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# Autonomy, ambiguity and symbolism in African politics: The development of forest policy in Sierra Leone

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**Abstract**

The stated forest policies of governments of developing countries, published in official documents, often differ from their actual policies. The historical trend in actual forest policy in Sierra Leone is explained by changes in the balance of pressures on policy makers from internal exploitative and protectionist groups. The combined trend in actual and stated policies is episodic, passing from the exploitative phase to the sustainable management (1911), ambiguous (1922), exploitative (1929), sustainable management (1946) and ambiguous phases (1968). This contrasts with the progression through exploitative, ambiguous and sustainable management phases seen in other countries. Divergence in colonial times from a stated policy of sustainable management, justified by a narrative framed within a colonial environmental discourse, mainly resulted from external pressure stemming from an Imperial discourse of political and economic security. Divergence in the post-colonial era is explained by lack of domestic ownership of colonial, and later eco-imperialist, forest policies, and the peripherality of policy texts of the institutional state to the 'shadow' neo-patrimonial state, which was the real centre of power and added institutional ambiguity to policy ambiguity as a tool to contest overseas pressures and defend national autonomy. There is no apparent link between divergence and type of political system, probably because of the pervasiveness of the neo-patrimonial state, though ambiguity was less prevalent in colonial times. Indigenous democratization and pluralization should help domestic protectionist groups to become more powerful, but external attempts to impose political change might be counterproductive by prompting further instrumental use of ambiguity.
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## Introduction

How do overseas pressures impinge on the autonomy of national forest policy-making in developing countries? Pressures from multilateral and bilateral donor agencies on governments to restructure their administrations and national economies, become more democratic and slim down the state are said to represent 'a new ideology of imperialism' (Furedi, 1994) and 'recolonization' (Hyden et al., 2000), while attempts to influence governments to manage the environment of their countries more sustainably are termed 'eco-imperialism' (Lal, 1990). These form part of a wider set of influences which are reconfiguring national sovereignty (Leonard, 2001; Kurtulus, 2004).

To explain the effects of this 'internationalization' of the policy process (Howlett and Ramesh, 2002) on long-term trends in the character of forest management (Lane and McDonald, 2002) requires multilevel policy models (Hogl, 2000). Howlett and Ramesh assume that policy transfer (Evans and Davies, 1999) from overseas is initially uncontested by governments but ultimately self-limiting. We, however, have previously shown how the governments of Thailand and the Philippines have contested overseas pressures from the start by the subtle use of ambiguity (Grainger, 2004a; Grainger and Malayang, 2005). Ambiguity is one of a number of forms of deception which politicians employ to maintain their autonomy (Ramsay, 2000). The study of such 'symbolic politics' originated with

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Lasswell (1936) but is now undergoing a renaissance (Matten, 2003). As forests and forestry are constructed in different ways by competing groups (Cline–Cole and Madge, 2000), it is unsurprising that in developing countries stated forest policy, as published in official documents, often does not match a government's actual policy (Ribot, 2000).

Here we apply our method to the West African state of Sierra Leone to compare the effects of overseas pressures in colonial and post-colonial eras. Hajer (2003) has claimed that encroachment of pressures from actors at all levels of the spatial scale into the traditional realm of the state has now created an "institutional void", with "no generally accepted rules and norms according to which policy making and politics is to be conducted." Yet voids can offer opportunities for transformation (Weber and Christopherson, 2002), and experience in Sierra Leone suggests that African governments may be exploiting traditional symbolic skills as a tool of post-colonial resistance (Slater, 1998) to maintain their autonomy through ambiguous power structures. These add to policy ambiguity by manipulating the language of the discourses of the governments of developed countries.

The paper consists of four parts. Part one introduces Sierra Leone and its forests. Part two outlines our data sources and modelling framework. Part three charts historical trends in the country's actual and stated forest policies. Part four explains these trends within the framework of a model designed for Asian countries which are more heavily forested than Sierra Leone, where closed forest cover is now only about 6%. We enhance that model to incorporate post-positivist approaches to policy analysis (Fischer, 2003) and international relations (Vasquez, 1995). While sustainable forest management requires not only a suitable forest policy but that it be implemented properly, we assume, for the sake of brevity, that deficiencies in policy formulation can be analysed separately from implementation deficiencies (Lasswell, 1948).

## Sierra Leone—a contested state

### *Space and power*

The contradictory impacts of external intervention are etched into the political fabric of Sierra Leone through a formal dualistic division between a modern urban core and traditional rural periphery (Lewis, 1954; Wellhofer, 1989). By the 18th Century the territory had been settled by various peoples who subsisted by shifting cultivation, pastoralism and fishing. Among the major groups of peoples, the Temne, Limba, Loko and Koranko were dominant in the north, and the Mende, Kissi and Kono in the south. In a benevolent attempt to right past wrongs, in 1808 the British government made the Freetown Peninsula a Crown Colony, taking over a financially unviable settlement for former slaves from Britain, the USA and Jamaica, dating back to 1787. The Royal Navy used Freetown as a base for intercepting slave ships and liberating their captives, raising the population of immigrants (called Creoles) to 50,000 by 1850. In 1896 the hinterland became a British Protectorate, but its democratic rights were inferior to those in the Crown Colony until the country approached Independence in 1961 (Fyfe, 1962). The resulting political and administrative gap between the present Western Area (the old Crown Colony) and 'the Provinces' (the former Protectorate) has been central to subsequent problems with forest policy and national identity, competition for power between northern and southern peoples, and the launch of a rebel insurgency in 1991 which escalated into a civil war that lasted until 2002.

### *Contested views on forest trends*

Insights into the sustainability of forest management (as traditionally understood in the productivist paradigm) may be gained from trends in timber production, timber reserves and forest cover, though in Sierra Leone reliable information on the first two trends is poor and the last is strongly contested.

One debate concerns the relative extents before human settlement of closed canopy forest, such as tropical rain forest, and open forest (savanna woodland) in which tree density is much lower (Lanly, 1981). Sierra Leone is on the western edge of the tropical rain forest belt of West Africa and this, combined with a long history of settlement, makes it difficult to distinguish 'natural' vegetation from that modified by humans. Some apparent relicts of 'virgin' forest are now thought to be either natural regrowth or to have been planted on previously deforested land (Fairhead and Leach, 1996). Estimates of the proportion of the country originally covered by tropical rain forest range from 100% (Aubréville, 1938; Keay, 1959) to 50% (Eyre, 1968) and to just 12% (White, 1983). The present distribution is consistent with Eyre's map, being confined to hilly and mountainous areas in the east and the Freetown Peninsula, and the southeast plateau region adjacent to the Liberian border (Fig. 1). Elsewhere, land cover is dominated by mosaics of clearings and low regrowth that typify areas under shifting cultivation, and by more open grazing lands (Spencer and Gordon, 1995).

Trends in deforestation are also contested. In the environmental crisis narrative of Myers (1980), most forest was cleared in the 20th century, a view shared by Sayer et al. (1992) and Ciesla (1995). Yet the earliest estimate of national forest cover was just 1% in the early 1900s (Unwin, 1909), and this was integral to a colonial environmental crisis narrative used to justify Sierra Leone's first stated forest policy. Studies of the spread of 'sleeping sickness' suggested that most deforestation occurred between 1810 and 1860, when farmers moved into selectively logged forests (Dorward and Payne, 1975). Millington (1985, 1987) reached the same conclusion using different data. But according to Fairhead and Leach (1998)

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