tends to involve movement from networks out of power to networks in power, and second, the higher one is in the hierarchy, the less fluid the networks seem to become. For this reason, we explore below whether there is indeed fluidity at all levels within the networks, and what role formal institutions might play in the structure of the network behavior of big-men.

A third component of big-man theory is how networks are formed. Some propose homogenous ethnic relations (Diamond 2008; Chabal & Daloz 1999; De Waal 2014). In Sierra Leone this has found expression in some claims that “informal networks and cultural institutions have a stronger influence over individuals’ behaviour through ethnicity, than the rules and regulations of the formal state” (M’cleod & Ganson 2018:6; Conteh & Harris 2014:68; Bangura 2012).

Others argue that big-man networks are heterogeneous and based on multiple overlapping social relations and identities (Utas 2012b). In Sierra Leone, a majority of authors argue that big-man networks are not ethnic but rather heterogenous (Kandeh 1992; Fanthorpe 2001), based on features such as the ability to provide work (Enria 2015), moral reciprocity (Utas 2012b:7), social protection (McCauley 2013), or military ties and past presence in local communities (Themnér 2017).

The problem with both versions is that they have never really been tested in Sierra Leone beyond individual accounts. But, perhaps more importantly, an explanation for why networks might either be homogenous or heterogenous is lacking. Utas suggests that heterogeneity stems from the multiple connections of the big-man and an instrumental notion that it allows the big-man to “work across virtually any divide” (Utas 2012b:13). To complicate

matters even more, institutionally embedded “chiefs” can also have heterogeneous networks. Below, we find heterogeneous networks and argue that an institutional logic better fits post-war Sierra Leone; the strongest big-man networks have institutionalized into political parties of roughly equal size. Heterogeneity emerges as these institutionalized blocs force one another to be inclusive in order to gain a competitive edge. Taken together, all of these factors imply that the formal institutional structure wherein big-man networks operate are likely to be more consequential than social network connections.

Data and Research Design

One challenge for big-man studies is to move beyond individual life histories and obtain structured data on big-men and their networks.

This study presents a large N database of nationally important big-men with varying degrees of political influence. Big-men of national importance were defined as those who can influence central state decisions in more than one district. A big-man with political influence was defined as someone with: a) a group of followers that gives an economic, security, societal, or mobilization power base that can be leveraged; b) a role in obtaining votes and/or enabling regime (re-)election; and c) influence on the decisions made by relevant national political figures.

To this end, a long list of big-men was compiled. Collection followed two routes, an institutionalist approach and an informal one. The institutional route focused on individuals who held state and party positions. This involved a review of cabinet positions (29), parastatals (72), and oversight boards and other key positions in the state and the party (such as chiefs, parliamentary bodies, judges, permanent secretaries, and executive party members). As there are no accurate records of existing institutions in Sierra Leone, the list of state institutions was generated on the basis of records of all appointments since 2012, through Parliament’s appointment committee. Party positions were collected based on the statutes of the All People’s Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and a review of positions occupied by various persons within these parties. A total of 159 nationally relevant institutions were selected, out of which just over a dozen also had potentially important sub-bodies.¹ In total this exercise generated records of over 850 appointments since 2012.

To avoid any institutional bias, a separate “informal” approach was set up, whereby “sectors” were structurally reviewed. For the informal security sector, the names of big-men were collected based on their existing ties with ex-combatant networks, extensive hanging out with party taskforces, and fieldwork with Sierra Leone’s three main gangs. Economic figures were generated based on interviews with a number of entrepreneurs and those involved in talks on party financing. Finally, an insider track was developed to identify figures orbiting Sierra Leone politics with substantial influence. To this end, the research built deep ties with four young persons with central

positions in three parties (SLPP, APC, and National Grand Coalition [NGC]) and good connections to the respective inner circles. These individuals collaborated for six to nine months with the research, sometimes on a daily basis. Separate interviews with numerous big-men helped to validate names.

Combined, the institutionalist and informal approach generated 1280 individuals. To narrow these down to the most relevant people, the author reviewed the relative importance of all institutions, as well as the perceived influence of most individuals. The relative importance of each institution was assessed through a review of the number of employees, allotted resources, and the (proven) potential to divert resources by July 2019 (see annex). Moreover, the informal influence of the institutions was reviewed through separate interviews with party officials, journalists, and insiders who ranked all 159 institutions. The perceived influence of individuals was determined through a review of lists of names that were sent to all four young figureheads. They selected from the lists those whom they believed were the most consequential big-men. Names were added or removed when two out of three consultants agreed. From this, 305 big-men met the criterion of a nationally important big-man with some form of political influence, including people in formal office as well as those with “informal” influence.

Data collection took place from May 2018 until July 2019. For each individual, all (previous) official, unofficial, and societal positions were collected; biographical details (religion, region, tribe), party membership or affiliation², and other characteristics were also collected (see Table 1). For 154 people—big-men considered to be especially important—their factional affiliation, relationships with one another, and their respective leverage vis-à-vis the party and the leader were collected additionally. To avoid an “urban” bias, three smaller data collection efforts were made in Kono and Kambia districts as well as in the Tonko Limba Chiefdom. Local big-men were generated through a name generator.³ This generated 63 big-men. For each big-man, party membership and his (former) position were determined.

In addition, a qualitative anthropological track was constructed, leading to a total of 128 one-off formal interviews with relevant big-men (average duration 78 minutes) and 15 multi-round interviews with senior big-men at the national level (various multi-hour conversations). Furthermore, 60 once-only interviews and 7 multi-round interviews were conducted in rural areas and outside of the capital. The author also engaged in extensive “hanging out” (Geertz 1998) in party circles and offices, *attaya* bases, and various informal institutions, which greatly facilitated the understanding of big-man politics in action.

The Formalization of Big-man in Post-war Sierra Leone

The remainder of this article assesses the three central claims of big-man theory. Tables 2 through 6 test the claim that big-man status rests on personal social relations, based on the database of nationally relevant and politically

Table 1. Examples census data (selection of key variables).

	Example 1	Example 2
Name	David J.	Komba
Last Name	Francis	Mondeh
Gender	Male	Male
Position State	Chief Minister	–
Position Party	–	Security organizer
Position Other	–	–
Former State	Head, Bio Transition Team; Foreign Minister Designate; Head of the GTT	–
Former Party	–	–
Former Other	Head Department Peace Studies Bradford (13-16)	–
Party	SLPP	SLPP
Faction	Staunch Paopa	–
Security Link	0	1
Economic Power	0	?
Mobilization	0	0
Other	1	0
District	Kenema	Kono
Ethnicity	Mende	Kono
Religion	Christian	Christian
Comment	David Francis is a complex personality with the key function of Chief Minister. As Chief Minister, Francis heads cabinet meetings and is an intermediary between Bio and Minister. Francis is responsible for the performance contracts with individual ministers. Francis is Bio's former PhD supervisor in the UK, and working relations between Bio and Francis are tight. Francis has no real base in the SLPP; he only came to Sierra Leone around 2014/2015 and became an SLPP member by November 2018. Since Francis assumed office he has tried to expand his base in Kenema, working	Komba Mondeh is the "secret" leader of the SLPP's internal security. Mondeh is a Kono from Kono and related to the C4C party hierarchy but loyal to the SLPP and Bio in particular. As a co-plotter of the 1992 coup, he has good relations with Bio, was the Chief of Defence staff from 1992-1996 and was deputy head of state under Bio in 1996. In 2013 Mondeh was forced into retirement by the APC. Mondeh is in charge of all SLPP party task forces, informal security outfits, party intelligence networks and is the main linking pin between the street and the regime.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	Example 1	Example 2
	with the Kapuwa family to expand his influence. Francis can be a difficult and arrogant personality, and many people in the administration dislike him.	
Relationships	Close to: Bio (supervisor), Kabbah, Abbij (Ethiopia), Leema, Kapuwa Family; Tensions with Fatima Bio, Ali Kabbah, Prince Harding.	–
Sideswitching	–	–

Table 2. Big-man and formal office (national data, 2018-2019).

Positions	# of observations
Formal office	200
Past Formal Office	56
No office held or unknown	49

consequential individuals. Tables 2 and 3 explore the overlap of big-man with state office, whereas Tables 4 through 6 explore the overlap with party office.

Table 2 presents information on the 305 big-men who met the criterion of national importance and assesses their overlap with state office. Of these, 66 percent held a formal state position at the time of the research, while an additional 18 percent recently held a state position. This means that over 80 percent of all individuals who are influential in Sierra Leone hold or have recently held a formal state position.

Table 3 presents a control from the small database of individuals collected through the name generator in Kambia, Kono District, and Tonko Limba Chiefdom. In total, 63 big-men were identified: 23 for Kono, 24 for

Table 3. Big-man and formal office (subnational data, 2019).

	Kambia District	Kono District	Tonko Limba
Formal office	8	8	4
Past Formal Office	10	7	7
No office held or unknown	6	8	5

Kambia, and 16 for Tonko Limba, based on 18 local respondents.⁴ These data show that a third of all named big-men held formal state office at the time of the research (Kambia [33 percent], Kono [35 percent] and Tonko Limba [25 percent]). Another third of this group held prominent formal state offices very recently. These often included former ministers (Kambia [42 percent], Kono [35 percent] and Tonko Limba [44 percent]). Hence, even at the regional and local level—believed to be a favorable microcosm for bigmanity—60 to 70 percent of all individuals had held a (recent) formal state position.

Tables 4 through 6 present the results of the relationship between the big-man and the political party by considering party position and membership. Table 4 presents data on the correlation between nationally important big-men and prominent party positions. Prominent SLPP party positions included district, regional, and national executive positions. For the APC this only involved some national executive positions (with APC being more hierarchically organized at the time of writing). The majority of those who held a position in the recent past but did not presently hold state office had an important position in the party at the time of the research. Moreover, an additional 40 percent of those who had never held any formal state office had held important formal party positions.

Combining the results on state and party office, this means that almost 90 percent of all big-men in the data either (recently) held state office or had an important party position. This result is particularly significant when one considers that only prominent party positions were included in the tally. The reality is that the very deep organization of Sierra Leone's political parties all the way down to the zonal level means that almost every individual has some political party position.

Tables 5 and 6 go one step further and present data on party membership and affiliation (not everyone who belongs to party networks is also a member). Table 5 shows that only 11 out of 305 big-men were not directly affiliated with a political party. Moreover, out of the only 49 individuals who had never held any important state or party position, just 8 were not affiliated with a political party. These 8 include figures who have to remain (somewhat)

Table 4. Big-man and party positions (national data, 2018-2019).

State Positions	Party Positions	# of observations
Formal office	Party Position	20
	No Party Position	180
Past Formal Office	Party Position	27
	No Party Position	29
No office held or unknown	Party Position	18
	No Party Position	31

Table 5. Big-man and party membership (national data, 2019).

State Positions	Party Membership	# of observations
No office held or unknown	APC	22
	SLPP	17
	Other Party	2
	Unknown – No party	8
Past Formal Office	APC	43
	SLPP	7
	Other Party	6
	Unknown – No party	0
Formal office	APC	27
	SLPP	158
	Other Party	12
	Unknown – No party	3

Table 6. Big-man and party membership (subnational data, 2019).

	Kambia District	Kono District	Tonko Limba
Party Member	20	23	15
No Party Member/Unknown	4	0	1

neutral, such as international businessmen (like Rob Hatting of Sierra Rutile). Relying on internal party records on membership revealed that just 97 individuals out of all the 305 big-men were not registered party members (32 percent).⁵ Table 6 presents data on big-man affiliation with parties at the regional and local level (in Kono, Kambia, and Tonko Limba). The results are very similar; just 17 percent of Kambian, 6 percent of Tonko Limba, and 0 percent of Kono big-men were not affiliated with a political party.⁶

The overlap between formal office and important big-men is too high to continue advancing exclusive personalist interpretations of politics in Sierra Leone. The important big-men in Sierra Leone hold formal state positions and nearly always operate as political party agents. This empirical finding squares with various examples of big-men in the literature who also hold formal state or party office (Söderberg Kovacs & Bjarnesen 2018; Daloz 2003). Moreover, it fits the research on the elite capture of institutions (Labonte 2012; Jackson 2007), the impact of party membership on tax collection (Jibao & Prichard 2015) and the politicization of civil society along party lines (Datzberger 2015) in Sierra Leone. Big-men in Sierra Leone do not operate in “formal organizational voids” (Utas 2012b:4, 8) but in an institutionalized formal context. Nationally relevant individuals in Sierra Leone are not only “big-men” but also “chiefs.”

Stable Networks: Big-man Instability Disappearing in the Core of the Network

A second claim of big-man studies is that big-man networks are fluid. The collected data allow for a first test based on the 154 individuals on whom additional information was collected, and the 1280 appointments since 2012 by the SLPP and APC. Even though this is a downward-biased sample, as data collection did not systematically probe into the past network association, 20 percent of all appointed individuals in the database (out of the 1280) and 30 percent of all individuals for whom background information was collected (154) had switched party allegiance during their lifetime. Big-man networks are indeed fluid.

However, the data point to a systematic anomaly: there is surprising stability at the top. Of the 16 most important big-men in the data by July 2019 (the so-called Regime Elites, who maintain regime stability through their own large networks of lower big-men and very important state and party positions), no one had ever moved from one party network to another.⁷ Of the 30 subsequent most important elites (Senior Elites, defined as those who hold very important state or party positions), just two had cross-carpeted (7%). The track record of regime and senior elites supports the inference that many have been important to their respective party for decades. The well-known examples of high-level defections are anomalies; high-level cross-carpeting is surprisingly uncommon.⁸ This result is at odds with observations immediately after the war, when high-level elite defection was more common (Kandeh 2008).

To further investigate the robustness of this result, a series of interviews was conducted concerning a moment when high-level cross-carpeting was very likely but did not occur: the November 2017 APC convention, where Samura Kamara was hand-picked by former president Koroma as his successor. This move upset nearly all high-ranking big-men, as many had been promised that they would be Koroma's successor (for example, "at night he would come and tell I should lead the party and that [N.N.] hates your guts"). Without exception, they were embittered, refused to campaign, and some even left the country. But no one defected from the party.

Interviews were held with most key participants, and the results are informative: one contestant said, "for you to gain power you need to be part of those two parties [...] I stayed because ... it is an African thing really. You show loyalty [...] stand the pain and endure [and] wait for things to change."⁹ Another considered leaving the APC (and was approached by the SLPP to cross-carpet) but decided to stay because, "a) [...] I don't have the position now, at this moment, but let me see what happens [...] and; b) if we lose there will be a different type of politics [...] he [Koroma] would go, the party would change and it may be my time."¹⁰ Data and interviews show stability rather than fluidity at the top of the APC big-man network. This is a result that could not be predicted by relying on big-man theory.

It seems that institutional constraints limit big-man network movement at the top through two mechanisms. First, formal institutions give clientelist opportunity to senior big-men, which allows them to expand their network. However, the resulting networks are not only personal; followers of big-men are also bound to the institution they serve and are willing to be co-opted and jump ship when a new big-man enters into formal and party office. This restricts senior big-man movement, as moves to new networks do not allow them to bring the networks that made them powerful in the first place. A second mechanism is that institutions protect very senior big-men against the whims of the leader. In order to obtain those positions—particularly within the party—they have to make years of investments, and these investments restrict their willingness to jump networks as they lose institutional protection. I provide empirical support for both ideas below.

Formal State Positions Limit Big-man Movement

The first mechanism—that big-man networks are entangled with formal office—already has some support in the literature. It is recognized that party networks are a key resource of the leverage and influence that big-men have (Utas & Christensen 2016; Themné 2017). Fieldwork highlights how senior positions in the party are most important to building party networks: big-men sponsor followers who rise through party ranks into positions of importance, which creates factions within the party tied to an individual big-man. For example, in 2019 Chief Minister David Francis was a prominent politician although he lacked a party base (he came from the diaspora). The moment Francis entered into office, he used his position in the party appointment committee to generate a base in the party.¹¹

Senior big-men also build their networks through the approval of party candidates for public elections (a process known as “awarding of symbols”). This awarding process builds lasting ties between the party hierarchy and those at the lower level, and is used as personal leverage for those at the top. For example, during the 2017 internal primaries, SLPP chairman Prince Harding influenced the awarding of symbols to place individuals loyal to him on the ballot. Sources within his network and from the statehouse highlighted how Harding calculated that Bio could lose the elections and that Harding would then be the highest SLPP office holder and therefore control the elected parliamentarians he had personally selected.¹² This example is instructive of how high-level positions in the party are used by big-men to build their networks.

Finally, big-man networks entangle with institutions via state appointments. For example, in 2018 a group consisting of very senior big-men—Kanja Sessay (regional chairman south), Abbas Bundu (former regional chairman north), JJ Saffa (former Secretary-General), Sahr Jusu (party financier), and David Francis (no party position)—prepared all of the high-level appointments of the newly elected SLPP.¹³ During the tenure of Koroma’s APC (2012–2018), a small group of loyal big-men were consulted

on and gave consent to Koroma's appointments.¹⁴ This allowed them to populate the state office with loyalists, to generate resources, and to expand their own networks.

The ways in which big-men at the top build their networks create an overlap between personal networks and institutions and limits senior big-man maneuvering. Consider an APC candidate for the 2017 leadership contest who was approached by the SLPP to cross-carpet. Explaining why he stayed, he said, "It was not for me only [...] I have supporters everywhere, will they all follow me? Can I accommodate them [...]?"¹⁵ It is not a surprise that the only really successful cross-carpeting move from SLPP to APC was by Usu Boij, who had first negotiated new positions in the APC party structure for large parts of his network (some of whom now belong to the Koroma inner circle). Jumping ship often means that big-men lose their party networks and the leverage that comes with them. This again underscores the core point of this article, that bigmanity in Sierra Leone has been institutionalized. Formal rules and procedures constrain the behavior of big-men. They also qualify as "chiefs."

Sunk costs: Party Investment Limits Big-man Movement

The second mechanism that restricts big-man movement at the top is the investments that big-men have made to ensure their protection against the biggest big-man (the president). This mechanism finds its genesis in a research tradition on competitive authoritarianism which claims that senior elites seek protection in party institutions. Gordon Tullock (1987), Barbara Geddes (2005), Stephen Haber (2008), and Beatriz Magaloni (2008) argue that a group of senior elites propel a leader into power (a "launching organization" [Haber 2008] or "seizure group" [Geddes, Wright, & Frantz 2018]). In Sierra Leone, these senior elites tend to be a group of senior big-men that forms around the "common interests" of seizing power (Utas 2012b:13). The problem is that once he is elected in office, the leader becomes elevated above the herd and obtains the power to remove his powerful allies, take their seats, reject demands, and undercut their benefits (Magaloni 2008). Senior elites may in turn seek to replace the leader (Tullock 1987). A large body of authoritarian literature points out that state institutions (Magaloni & Kricheli 2010; Bueno de Mesquita 2003; Morse 2018; Gandhi & Przeworski 2007) and particularly political parties help to manage this tension (Ezrow & Frantz 2011).

Interviews suggest that the same dilemma is at play in Sierra Leone. Consider five players at the absolute top of the political hierarchy concerning their problems with the president: "There is too much dictatorial power in the hands of the President" (a secretary-general), "The constitution gives the President supreme executive power [...] In practice he says he is above all others" (regime elite), "The President has full control over people in the party" (regime elite), "The President is everything, he oversteps any hurdle" (a party chairman) and "Presidents have awesome powers and they overstep it often" (another secretary-general).¹⁶ A review of Koroma's tenure

highlights how challengers were systematically targeted. In 2008, he sent away his main challenger Eddie Turay after much pressure. In 2016, Koroma sacked his vice president Sam Sumana by ousting him from the APC. In 2015, Petito, a grassroots politician and potential successor, was removed from state office (and even party positions). Similar dynamics were at play at lower levels in Tonkolili (sponsoring the disliked Minkailu Bah), Freetown (going after Pat Sowe), Port Loko (undercutting the base of Alpha Kahn) and Bo (forbidding Victor Foh from campaigning).

The collected evidence suggests that party institutionalization protects senior big-men against the president by creating power outside of the president's reach. This was clearly visible in a cabinet reshuffle in May–July 2019 by President Maada Bio.¹⁷ Four key members of the Bio government with important constituencies were targeted: Prince Harding (in charge of NATCOM); Napoleon (in charge of most agencies); Anthony Brewah (Minister of Local Government) and Ali Kabbah (Minister of Foreign Affairs). Although Bio tried to remove all four, he only succeeded with Brewah and Kabbah, whereas Harding and Napoleon were able to prevent their removal. The reason for this is that Harding and Napoleon held prominent party positions (party leader and secretary-general, respectively) and leveraged their power in the party to renegotiate a state position; Napoleon promised to distance himself from Harding, and Harding threatened to use violence.¹⁸ Senior big-men sometimes invest decades to obtain such protective positions.

It is precisely this long-term investment that makes big-man networks stable at the top. Senior big-men accept setbacks and wait it out until they can leverage their decades of financial contributions and years of rising through the party hierarchy and maintaining networks. It is therefore unsurprising that this exact argument was used by the Koroma entourage to convince senior big-men to remain within the APC after the succession saga: “To JFK [...] that he would get another change [...] to Petito that he should use his religion to overcome this and that age was on his side [...] to John Bonoh that it was not his time as a first cousin, that the party was not brave enough to embrace him.”¹⁹

Institutionalization and its formal rules structure the behavior of what used to be mainly personalized big-man networks. Sierra Leone's big-men have started to behave more like Sahlins' “chiefs.”

How Party Competition Produces Heterogeneous Networks

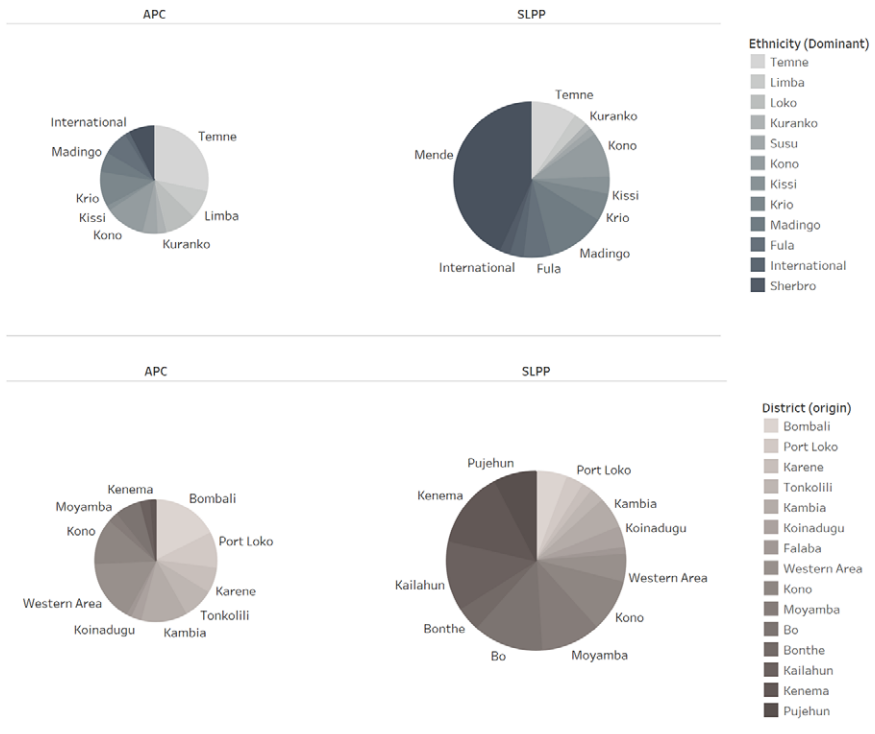
The final claim of big-man theory that this article assesses is the idea that networks are heterogeneous. [Table 7](#) presents data on the ethnic background of all nationally important big-men by July 2019 (N = 305). The table shows that the total group of big-men is ethno-regionally mixed. To explore party effects, [Figure 1](#) presents networks of the SLPP and the APC by July 2019.

Popular opinion has it that the SLPP draws support among the Mende and Sherbro in the south and southeast, whereas the APC draws on Temne, Limba, and Loko in the north.²⁰ Aggregate voting patterns seem to suggest a

Table 7. Ethnicity of important individuals in Sierra Leone (national data, July 2019).

Mende	69	22.62%
Temne	36	11.80%
Kono	27	8.85%
Madingo	23	7.54%
Krio	17	5.57%
Fula	13	4.26%
Limba	11	3.61%
International	10	3.28%
Susu	6	1.97%
Loko	6	1.97%
Kissi	6	1.97%
Sherbro	4	1.31%
Kuranko	4	1.31%
Unknown/Unclear/Mixed (Almost all Paramount Chiefs)	73	23.93%
Total	305	100.00%

Figure 1. Heterogeneous SLPP and APC 'Big Man' Network by July 2019.

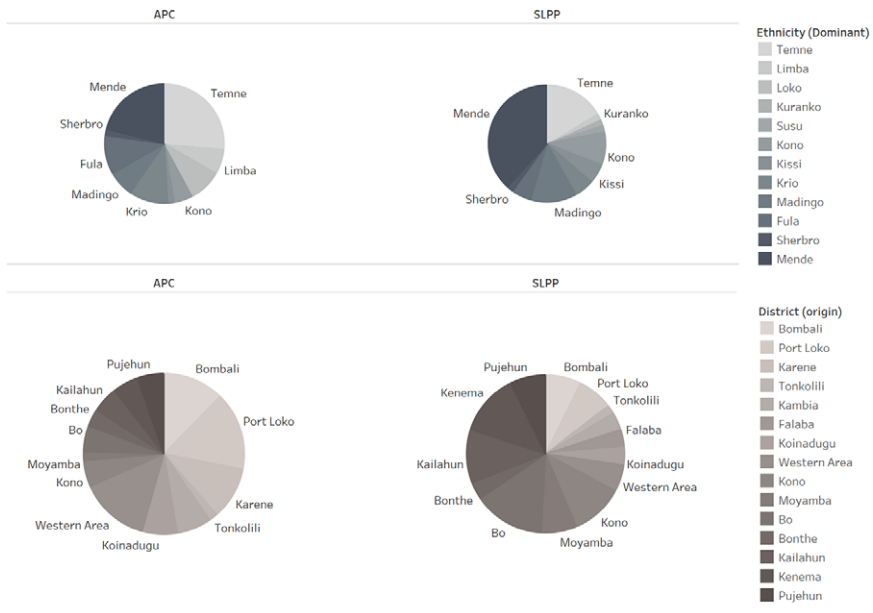


similar divide (see for example, Casey 2015:35; Fridy & M’Cormack-Hale 2011:47). However, the collected data on big-men in these networks contradicts this inference; less than half of the big-men in the SLPP network are Mende or Sherbro or from south and southeast (Bo, Bonthe, Kenema, Kailahun, and Pujehun). Likewise, less than half of the important APC big-men are Temne, Limba, or Loko or come from the north (Bombali, Port Loko, Kambia, Karene, and Tonkolili).

Instead, the collected qualitative and quantitative data support a heterogeneous reading. Figure 2 confirms this conclusion through the regional and ethnic backgrounds of APC and SLPP cabinets (January through March 2018 and March 2018 through June 2019). Fewer than 50 percent of cabinet seats are taken up by the party’s alleged “core tribes” and “core regions.” For example, the 55-member SLPP cabinet included not only “core tribes” but also nine Temne, seven Mandingo, and five Kono.²¹ These data suggest ethnic and regional heterogeneity.

A series of interviews was carried out with key elites on the composition of the network that brought President Maada Bio to power. By 2005/2006, Maada Bio drew first and foremost on a personal military network created during his time in the NPRC.²² Around the same time, Bio was joined by Prince Harding, who brought in a Mende Ethnic grassroots base around Kenema, a network of “old” politicians (sometimes called “Old Skool”) and later a paramilitary pillar of the current Bio regime called the Benghazi unit. Bio’s second bid for power (in 2010–2011) secured an alliance with Kanja

Figure 2. Heterogeneous SLPP and APC Cabinet (2018 vs. 2019).



Sessay, which brought a network of many lower big-men thanks to their party positions or delegate roles to the Sessay stewardship of NACSA during the Kabbah government (1996–2007) in addition to a sizeable Madingo constituency. Bio was joined by Abbas Bundu, who brought an international network and old SLPP politicians.

Bio's third bid for power (2012–2017) made his network truly heterogeneous. His time as a PhD student in Bradford led to an alliance with the UK diaspora network, which brought funding. The 2017 contest for the leadership of the SLPP brought on board Allie Kabbah (a grassroots and chameleon politician with an ethnic network in Kono, Kailahun, and Kenema, and contacts with the RUF), Osman Timbo (a good Temne support network in the north) and individuals who had been dislodged from Kandeh Yumkellah (particularly individuals from the north). Hence, the big-man network that brought Bio to power was a truly heterogeneous network that patched together a number of relations ranging from regional, ethnic, co-worker, personal skills, and financial attributes.

Network Heterogeneity has Institutional Origins

Presently, big-man theorizing on heterogeneity argues that it makes networks strong, works across divides and “counteract(s) identity-based conflict” (Utas 2012b:14). Utas argues that heterogeneity is an “advantage for network operations” (Utas 2012b:13). Heterogeneity is not a function of overlapping personalist relations and identities, but rather it has an institutional cause, namely Sierra Leone's (essentially) two-party system. The SLPP and APC are strong parties with a deep reach into the interior of the country. As their ethno-regional cores put them roughly on an equal footing, they are forced to create heterogeneous networks.

The All Peoples Congress has a Temne core (30 percent of the population) alongside a Limba ethnic bloc (9 percent) and some small tribes (Loko, Susu, and Kuranko, about 3 percent each). The Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) has a Mende core (30 percent of the population) and is joined by a number of very small tribes (Sherbro, Krim, Vai, Mandingo [1 percent] and some Kissi and Fula [2 percent each]). As these ethnic cores put them roughly on an equal footing, political success is dependent on their ability to become heterogeneous (for electoral support but also to actually rule the country). One key strategist in the SLPP explained, “Politics is a numbers game. The membership of SLPP is constant. We need additional numbers,” while a key APC leader noted, “A political win has to be planned and calculated. [We survive by] bringing the groups together, like Siaka Stevens did.”²³ The roughly equal-sized cores push both parties to a “politics of management of margins” where they co-opt small sections of society. Again, the institutionalization of Sierra Leone's informal big-man networks into two rival political parties leads to constraints on how big-man networks can operate.

This was clearly visible in a series of interviews on the specific strategies of the SLPP and APC and why they have opted to become heterogenous. Both parties have a different composition. The APC is a proper congress party, as the three prime tribes are all relatively large; hence, the Loko and Limba often team up to “balance against the dominance of one” (Temne).²⁴ The result is that ethnic identity is important in the APC, and factions in the APC often have a clear ethnic component. The SLPP has a dominant ethnic identity, wherein other tribes assimilate.²⁵ For example, politicians tend to identify as Mende, even when they are from other tribes. The effect is that factions in the SLPP have no ethnic component but are instead based on social characteristics such as military ties, a youth link, or a shared history in a previous government. The main divide in the Bio administration, for example, is generational, between Paopa supporters and the Old Skool group.

Hence, the SLPP’s prime strategy is to expand by dislodging APC ethnic factions from the north, whereas the APC grows by dislodging social factions from the south and southeast. Conversations with SLPP strategists and those responsible in the north highlight how the SLPP primarily makes ethnic appeals in the northern heartland.²⁶ Conversations within the APC revealed that the APC pursues non-ethnic networks by engaging at the grassroots level through social structures.²⁷ During the past ten years, for example, the APC has built impressive non-ethnic support structures by co-opting leaders of institutions such as bikers, money exchangers, and market women.²⁸

This means not only that two-party institutionalization leads to heterogenous networks but also that the specific ways in which the parties are institutionalized determines how they can increase their big-man network. There is ample evidence to suggest that the heterogeneity of big-man networks in Sierra Leone is not a free choice by big-men with many social connections, but it is produced by institutions that determine and constrain the type of behaviors that big-men can display.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the 1960s, Sahlins observed individuals who leveraged their personalized connections as opposed to hierarchically embedded chiefs. Resulting big-man studies claim that: a) big-men are highly personalized; b) they operate in very fluid networks; and c) they operate in networks that are heterogenous and that are formed over multiple social identities.

This article has challenged these predictions. Based on information from a database of 305 nationally important big-men in Sierra Leone and over a year of in-country anthropological research, it appears that: a) big-man networks almost perfectly correlate with formal institutions, which means that exclusive personalist interpretations cannot be maintained; b) fluidity is limited at the top of the network; and c) the networks are ethnically inclusive and diverse and indeed heterogenous.

Based on these results, the big-man perspective is insufficient to explain Sierra Leone's post-war politics. Informal big-man networks have institutionalized, and institutions such as elections, formal office, and parties have become major co-determining factors of big-man network formation and serve to constrain big-man behavior. For example, limited movement at the top of the big-man network has institutional origins, as senior big-men seek party office to protect themselves against powerful leaders through decades of investment in the party. Furthermore, their personal networks of followers are institutionalized, which binds them to their party. Both factors limit senior big-man movement. Institutions are also the origin of the heterogeneity of big-man networks. Sierra Leone's two-party system forces both parties to seek a diverse array of big-men. Existing studies of big-men insufficiently appreciate the effects of post-war institutionalization.

In fact, there is reason to believe that this argument is applicable outside of Sierra Leone. A growing body of literature points to the institutionalization of Africa's politics (Posner & Young 2007:127; Cheeseman 2018) and also to constraints on political actors through institutions such as presidential term limits (Reyntjens 2016; Posner & Young 2007; Maltz 2007); decentralization (Dyzenhaus 2018; Riedl & Dickovick 2014; Fombad 2018); gender quotas (Tripp 2015); elections (Eifert, Miguel, & Posner 2010; Lindberg 2006, 2013; Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis 2017); and legislatures (Collord 2018; Osei 2016, 2013). While this article does not share the democratic interpretations of some of this literature, it does suggest that the influence of institutions on informal practices such as big-man networks is increasing.

With this in mind, there are two clear avenues for future research. The first avenue for research would be to collect structured data to allow for rigorous comparative research on big-man (networks). Qualitative studies have generated a wealth of hypotheses and deep insights into big-man operations, networks, and maneuvering. However, the structural determinants of bigmanity, typologies of layers of the importance of big-men, and the uncovering of structural determinants of network behavior have often required a much larger number of observations. For example, a preliminary exploration of the collected data highlights that economic big-men tend to be more prone to cross-carpeting, and that those with links to violent groups are often higher up in the network. Structured data would help to build a progressive and shared knowledge base that can be used to test and advance bigmanity and the study of African politics.

A second avenue is exploring some very thorny questions about causality. If institutions indeed structure personalized big-man networks, the big question is to what extent these institutions are themselves subject to manipulation by big-men (Pepinsky 2014). For example, while the ethnic core of SLPP and APC structure the formation of big-man networks, the really thorny question is what actually produced those ethno-regional cores in the first place (Brownlee 2007). If party institutions protect big-men against leaders,

the underlying question is whether these institutional constraints are self-enforcing or rather upheld by the power of big-men over these institutions. And, finally, if big-man status and formal office overlap, how are new big-men produced, only through positions or mixed with personal maneuvering? (Reno 2009:132). While we certainly need to take institutions much more seriously in big-man studies, we should at the same time resist superficially ascribing causal effects to institutions. Rather, sensitivity to the historical processes that lead to institutional formation and research designs that can distinguish causal effects are needed. Only then can we truly solve Shalin's conundrum of "big-men" and "chiefs."

Notes

1. A detailed methodology is available upon request.
2. For many verified through party records.
3. "who are important in [...]"; "who are politically important in [...]" and "who do you need to get on your side to win elections here"
4. Some caution is warranted as the number of respondents was low (Kono, N = 4; Kambia, N = 5; Tonko Limba, N = 9).
5. For many big-men, however, party-affiliation was known (e.g. informal security outfits) or could be easily inferred.
6. The 100% affiliation for Kono is testimony to the deep penetration of three political parties (APC, SLPP, and C4C).
7. Not taking into account the transition from the one-party era to multiparty democracy (Abass Bundu and Prince Harding were APC).
8. Sumana Karpeh (SLPP Secretary General), Usu Boij (SLPP leadership contender in 2012), Tom Nyuma (SLPP war hero).
9. Confirmed in confidential interview with HDJ, 23-05-2019.
10. Confirmed in confidential interview with POJ, 17-05-2019.
11. The selection of people from the UK SLPP branch, individuals bound to him (Lawrence Leema, Memunata Pratt, Patricia Laverly), undercutting the base of a contender (Alie Kabba) through appointing members of the Kapuwa family to certain positions.
12. This allowed him to make his own bid for the flagbearer. Confidential interviews with AV, 18-12-2018; RQ, 9-10-2018; PEJ, 20-6-2019.
13. Harding and Napoleon, for example, were able to convince the group to give them a position against the wishes of the President.
14. Confidential interview with KD, 04-12-2018.
15. Confidential interview with POJ, 17-05-2019.
16. Confidential interviews with Victor Foh, 04-12-2018; 20-2-2019; HIV, 22-5-2019; 6-6-2019; HDJ, 23-5-2019; IDT, 25-6-2019; WR, 12-12-2018; 11-12-2018.
17. The same dynamics hold true for the APC. For example, a small coalition of very senior party elites torpedoed the plan of the former President Koroma to stay on for a third term: "[N.N.] and I teamed up against Koroma [...] we put a stop to that ambition. That is how we departed." Confidential Interview CD, 05-12-2018. Confirmed in a confidential interview with HDJ, 23-05-2019.
18. Faced with this problem, a few weeks later Bio went after the party posts of Harding and Napoleon by proposing a party convention to unseat them. Again

- both used their party positions to influence lower big-men. Harding even employed his network of ex-combatants and party-militias to attack opponents and signal his resolve. The result was that the convention was postponed for six months.
19. Confidential interview with IDT, 25-6-2019.
 20. Most Fula support the SLPP (since prosecution by Siaka Stevens). Madingo are split between both parties. Kono and Krio tend to swing. Kuranko and Susu are closer to APC, Kissi to SLPP—although these last three tribes can change their affiliation.
 21. The same pattern holds true for all 800+ appointments from 2012 to 2019. Results are robust for a range of alternative specifications.
 22. Various party executives are military personnel who worked with Bio in the 1990s and joined him in 2005.
 23. Confidential interviews with VJ, 05-23-2019, and IDT, 25-6-2019.
 24. Culturally, ethnic identity in the north is also stronger than in the south (Fanthorpe 2001).
 25. Culturally, Mande societies are generally more accommodating to so-called “strangers,” e.g. allowing landownership and inheritance through matrilineage (Bulte, Richards, and Voors 2018:73).
 26. The Bio regime relies on ethnic networks of Alpha Timbo (Temne), Napoleon (Kuranko), and Jalloh (a Fula).
 27. Such as Tom Nuyma, Usu Boij, or Eldred Collins (all with ex-combatant networks). The only exception is Kissi.
 28. Note, however, that both parties are open to anyone who brings a set of followers and expands the base. The APC in turn has tried to dislodge some small tribes (such as the Kissi) in the south. Formal institutional party organization and the competition between two well established parties (co-)produce heterogenous big-man networks.

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