

A Black Utopia?

Social stratification in Nineteenth-century Colonial
Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

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In the present dissertation, social stratification in colonial Sierra Leone is discussed, with the aim of providing novel evidence on the association between ideals, institutions and inequality. The case study of Sierra Leone is valuable for it allows to examine social stratification in an alleged egalitarian context.

The dissertation consists of an introductory chapter and four research essays. The essays examine four aspects that contribute to social stratification. The former two essays delve into the social aspects of social stratification, namely socio-economic status and marriage patterns, whereas the latter two examine social stratification from an economic perspective. The intention is to employ the case study of Sierra Leone to portray a picture of European colonialism in Africa that differs from that often portrayed in the literature.

The first essay studies the association between ethnic belonging and socio-economic status in early days colonial Sierra Leone. The findings suggest that, in spite of the egalitarian ideals on which it had been allegedly founded, a certain degree of ethnic discrimination characterized the socio-economic structure of the colony. Ethnic discrimination did not, however, translate into a strict occupational segregation for individuals from most ethnic groups could be found across the whole socio-economic spectrum.

The second essay delves into the association between ethnic belonging and marriage patterns. The study shows that, irrespective of egalitarian ideals and ethnic heterogeneity, endogamy was the most prevalent marriage arrangement in colonial Sierra Leone. This finding implies the existence of an association between ethnic belonging and marriage patterns, while providing circumstantial evidence on the presence of an ethnic social divide in the colony. Furthermore, the essay shows that exogamy occurred within ethnic groups' clusters, a finding that corroborates the hypothesis of the existence of a vertical ethnic hierarchy in colonial Sierra Leone.

The third essay examines quantitatively the claim that egalitarian ideals impacted on inequality levels by studying wealth inequality in rural colonial Sierra Leone. The results show that between households' distribution of resources was fairly egalitarian in global comparison. Wealth inequality estimates for Sierra Leone are on par with those estimated for other rural settler colonies in North America in their early days of existence. The results provide supportive evidence to the hypothesis that ideals can impact on the institutions driving inequality, by shaping the rules of allocation of resources towards egalitarianism.

The fourth essay examines the evolution of land distribution in colonial Sierra Leone over the course of the first forty years of the colony's existence. The results show that although egalitarian principles regulated land distribution, land inequality increased over the period studied. The essay argues that the shift in the type of egalitarianism underlying land distribution was the major responsible for increasing inequality as recorded for colonial Sierra Leone.

The results of this dissertation suggest that Sierra Leone was a fairly equal colony under most perspectives, and that institutions were influenced by egalitarian ideals, although not all to the same extent. The present dissertation ultimately provides evidence supporting the existence of an association between ideals, institutions and social stratification in a colonial context.

Keywords: Social stratification, institutions, colonialism, Africa, inequality, marriage, wealth, settler colony, slave trade, egalitarianism

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