

## NYARROH OF BANDASUMA, 1885–1914: A RE-INTERPRETATION OF FEMALE CHIEFTAINCY IN SIERRA LEONE

BY LYNDA R. DAY

*Brooklyn College*

**ABSTRACT:** This study examines Nyarroh, a woman chief situated at the cusp of colonial penetration in what is today southern Sierra Leone. Nyarroh ruled a large, strategically located town and its surrounding villages from about 1880 to 1914. The documents which outline her public life have not previously been explored, yet they reveal the flexibility of gendered notions of political power and leadership in the region. Her life story allows us to look backward to precolonial Mendeland and forward to the colonial era, to consider the extent to which women's leadership and prerogatives were maintained or re-invented through colonial penetration and the nascent colonial state.

**KEY WORDS:** Sierra Leone, women, chieftaincy, war, gender, politics/political.

### INTRODUCTION

FEMALE chieftaincy in southern Sierra Leone speaks directly to the issue of women's authority in nineteenth-century African political systems, a topic that overlaps the broader fields of both African and women's history.<sup>1</sup> Gendered interrogations of precolonial African political practices touch on issues such as how the paradigm of separate but complementary male and female spheres of responsibility shaped African gender relations and how colonialism affected women's rights and prerogatives. The life of Nyarroh of Bandasuma, a woman chief from the Mende region of Sierra Leone, responds to these issues, and demonstrates that indigenous gender constructs supported female political leadership. Further, in contrast to studies demonstrating that colonialism destroyed female political leadership, here we see that colonial agents accepted, even embraced, women leaders like Nyarroh who controlled land, people and

<sup>1</sup> General treatments of African women considered the many examples of high-ranking women in African political systems as early as Denise Paulme's edited work, *Women of Tropical Africa* (Berkeley, 1963). But more recent collections or general histories have addressed various aspects of this topic as well: for example Marcia Wright's contribution to Teresa A. Meade and Merrye E. Weisner-Harlis (eds.), *A Companion to Gender History* (Williston VT, 2004); Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nyakanisi Musisi (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories* (Bloomington, 2002); Iris Berger and E. Frances White, *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History* (Bloomington, 1999), Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Women: A Modern History*, trans. Beth G. Raps (Boulder CO, 1997); and Flora Kaplan (ed.), *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses and Power: Case Studies in African Gender* (Annals of the NY Academy of Sciences, 810) (New York, 1997).

armed men. Indeed, at this dawn of the colonial era, the new vectors of power introduced by the encroaching colonial state were manipulated by the politically skilled, including women chiefs, to enhance their local political standing.

Studies of women's power and authority in indigenous political systems have revealed a wide array of women's formal leadership capacities. Among the many examples of women officeholders, however, Mende women chiefs are different from other female political authority figures, where they exist, in West, Central and Southern Africa. Mende women chiefs before the era of formal colonial rule were not titled women in the sense of the *kpojito* of precolonial Dahomey, a position of lifetime tenure as the reign-mate of the king of Dahomey. Nor were they placed in their positions as stand-ins for male rulers in the sense of the *iyoba* of Benin. Nor did they 'represent' the collective body of women as described for the *omu* of Onitsha. Mende women chiefs did not independently check the power of male rulers as did the *asantehemaa* of the Asante and other queen mothers in African societies.<sup>2</sup>

Nyarroh, like other Mende women chiefs, demonstrates a distinct model of female political leadership within the spectrum of women's political roles, combining elements from the complex state-based political systems and the lineage-based parallel sex systems presented by other scholars. Coquery-Vidrovitch as well as Berger and White, in their general histories of African women, illustrate the consensus that Mende women chiefs, like royal women in African imperial systems, exercised political power through military expansion and control of resources, including captive laborers. However, they note that, unlike female titleholders in complex states, and like women leaders in lineage-based systems, Mende women chiefs were legitimized by the collective body of women through their secret societies; and by the late nineteenth century, growing British influence in the region sustained and even expanded women chiefs' political power and prerogatives.<sup>3</sup> This bundle of political supports – i.e. control of local resources, women's authority within their associations and lineages, and, during the colonial era, the British West African frontier police – was proffered by Carol Hoffer MacCormack as explanation of the existence of women paramount chiefs in Mende and Sherbro country, a case effectively made in her research on Madam Yoko, the well-known Mende woman chief who governed Kpa-Mende, a large territorial state, from 1884 until 1906.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The foregoing references are drawn from chapters in Kaplan (ed.), *Queen Mothers, Priestesses and Power*: Edna G. Bay, 'The *kpojito* or "queen mother" of precolonial Dahomey: towards an institutional history', 19–40; Flora E. S. Kaplan, 'Iyoba, the queen mother of Benin: images and ambiguity in gender and sex roles in court art', 73–102; Helen K. Henderson, 'Onitsha woman: the traditional context for political power', 215–44; Sandra T. Barnes, 'Gender and the politics of support and protection in pre-colonial West Africa', 1–18.

<sup>3</sup> Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Women: A Modern History*, 35; Berger and White, *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 85–6, 88–9, 94.

<sup>4</sup> Carol P. Hoffer [MacCormack], 'Madam Yoko: ruler of the Kpa Mende confederacy', in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford, 1977). Professor MacCormack is best known for numerous articles discussing

This study considers Nyarroh, another Mende woman chief, who, like Yoko, is situated at the cusp of the introduction of colonialism, but about whom little has been written. Nyarroh ruled a large, strategically located town and its surrounding villages in the Mende interior for at least thirty years, and was succeeded by her daughter at her death. The extensive government documents that elucidate her public life have not heretofore been explored, and yet through them are revealed the importance yet flexibility of gender constructs and the fluidity of power and political leadership that led the way to ‘traditions’ of women as political leaders in the region. Her life story allows us to look backward to pre-colonial Mendeland and forward to the colonial era, to consider the extent to which ‘traditional’ women’s leadership and prerogatives were adapted and re-invented by colonial penetration and the nascent colonial state.

Like the authors of *Women in African Colonial Histories*, this article seeks to locate women ‘as historical subjects in gendered colonial worlds’.<sup>5</sup> I propose that in this early period of the colonial project, state-sponsored patriarchal hegemonic relations were introduced in the initial stages of colonial rule, but were manipulated by this particular woman political leader to maximize her own personal power, agency and efficacy. Like other recent approaches, I challenge the binary opposition of resistance/collaboration so often used to undermine the legitimacy of women political figures who engaged with colonial authorities.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, I hope to offer a nuanced, more gendered consideration of the early colonial history of Mende country as a corrective to previous studies of the region in this period and to add to the corpus of literature on women political leaders in Africa before colonial annexation.

While highlighting Nyarroh of Bandasuma, the article returns to a controversial argument regarding women chiefs in the region, and attempts to make sense of two apparently contradictory positions regarding female paramount chiefs of the early colonial period. In the 1970s, Arthur Abraham and Carol Hoffer MacCormack, two scholars of Mende history and culture, presented pointedly differing interpretations of the position and function of women chiefs in the region, one suggesting that women ‘chiefs’ were put in place to serve colonial interests, while the other suggested that women functioning as ‘chiefs’ was a ‘traditional’ practice that long predated colonial rule. Here I propose a third way of viewing women political leaders in the region, one that offers a re-interpretation of their conclusions using new documentary sources, new readings of old sources and a more consciously feminist framework.

---

the Sande women’s initiation society as the central institution supporting female power in Mende and Sherbro life. But see ‘Mende and Sherbro women in high office’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6 (1972), 151–64, for her wide-ranging discussion of female chiefs in Sierra Leone. <sup>5</sup> Allman *et al.*, *Women in African Colonial Histories*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* The introduction to the Allman *et al.* edited volume seeks to interrogate numerous assumptions regarding the encounters of African women and European colonialisms.

Most of the data presented in this article are drawn from letters and memoranda written by British officers posted to Freetown and the coastal areas which had been ceded to British authority in the early nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, these officers had begun to venture more regularly into the Mende interior to investigate conflicts that threatened to interrupt trade to the coast. Though written to report to the Secretary of State on their assignments, travel and meetings, these letters contain a wealth of detail about the political leaders of the Mende region at the time. And even though they were written by English-speaking officers with little in-depth knowledge of the culture they were encountering, new questions can be asked of these conventional colonial records that allow us to re-vision the internal politics of that region at that time. Furthermore, given their detail with regard to dates, places, times and individuals, these letters and reports establish a baseline of specific conditions, persons and events on which to build future analyses.<sup>7</sup>

#### BACKGROUND

A heated debate about the legitimacy of female chieftaincy within the pre-colonial political structure of Sierra Leone was undertaken by Sierra Leonean historian Arthur Abraham and American anthropologist Carol Hoffer MacCormack in several publications and presentations during the early 1970s. Though it was well known that numerous women, both past and present, had held the office of 'paramount chief' in southern and eastern Sierra Leone, these two scholars came to radically different conclusions about female chieftaincy from the same set of facts. Abraham, the author of *Mende Government and Politics Under Colonial Rule* (1978), contended that female chieftaincy was a colonial invention by pointing to examples of women chiefs who had been installed or propped up by the colonial government after the formal establishment of colonial rule in 1896.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the assertion is made again that all women Paramount Chiefs were colonial products. In pre-colonial times, no woman could acquire political power of the highest order, although women held subordinate political offices ... despite the support received from the administration, the authority of women chiefs was generally precarious.<sup>9</sup>

He insisted that not only were women chiefs products of colonial rule, but that they had never held 'the colonial equivalent of traditional political

<sup>7</sup> Most of the information about Nyarroh presented in this paper is taken from official correspondence published as Parliamentary Papers by the Great Britain House of Commons 1886–9, entitled 'Correspondence respecting disturbances in the Native Territories adjacent to Sierra Leone'. For the year 1886, vol. XLVII, I have used Command Papers 4642, 4840 and 4905. For 1887, vol. LX, I have used Command Papers 5236 and 5740. These papers were published in bound volumes by His Majesty's Stationer in London in 1909 and reprinted by University Microforms in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1963. I consulted the volumes located in the Memorial Library of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Abraham, *Mende Government and Politics Under Colonial Rule* (Freetown, 1978), 249–68. See also 'Women chiefs in Sierra Leone: a historical reappraisal', *Odu*, 10 (July 1974), 30–44, for Abraham's most pointed attack on the legitimacy of female chieftaincy.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham, 'Women chiefs', 38, 40.

office of the highest order', i.e. 'paramount chief', in the precolonial political structure. He further asserted that they were not recognized as legitimate authority figures by their people, that they were 'imposters', 'pliable instruments' of the colonial administration, and named Madam Yoko a 'puppet' of the colonial government. Finally, he contended that, because of their gender alone, they could never have held high political office equivalent to male chiefs since leadership at this time was regularly acquired through warfare, and war-making was 'not the concern or domain of women'.<sup>10</sup>

Carol MacCormack, on the other hand, asserted that, before colonial rule, women held high leadership positions in the politico-jural domain among the Mende, Sherbro, Krim and Vai people of southern Sierra Leone. MacCormack described women chiefs whose influence arose from bilateral kinship networks, control of economic resources and cultural support for the idea of 'mother' as an authority figure. She posited that the Sande women's initiation society acted as a crucible for the exercise of female executive authority in the public domain. Sande for women and Poro for men have long mediated the definitions of adult women and men respectively, and have regulated the public roles of women and men as separate socio-political collectives. Many of MacCormack's arguments regarding women in high office were based on her interpretation of Sande iconography and ritual as well as her research on the career of the Sherbro paramount chief, Madam Honoria Bailor-Caulker.<sup>11</sup>

Both authors presented engaging arguments in defense of their positions, but dropped scholarly debate on the issue after a vitriolic encounter at a Fourah Bay College public lecture. Approaching the work of these two authors on this subject is rather like looking at the half-full/half-empty glass, and both leave much unsaid. In attempting to understand their perspectives, one is frustrated by the amount of data simply omitted. For example, MacCormack's theoretical arguments, though provocative and moving, are systematically applied only to Madam Yoko of Kpa-Mende. Though she gave readers a tantalizing glimpse of other women in high office in her 1972 article, they were never explored as the author moved on to other research areas. When Abraham addressed the issue, he omitted numerous women chiefs in arguing his thesis, or only mentioned the part of their careers that confirmed his premise. Indeed, his basic arguments are not sustained by an examination of the precolonial women chiefs he either disregarded or dismissed. Furthermore, his work is influenced by a nationalist/anti-colonialist orientation so strong that it overwhelms his data. In fact, much of the evidence he used could be reinterpreted in the context of his own presentation of Mende government and politics. Finally, his entire argument needs to be reconsidered in the light of feminist scholarship to reframe and recontextualize the analysis.

One of the contentious issues Abraham and MacCormack engage with is the use of the term 'paramount chief'. MacCormack proposed that it is

<sup>10</sup> Abraham, *Mende Government and Politics Under Colonial Rule*, 249–65.

<sup>11</sup> Carol P. Hoffer [MacCormack], 'Acquisition and exercise of political power by a woman paramount chief of the Sherbro people' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Bryn Mawr, 1971); see also fn. 4.

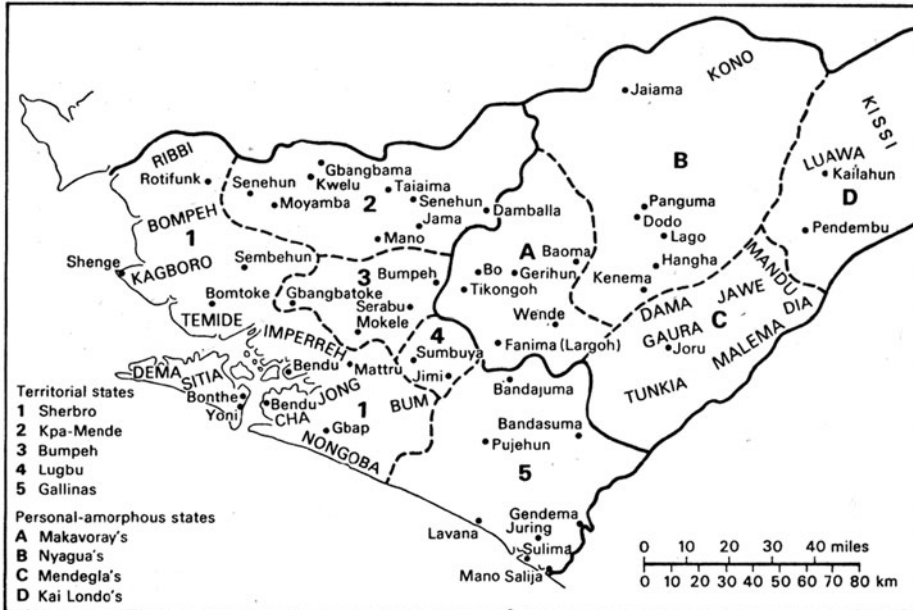


Fig. 1. Tentative reconstruction of late nineteenth-century states in Mendeland. Reprinted with permission from Abraham, *Mende Government and Politics Under Colonial Rule*.

'traditional' for women in Sherbro and Mende country to serve in high political positions including that of paramount chief. But one of Abraham's key charges against MacCormack is that she mis-used the term 'paramount chiefs' when referring to women chiefs. He claimed that they were not paramount chiefs in the precolonial political system even though they were considered paramount chiefs in the terminology of the colonial state. They both agreed that since 1905 paramount chiefs have had well-defined roles, first in the Native Administration of the Protectorate, then in the constitution of the independent Republic of Sierra Leone. But were there women paramount chiefs in the precolonial era? What was a 'paramount chief' before the term was codified in the English parlance of the Protectorate?<sup>12</sup>

Abraham's analysis of precolonial Mende government is helpful in trying to understand the complexities of this system. In his analysis, he designates nine separate 'states' in the political structure of Mende country just before the imposition of colonial rule, five based on territorial boundaries – i.e. Sherbro, Kpa-Mende, Bumpeh, Lugbu and Gallinas – and four defined by loyalty to specific leaders named Makavoray, Nyagua, Mendegla (spelled 'Mendingrah' in the documents) and Kai Londo (see Fig. 1). The heads of these nine states are normally referred to in the literature by the honorific 'king'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone* (London, 1962), 293.

<sup>13</sup> Abraham, *Mende Government and Politics Under Colonial Rule*, 33–4.

But the term ‘paramount chief’ is the real problem. In Abraham’s groundbreaking articulation of nascent state structure in precolonial Mende politics, he conflates the position of paramount chief, a title codified in the colonial period, with the English language titles ‘king’ and ‘queen’. He asserts that all such high titles designated ‘sovereignty of the highest rank’, and were incorrectly granted to women leaders by colonial officials. However, it is in contrasting the respective spheres of influence of *ndo-mahei* (land chief) and *ko-mahei* (war chief) that we may find the roots of the controversial misapplication of the term ‘paramount chief’. Historian Alpha Lavalie neatly summarized the distinction:

During the nineteenth century when the entire Mendeland was engulfed in a series of wars, a new type of political leadership emerged. This was the ‘warrior chief’, *Koh Mahel* who transformed autonomous groupings into proto-states ... As time wore on the British pacified the hinterland, the ‘warrior chief’ gave way once more to the ‘civilian chief’, known as ‘Paramount Chief’, *Ndo lo Mahe* Chieftaincy then belongs to an established institution which is as old as the people themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Here Lavalie equates the *ndo-mahei* title with the term ‘paramount chief’ and stresses that the *ndo-mahei*, whose authority was derived from his (or her) position as a descendant or representative of the founders of that particular settled area, as well as from demonstrated skill in leadership, was the same as the paramount chief position that has been delineated since the colonial era.<sup>15</sup>

Abraham rightly pointed out that no woman, with the exception of Madam Yoko of Kpa-Mende, exercised sovereignty over any of the nine ‘states’ he described in his study. But the many leaders who had political authority in their own right and who retained primary responsibility for the people of their ‘countries’ as representatives of the first ‘owners of the land’ were *ndo-maheisia* (land chiefs). Sometimes these land chiefs operated within the sphere of influence of an important *ko-mahei* (war chief), and normally they owed allegiance to one of the nine ‘kings’, but their authority arose from an internally legitimated tradition that was neither imposed from the outside nor derived purely from military power. What seems clear is that, like the colonial authorities, both authors retroactively and anachronistically applied the term ‘paramount chief’ to high positions in a multi-layered, overlapping and fluid network of authority and political rule in the hinterland of nineteenth-century Mendeland.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the disagreement over the application of the term ‘paramount chief’ to women leaders, Professors MacCormack and Abraham also disagreed on the real authority wielded by these women. Abraham argued that the authority of female chiefs was ‘precarious’, that they were not considered to have ‘legitimate’ authority by their people, and, to support his position, he

<sup>14</sup> Alpha M. S. Lavalie, ‘History and development of the institution of Mende chieftaincy from the pre-colonial period to independence: a case study from Kenema district’ (BA dissertation, University of Sierra Leone, 1976), 14. <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 27–31.

<sup>16</sup> The most detailed discussion of this topic is found in Kenneth Little’s anthropological study of the Mende, *The Mende of Sierra Leone* (London, 1951).

cited a Sierra Leone governor's 1903 reference to Nyarroh as 'a poor weak creature' who needed to be propped up by the British.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, MacCormack examined numerous avenues through which women in Mende and Sherbro country could exercise legitimate public authority, including positions as household head, lineage head, town chief, senior wife or Sande women's society official. But the women chiefs that MacCormack specifically discussed, including Madam Yoko, operated during the colonial period and are vulnerable to the charge of acceding to their office with the express consent and support of the colonial government.

Finally, the authors present divergent views on the fundamental impact of gender difference. Abraham argued that male and female chiefs were inherently different and automatically unequal in the eyes of the Mende people and in the context of Mende history. Key to this argument is his insistence that war was 'a most important aspect of politics', thus cutting women out of high office, since warfare was not the 'concern' or 'domain' of women, their domain being more properly 'productive activities'.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, though MacCormack suggested that women held high office on an equal footing with men in similar positions, she proposed that women's pathways to authority were legitimized through their own gendered realms of activity.

But was Abraham revealing a fundamental truth when he pointed to culturally conceived differences between female and male chiefs? And if that is true, can we accept the differences between male and female leaders in precolonial politics without, as Abraham did, challenging the 'legitimacy' of women chiefs or accusing them of being merely 'pliable instruments of colonial rule'? An exploration of 'difference' in the specific case presented here points to the gendered nature of political actors in precolonial Mende society. This investigation proposes that, though male and female genders were defined as separate, these gender constructs were not in opposition, and, though separate, were fundamentally flexible and responsive to practical application.<sup>19</sup> It may thus resolve the apparently contradictory positions of these scholars regarding female chieftaincy in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone.

#### SITUATING QUEEN NYARROH

Nyarroh of Badasuma was a woman chief of the Barrie district in the southern region whom Arthur Abraham briefly discusses but dismisses as a 'product of colonialism'. However, contrary to the Abraham thesis, page after page of official colonial correspondence reveals Nyarroh to be a political leader already in place when the British officials arrived in her town, who was deeply embroiled in the power politics of her time. Far from being 'weak', Nyarroh participated in the same system of alliances and warfare as

<sup>17</sup> Abraham, *Mende Government and Politics Under Colonial Rule*, 264.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 258; Abraham, 'Women chiefs in Sierra Leone', 32.

<sup>19</sup> See an essay by Igor Kopytoff in Oyèrónké Oyèwúmi (ed.), *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (New York, 2005), 127–44, for a discussion of flexibility in the definition of gender in African societies.



the male chiefs in the countries around her: she signed treaties, participated in peace negotiations, received delegations, sent out war parties and was even attacked, captured and held for ransom during this period. Many events surrounding Nyarroh's life refute Abraham's main thesis that women could not legitimately hold high political office in indigenous Mende politics; nevertheless, we will see that the Abraham thesis is recalled in several ways.

Nyarroh is described in the documentary record as chief of the Barrie country, a land bounded on the north by the Tunkia country, on the south by the Magbely country, and on the west by the Moa River, and running east to Mano. She is described as having succeeded her husband, Kahjay, as chief of Bandasuma upon his death. Usually designated as 'Queen' Nyarroh in written sources, she was the principal ruler of the Barrie country and Bandasuma from at least 1885 until her death in 1914.<sup>20</sup> In oral interviews conducted by Abraham, informants recounted that Nyarroh's holdings expanded beyond her own town of Bandasuma when she was given several others to oversee by her ally and lover Boakie Gomna, the influential chief of Tunkia, in appreciation of their relationship. According to this tradition, these towns, along with Bandasuma, became the Barrie country of which she was chief.<sup>21</sup> The documentary record proves that, as early as 1885, she was deeply involved in defending her country in the face of the ongoing warfare which characterized this period in the region's history.

I argue that Nyarroh was a land chief, an *ndo-mahei*, in a position that neatly fits the definition of *ndo-mahei* above. In many ways she is shown to be the primary authority in her country with the power to take action and negotiate on her own. Official correspondence indicates that, for the most part, she was treated as any other *ndo-mahei* would be. She was a principal player in the dramatic events of the late 1880s in the Gallinas country, and her role in this conflict was not substantially different from, and no less significant than, that of any other *ndo-mahei*. At the same time, she and her town had a place in the configuration of players and events that may in fact be linked to her identity as a woman.

By 1885, when the British made an effort to negotiate an end to the war in Gallinas, two major factions had been actively fighting for three years. What had begun primarily as a dispute between two chiefs of the Upper Kittam River, Momo Kai Kai and Jabati, had drawn in their respective allies, and turned into a bitter struggle to assume control of the Massaquoi kingdom and its lucrative trade network (see Fig. 2). Boakie Gomna, called 'Bocary Governor' by the British, had allied himself with Jabati since 1882, and was widely regarded as a natural successor to the Massaquoi title. But his succession hopes were severely tainted by the widespread belief that he had planned the murder of the last title-holder, Prince Jaiah, in 1884. Nevertheless, many chiefs supported Boakie Gomna, most notably Jabati of Bomie, Nyarroh of Bandasuma, Abdul Lahai of Juring and the most powerful inland Mende king at that time, Mendegla. Opposing Boakie Gomna was Fawundu, a leading coastal chief allied with Momo Kai Kai, and most of the other down-river

<sup>20</sup> Sierra Leone Archives, *Records of Paramount Chiefs* (1899), 177.

<sup>21</sup> See Abraham, 'Women chiefs', 37 fn. 37.

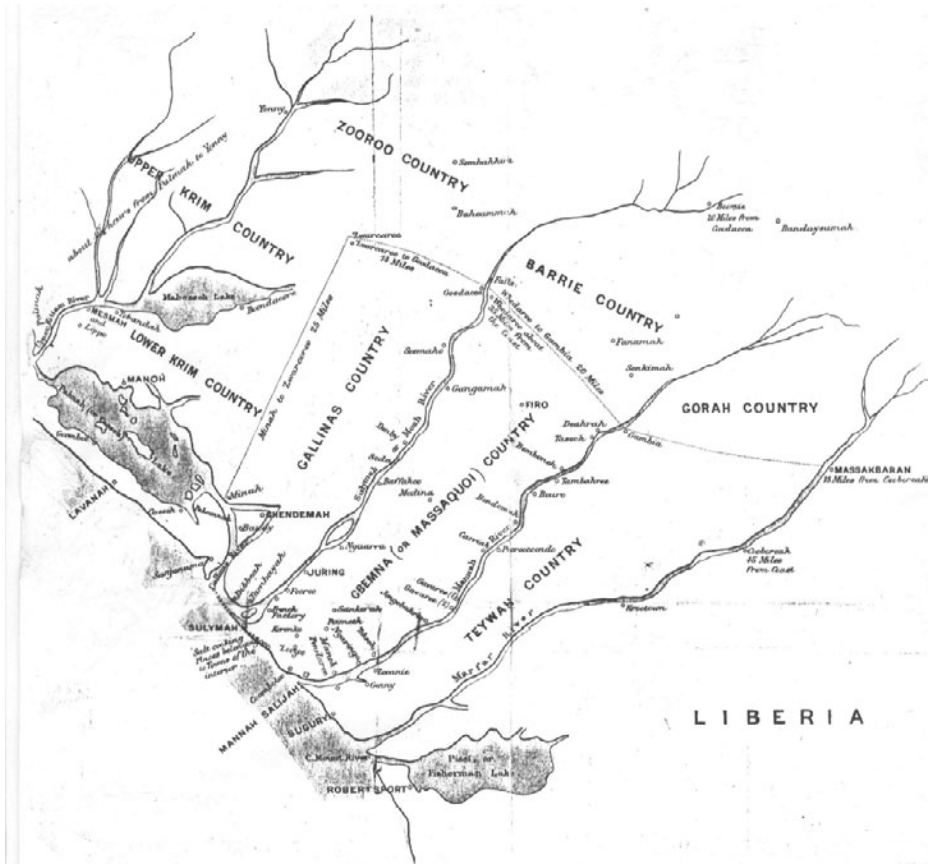


Fig. 2. Map of the interior and coast, north, south and west of Sulimah, drawn by Special Envoy, Major A. M. Festing in April 1885. PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:16–18) no. 16, enc. 1, Festing to Rowe, 14 April 1885.

chiefs.<sup>22</sup> Nearly every reference to actions taken by the Boakie Gomna faction, whether treaties, military actions, reprisals or peaceful negotiations, makes mention of Queen Nyarroh as one of the principal participants.

Nyarroh was first mentioned in official correspondence between the British West African governor and his representatives in April 1885. Major A. M. Festing, a special envoy of the Governor Samuel Rowe, had traveled to Mannie on the Sulimah River, to meet a warrior named Kobah who had conducted many devastating raids on the coastal villages then under British protection. The reader is first introduced to Nyarroh during an exchange between Festing and Kobah, at which the latter declared that he had been 'ordered' to make war by the interior chiefs and named seven of them, including Nyarroh of Badasuma. Kobah insisted that 'Governor must go to

<sup>22</sup> Adam Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels: a History of the Gallinas Country (West Africa), 1730–1890* (Wiesbaden, 1983), 15–16, 120–2, 144–7; Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP) 1886, LXVII (C 4642:10) no. 13, Rowe to Secretary of State (hereafter SS), 6 April 1885; *ibid.* (C 4642:52) no. 38, Rowe to SS, 18 July 1885.

Queen Narroy, at Bandazuma to make peace'.<sup>23</sup> Festing recommended that Governor Rowe make an effort to see Queen Nyarroh, 'as from Kobah's particularly mentioning her, I presume she is the moving spirit in these troubles'.<sup>24</sup>

Further revelations would show that Nyarroh was not the prime instigator of the war, but Kobah's remark that Festing should go to see her at Bandasuma to make peace, though initially puzzling, in fact forecasts Nyarroh's role as mediator and go-between in the conflict between the Upper Gallinas chiefs and the down-river chiefs.

A description of Nyarroh and her town reveals the possible influence she could wield in the unfolding involvement of the Colony Government in the affairs of the Gallinas interior. After Festing's 14 April letter to the governor, Nyarroh and her town are next mentioned by Edmund Peel, the government's civilian traveling envoy, who stopped in Bandasuma on 20 April as part of his tour of Upper Gallinas towns. He depicted Bandasuma as follows:

This town here is a large fenced town, by far the largest I have seen. It is situated on the left bank of the Sulimah River, which is very broad here, but very rocky. The outer fence of the town goes right down to the bank of the river. I was well-received here and have seen all the principal people of the place. The head person is a woman called Mammy Gnaro [Nyarroh] who speaks English very fairly.<sup>25</sup>

Already we see that Nyarroh welcomed this envoy of the governor. How it is that she spoke English is never explained, but would have to be a hopeful sign for any representative of the British government seeking friends and allies in the interior.

The correspondence from her, to her and referring to her makes it clear that Nyarroh is an independent land chief and an equal member of the up-river alliance. In spite of being described by Peel as being 'under' Boakie Gomna, and being 'in daily communication' with him, Nyarroh apparently exercised considerable freedom of action. For example the Bandasuma people had made a separate peace with one of Boakie Gomna's enemies, a move that had caused Nyarroh and her elders a bit of trouble.<sup>26</sup> We do not know if Boakie Gomna had approved of this or not, but Nyarroh sent her messengers to deliver Peel's 21 April letter to the governor along with her own message inviting him to Bandasuma and assuring him that the other important chiefs of the region would come there to meet him. The governor reported her message as follows:

... she was exceedingly glad to hear that I had come to the country to settle the war; that she put herself entirely in the hands of the Governor, that she was willing to come and see me at Sulimah, that, whether Boccary Governor or Bye Jahbee [Jabati], or the others fighting this war, were satisfied or not, she put herself entirely in my hands, and that she was sending messengers to Mendingrah to tell him so.<sup>27</sup>

Her paraphrased message to Rowe illustrates her place in the alliance, including the political moves she could make on her own as well as the

<sup>23</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:17) no. 16, enc.1, Festing to Rowe, 14 April 1885.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>25</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:20) no. 17, enc., Peel to Rowe, 21 April 1885.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>27</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:19) no. 17, Rowe to SS, 24 April 1885.

allegiance she owed to Mendegla (alternately spelled Mendingrah), her overlord from farther in the interior, one of the four 'kings' of Mende country at this time (see Fig. 1). In his reply dated 22 April, Governor Rowe expressed his interest in, and intention of, visiting Bandasuma to 'make the acquaintance of Queen Nyarroh'.<sup>28</sup>

The initial arrangements between Nyarroh and the governor demonstrate her position as an independent member of the network of Upper Gallinas chiefs. Nyarroh was extended the same official protocol as other chiefs. Before his visit, Governor Rowe sent his envoy Mr. Peel to present her with the usual gifts the government gave important chiefs, in order to 'shake hand', i.e. establish a friendly relationship.<sup>29</sup> She conducted the business of governance in the manner of other chiefs; clearing the roads, for example, was one of the primary responsibilities of land chiefs. She had promised the governor to clean and brush the road between Bandasuma and Kobah's town, Fanima, and, at her order, the twelve miles of road between the two towns was quickly cleared for his trip.<sup>30</sup>

Bandasuma's prominent geographical location and large population may help explain both Nyarroh's position in the up-river alliance and the interest government officials showed in her and her town. Indeed, Bandasuma was described as the most densely populated permanently settled town above the headwaters of the Sulimah River. A British commissioner some years later described it as 'a very noted town, a market center with well traveled roads to the inland countries of Tunkia and Gaura'.<sup>31</sup> Governor Rowe apparently believed it possessed great potential commercial value. As part of his justification for going, the governor wrote to the secretary of state on 24 April as follows:

I have been well aware that, if I could carry my party to Bandasuma, I should get in touch with the inland tribe of the Vei or Gallinas as this is the most effectual way of promoting trade of the settlement. I consider that having already given so much time, trouble, and expense to effect this, it was worthwhile to make another effort to visit Bandasuma.<sup>32</sup>

In an 1886 memo, Rowe made it clear that his major concern in settling the disputes in Upper Gallinas was 'to keep open the three important roads which lead from Bandasuma to Kittam, from Bandasuma inland by Juru and the Damala country'.<sup>33</sup> By then, the town had already come to the attention of Freetown commercial interests, as illustrated by a June 1885 article that appeared in the *Sierra Leone Church Times* touting it as the gateway to untouched interior sources of palm kernels and palm oil.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:64) no. 38, enc. 10, Rowe to Peel, 22 April 1885.

<sup>29</sup> '[The boys] carry with them 20lbs. of tobacco for you which you can make a present to Queen Nyarroh, and one case of gin, and one piece white cloth, and one handkerchief as a present to her'. PP 1886 LXVII (C 4642:64), Rowe to Peel, 22 April 1885.

<sup>30</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:66) no. 38, enc. 13, Peel to Rowe, 25 April 1885.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas J. Alldridge, *The Sherbro and Its Hinterland* (London, 1901), 166.

<sup>32</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:19), Rowe to SS, 24 April 1885.

<sup>33</sup> PP 1888, LXVII (C 4905:19), Rowe to Peel, 30 March 1886.

<sup>34</sup> 'Beyond the Gallinas country there lies that hitherto unknown tract of country but lately penetrated by His Excellency, Sir Samuel Rowe, known as the Barrie Country: seldom if ever visited by Europeans and hardly ever by Sierra Leone traders. The position

On 25 April 1885, Governor Rowe arrived in Bandasuma. At his request, Nyarroh invited many of the war leaders and land chiefs of the Upper Gallinas who had been instrumental in carrying on the war with the coastal people to meet him. Most notable of these was Boakie Gomna, as mentioned above, one of the two strong aspirants to the Massaquoi title. During Governor Rowe's visit, Nyarroh kept her messengers busy traveling the roads, maintained constant communications with her sub-chiefs, her main ally Boakie Gomna and their mutual overlord, Mendegla.<sup>35</sup> From his base in Bandasuma, Rowe carried on two weeks of meetings and negotiations during which many of the Upper Gallinas chiefs, including Boakie Gomna, agreed to accompany him to the coast to sign a peace agreement the very next month. The efficiency with which the governor conducted his business in Bandasuma attests to the influence which his hostess wielded among her allies.<sup>36</sup>

#### NYARROH AND WARFARE

Like the other chiefs and contrary to Abraham's assertion, Nyarroh participated in military affairs. It is true that she did not personally carry spears and guns, but neither did any of the other important, well-established land chiefs. Like them, she had 'war boys' who led raids on her behalf or defended her town against attack, and who could be lent or hired out to fight for her allies.<sup>37</sup> In January 1886, Edmund Peel, trying to settle new outbreaks of war, referred to warriors in one of the interior towns as follows: 'I have heard that nearly all the war boys [there] belonged to Mendingra [Mendegla] and Queen Nyarroh'.<sup>38</sup> She also retained *krubas*, or war leaders who were responsible for organizing and commanding her cadres of armed men. Peel identified Jakka Margay and Momodu Bongay as 'Queen Nyarroh's Kroobars', on one occasion, and named Momo (Momodu) Bongay as her

---

of its principal town, Bandazuma, as a trading centre, renders it of such importance to the commercial community that it cannot but be said to be peculiarly fortunate that it has been opened to commerce in these trying times. From it there are roads to the Toonchia country rich in palm kernels and palm oil, the Wenday and Gowrah and other districts beyond as yet uninvaded by traders; it is within easy access of both Yonnie and Mesmah in the Kittam and is not very distant from Sulimah ... Rich in produce which its people would gladly exchange for European products, it is undoubtedly one of the finest markets which has for some time presented itself, and which it is to be hoped, now that peace has been restored to the district, and it has been opened to the traders of all nationalities, will not long remain undeveloped ... It is said that not far inland of it, is a district known as the Conyah country, where horses run wild, and every thing is plentiful; in time, perhaps, enterprising men of commerce might tap even this region from it; at present, however, to get in the thin edge of the wedge in the Barrie country at Bandazuma is what is required, and that which awaits to be done'. PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:69) no. 38, enc. 19, *Sierra Leone Church Times*, 17 June 1885.

<sup>35</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:49) no. 37, Rowe to SS, 17 July 1885.

<sup>36</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:21–7, 43–61).

<sup>37</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4905:5, 8) Peel to Rowe, 9 Jan. 1886 and 21 Jan. 1886; author's interview with A. B. M. Jah, Pujehun, 26 May 1981.

<sup>38</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4905:8) Peel to Rowe, 21 Jan. 1886.

'head Kroobar', on another occasion.<sup>39</sup> While Nyarroh maintained a certain amount of control over her own *krubas*, the relationship between land chiefs and hired warriors was never stable. Like other land chiefs at the time, Nyarroh had to fear the mercenary war chiefs available for hire in the region. The British officials often cited the war chiefs as ultimately responsible for the unsettled conditions in the interior. They were described by British officials as 'lawless ruffians' committing 'independent acts of violence and plundering': 'The chiefs on both sides are utterly powerless to control these fellows, who plunder and murder, and above all catch slaves in any direction they think fit to go'.<sup>40</sup> It was well known that if the war boys or their leaders felt they had not been properly paid, they would turn against their hosts and extort what they saw as their just due. They were treacherous, switching sides at will and available for hire to the highest bidder. The warrior Kobah, whom Festing interviewed in April 1885 (see fn. 23), presented just such a threat to Nyarroh. This fear of treachery seems to have prompted the tension between Nyarroh and Kobah leading to the latter being killed in Bandasuma in November 1885.

Indeed the times seemed to require the use of war as a policy option. The record of correspondence after November 1885 is full of references to war-making or defensive measures taken by Nyarroh's warriors. The killing of Kobah that November, for example, seems to have been a calculated risk on the part of Nyarroh and her 'war boys', one that clearly exposed her and her town to great danger. But violence and bloodshed was part of the arsenal of governance at that time. Concerned about yet another threat to the stability of the region, the Governor's envoy, Edmund Peel, traveled to Bandasuma in December 1885 to investigate Kobah's death. After conducting several interviews with Nyarroh, her head *kruba*, Momo Bongay, and others, Peel set down a reconstruction of how Kobah came to be killed in Bandasuma:

The Queen told me that Cobah was sending presents to Darwah to induce him to bring war to Bandasuma ... Cobah then said, 'I will go to Bandasuma myself and take "my people"', ... He stopped at Fanima one night and drank a lot of rum, and the next day started for Bandasuma by bush road with his war boys. He slept one night in the bush, and at midday following, thinking that all the people would be scattered in the bush, he with four followers entered by the gate at the riverside whilst his war boys went in by the other gate and scattered about the town. Cobah then met Nuah Bannah, Jake, Sandy, and other people in the yard of one Bengi, a nephew of Queen Nyarroh. Nyarroh, seeing all Cobah's people in the town, called out, 'War has taken the town', ... Cobah then said to his boys, 'Fire'. They fired three guns, which missed Nuah Bannah but wounded some of his boys. Swords were then drawn, and they began to fight. Cobah had wounded four men when Nuah Bannah cut him badly through the shoulder and arm. Cobah then called out, 'Let us go', and ran away ... His wound however weakened him and he fell down about 60 yards outside the upper gate, where they finished him off.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4905:9) Peel to Rowe, 24 Jan. 1886; *ibid.* (C 4642:101) no. 66, enc., Peel to Rowe, 20 Dec. 1885.

<sup>40</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:23) no. 19, Rowe to the Earl of Derby, 4 May 1885.

<sup>41</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:102) no. 6, enc., Peel to Rowe, 20 Dec. 1885.

And, indeed, the threat of attack on Bandasuma after Kobah was killed in November 1885 was Nyarroh's chief concern, from then until 11 April 1887 when her town was sacked and she was taken prisoner.

Though the government had hoped to position Bandasuma as a neutral location, the town and its queen were nevertheless targets for revenge over the next two years as Kobah's allies, led by the *kɔ-mahei* Ndawa, sought to avenge his death. Nyarroh's plans to defend herself and her people in the face of continuing threats by Ndawa illustrate her policy-making role in warfare. On this issue, she refused to retreat from a war footing. She insisted that, though Kobah had been killed, she would seek to destroy his followers and supporters. Peel wrote as follows:

I told the Queen that if Cobah had done this, he had deserved his fate, but I said that now he was dead and his people scattered nothing more must be done. I told her that the Fanima fence must be broken and the road kept open. The Queen would not listen to this, and said that if Cobah's people were not given up to them her people had sworn to bring war against the people who had them. I told her that this must not be, and that she would be held responsible if the fence was [not ?] broken. I repeated all this several times to her and she would not listen, she turned her face away and appears determined to let her people fight. She said that 'The Governor had tied their hands and allowed Darwah to come and flog them'.<sup>42</sup>

As a land chief, Nyarroh's principal responsibility was the protection and defense of her town and people. In the unsettled time of the wars for expansion and the control of trade in the Mende interior, land chiefs were forced to hire and maintain paid warriors and to establish alliances with war chiefs. Though she was not *kɔ-mahei*, she used the tactics of warfare to maintain her position of leadership.

#### NYARROH: THE MEDIATOR

Thus, as a land chief with hired warriors, Nyarroh acted exactly like other chiefs at her level in the political structure of late nineteenth-century Mendeland. At the same time, she seems to have held a unique position in the alliance. This especially holds true with regard to locating her town as neutral territory and herself as a mediator in some of the on-going efforts to defuse the wars. Bandasuma often served as a center for negotiations between rival factions in the disputes in the Upper Gallinas. We have already seen that Bandasuma was the site for Governor Rowe's first series of negotiations with the up-river chiefs in April 1885. Even into the next year, Bandasuma continued to function as the site of important meetings of the up-river alliance. In April 1886, Special Envoy Peel wrote that he was going to Bandasuma 'where I expect to find most of the chiefs gathered', and in particular that he had sent constables to Mendegla, 'telling him to meet me at Bandasuma'.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:102) no. 66, enc., Peel to Rowe, 20 Dec. 1885.

<sup>43</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 5540:53) no. 28, enc. 2, Peel to Rowe, 10 April 1886.

Though Bandasuma often functioned as neutral territory during these years, two specific meetings, one held in 1889 and one held in 1893, particularly illustrate this role.

In 1889, Nyarroh hosted the first meeting between Mendegla [Mendingra] and the governor's Travelling Commissioner, Thomas J. Alldridge. It was there that a treaty of friendship was signed between them. And in 1893, Nyarroh hosted a meeting between all the chiefs of that region and Sir Francis Fleming, the governor of the West African Territories.

In 1889, Travelling Commissioner Alldridge made his first trip into this part of the Sierra Leone hinterland, intending to make a treaty with Mendegla, who had not been a signatory to the May 1885 Lavannah Agreement with Governor Rowe: 'My object was to consult at Bandasuma with the great Mendingra of the Gaura country'.<sup>44</sup> Mendegla arrived about noon on the appointed day and the meeting took place that afternoon: 'An hour afterwards [after Mendegla's arrival] I held the large meeting in the *barri* [large roofed structure maintained by chiefs for meetings] which was attended by a great concourse of people and many chiefs'.<sup>45</sup> Alldridge only explicitly mentions Nyarroh's participation when he writes that she 'did me the honour of taking my arm and allowing me to escort her to the *barri*'.<sup>46</sup> However, any meeting of this nature could only have taken place in the chief's town with her active logistical support.

An even larger gathering, one requiring even more organizational skill, took place in 1893, when Nyarroh hosted a historic meeting between the West African territories governor, Sir Francis Fleming, and all the treaty chiefs (signatories to treaties of friendship with the British government) of Upper Mende. By this time, Mendegla had died and his successor Batte Kaka was the most important of the Upper Mende chiefs to attend this meeting. Batte Kaka and Alldridge, together with their respective retainues and those of other chiefs, numbering over 200 people, met in Bandasuma. Alldridge made a special note of the hostess's thorough preparations.

In half an hour we entered the town of Bandasuma when I found that every possible arrangement had been made for our comfort. The inhabitants had practically given over the town for our use and had located themselves in some of the surrounding *fakais* [adjacent farms]. The place was beautifully clean and furnished up: a gigantic shed had been specially erected for the meeting as well as two large sheds for the carriers and a house for the Governor. The chiefs seemed very much pleased with the state of the town, the condition of the roads, and the thought that had been bestowed upon the preparations for their comfort.<sup>47</sup>

The importance of this meeting was attested to by the fact that two treaty chiefs from the Kittam River, who had been on the opposing side during the previous war, Momo Jah and Momo Kai Kai, attended, as did representatives of Kailondo, one of the other kings of the four 'personal-amorphous states' identified by Abraham.

But why did Bandasuma become the center for negotiations in this region? Was it simply a matter of its convenient location, or were there other reasons for this? On one hand, Bandasuma's special position recalls Abraham's

<sup>44</sup> Alldridge, *The Sherbro and Its Hinterland*, 166.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 169.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 170.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 259–60.



argument that women chiefs were British collaborators and that Governor Rowe, by choosing Bandasuma as his northern outpost in 1885, engineered its position as a diplomatic center. We have seen that during his first visit to Upper Gallinas in April 1885, he stayed for nearly two weeks with Nyarroh and from there sent messages inviting her allies to meet with him. Furthermore, the Lavannah Agreement of 16 May 1885, drawn up under the governor's supervision, contained a provision specifically calling for the neutrality of Bandasuma. Provision no. 6 of the seven-provision agreement reads as follows:

And in consideration of the assistance given to his Excellency Sir Samuel Rowe by Queen Nyarroh of Bandasuma, in receiving him in her town and in inviting the various Chiefs her neighbors to assist him, we hereby agree that the town of Bandasumah *being under the rule of a woman* [emphasis added] shall be considered to be a neutral town and we promise that we will not interfere with it in any of our disputes and that the road from Bandasumah through Singahmah to the Sulymah River at Manee or Wheedarroh shall be considered to be one of the trade routes with regard to which we have promised that the Governor of Sierra Leone shall have a right to cause such work to be done as may seem fitting to him.<sup>48</sup>

With renewed fighting in the Gallinas and rumors of impending attacks on Bandasuma, Rowe wrote to Mackavoray in January 1886 reminding him of Bandasuma's stipulated neutrality.

I have sent messengers to him, [Ndawa] and my officer has gone also to tell him that I will not have Bandasuma destroyed. It is down in the last treaty I made at Lavannah, that no war would attack Bandasuma, and if Darwah or any one else does attack it, they can never be my friends or the friends of my Queen. Send and tell him what I now write to you, *advise him, warn him* not to attack *Bandasuma*, [emphasis in original] or to disturb the peace of that part of the country.<sup>49</sup>

And there are several references to the fact that Bandasuma was 'His Excellency's town', as if the governor 'owned' it and had become its new landlord.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, several examples demonstrate that even without the specific direction of Governor Rowe, the players in the Upper Gallinas wars convened at Bandasuma and considered it neutral ground, or at least the most appropriate place for peace negotiations. For example, in May 1885, just after the Lavannah Agreement, one of Boakie Gomna's old allies in the war made an unsanctioned raid on their former enemies. Of his own accord, Boakie Gomna sent messengers to Mendegla (the most powerful war lord on his side), the offending ally and others, inviting them to meet him at Bandasuma to reach an agreement among them all.<sup>51</sup> The next year, Foray Gogra, another of Nyarroh's allies, wrote to the governor saying that he had

<sup>48</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:55–6) no. 38, enc. 1, Lavannah Agreement, 16 May 1885.

<sup>49</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4840:25) no. 17, enc. 5, Rowe to Mackavoray of Tikonkoh, 21 Jan. 1886.

<sup>50</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4905:3) Peel to Rowe, 7 Dec. 1885; PP 1887, LX (C 5236:47) Conversation between Rowe and Momo Jah, 6 Feb. 1887.

<sup>51</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:67) no. 38, enc. 17, Festing to Rowe, 29 May 1885.

called his people together at Bandasuma and pledged them to peace.<sup>52</sup> The fact that Nyarroh's town was the site of crucial meetings, while supporting the contention that she was a prominent member of the alliance of Upper Mende chiefs, also demonstrates the uniqueness of her position. In spite of her legitimacy as a political ruler, her participation in the alliance of other land chiefs in this region, and even her role in warfare, she was distinctly marked as different because of her gender. Indeed, she seems to have taken on the role of a mediator, perhaps by the very fact of her gender, as stated in the Lavannah Agreement (see p. 431).<sup>53</sup>

There is undoubtedly a precedent in Mende history of women acting as go-betweens in disputes between rival male combatants. Indeed, the typical peace overture in any military dispute was a woman dressed in white bearing presents to the opposing side.<sup>54</sup> Women – wives and daughters of war leaders – frequently appear in the historical record as message bearers in situations where direct contact between opposing factions would be dangerous or viewed as a sign of weakness. In April 1885, when Governor's Envoy Major Festing first travels into Gallinas country, Kobah's daughter personally relayed a message to him from her father. The war leader Makaia mentioned that the daughter of the chief of his enemies was 'in my place now presently' and that he had 'sent my wife with one man' to pay them a return visit.<sup>55</sup> Edmund Peel was visited by Boakie Gomna's nephew and 'one of his wives' to deliver a message.<sup>56</sup>

It may be that this traditional female role explains why, in spite of her involvement in the violent aspects of the war in Gallinas, Nyarroh was seen as the most appropriate of all the allies to host the governor on his peace mission. The cultural definition of women as non-combatants put her in the best position to mediate between the governor and her male allies and ease their fear of possible arrest and deportation. While the governor was in her town, Nyarroh was in constant communication with the other allies and kept them informed of the governor's intentions and actions. Indeed, rather than seeing her as a 'collaborator', a term applied by Abraham to women chiefs, it is more appropriate to see her as an ambassador acting as the line of first defense, in a safe position to 'feel out' the government's representatives, assess the danger of dealing with 'government', and thus protect her male allies. The same gendered identity that led naturally to her role as a mediator placed her at the margins of conventional practice, a woman in a man's

<sup>52</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4905:18) Peel to Rowe, 22 March 1886.

<sup>53</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:45) no. 36, enc. 1, Rowe to SS, 17 July 1885.

<sup>54</sup> Little, *The Mende*, 37; also J. Bokari, 'Mende warfare', *Farm and Forest* (April–June), 104. 'It is worth mentioning that if a chief desired to call for a cessation of hostilities between two forces, he would send as his representative a woman of fair coloured skin (*nyaha gowale*) with a white cloth (*kula-gole*) a gun (*kpande*) and salt (*kpolo*) to plead on his behalf'. See George Thompson, *Thompson in Africa* (New York, 1852), 130, 138–41, for a description of an unnamed woman 'ambadress' who was traveling from town to town trying to settle the war in the Kaw Mendi country near the Bum River in the 1840s.

<sup>55</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:16) no. 16, enc. 1, Festing to Rowe, 14 April 1885; PP 1886, LXVII (C 4840:27) no. 17, enc. 9, Mackaia to Rowe, 27 Feb. 1886.

<sup>56</sup> PP 1886, LXVII (C 4642:20) no. 17, enc., Peel to Rowe, 21 April 1885.

role: accepted, yes, and legitimate, but freer to negotiate the boundaries of convention adhered to by men in the same position.

The events surrounding Nyarroh's kidnapping and ransom confirm her position as a liminal figure in the configuration of power in the region. On 11 April 1887, the war leader Ndawa attacked Bandasuma in retaliation for Kobah's death there 17 months before. As Nyarroh had long feared, the town was plundered, its inhabitants killed or taken into slavery and she herself was taken prisoner. An English-speaking trader living in the town gave this account of the sacking of Bandasuma.

At 3 a.m. of the 11th of April the war party, headed by Darwah, entered the town of Bandasuma and took captive, besides the Queen and myself, 200 people ... Queen Nyarroh was removed from Bandasuma and taken to Woonday on the 19th of April ... She has been brutally treated since she has been taken captive; she was stripped and flogged on one occasion in my presence, and has been poorly fed ... I saw the warboys kill 25 men ... There were a number of persons drowned whilst endeavouring to cross the river to make their escape.<sup>57</sup>

Over the course of the next several months, Nyarroh was detained by Ndawa under threat of execution. In a message delivered to Governor Hay through Mackavoreh, Ndawa declares that he is justified in killing her:

as Nyarroh has killed his brother Corbah willfully he intends to kill the woman; he said that he knows that in England, according to white men law, he that kills a man willfully, that man who kills is to be killed.<sup>58</sup>

In spite of his declaration that he could lawfully execute her for the murder of Kobah, Ndawa participated in months of negotiations for her release. Nyarroh's newly acquired alliance with the British government meant that Ndawa had yet another power broker in the region with whom to contend. Indeed in the same message in which he justified her execution he subsequently stated that he would not kill her because he 'fear the Governor because he knows that Queen Nyarroh [*sic*] her for the Government'.<sup>59</sup>

And, indeed, the Colony Government did work to free Nyarroh from captivity. The correspondence relative to the Queen of Bandasuma over the next year refers to the negotiations the deputy governor of the Colony, Captain James Hay, and proto-state king and overlord to Ndawa, Mackavoreh, undertook to secure her release. Mackavoreh informed the governor of Ndawa's demands: 'but as I send the police constables with my men by the Government order he will not kill Nyarroh, neither ill-treat her, but the Governor must send some money worth while then he will deliver Nyarroh'.<sup>60</sup> Over the next several months, perhaps as long as a year, she was imprisoned, abused and held for ransom but not killed, the likely fate of a male chief who had been captured.<sup>61</sup> During the course of the negotiations, Nyarroh was positioned by the other players as unique, with

<sup>57</sup> PP 1887, LX (C 5236:118) no. 88, enc. 3, Statement of William Dixon, a trader of Bandasuma, sworn before the Civil Commandant at Sulimah, 5 May 1887.

<sup>58</sup> PP 1887, LX (C 5236:159) no. 117, enc. 1, Mackavoreh to Hay, 16 July 1887.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Ndawa had executed at least two male chiefs: one named Joya, who had been captured and whose town, Panderu, Ndawa had plundered, and the other named Sele, a town

special claims on the colonial government. Indeed, she positioned herself that way, as she called on the government's representatives to rescue her from her enemies.

The government's direct interest in her release is clear. The deputy governor kept the secretary of state abreast of this matter, and assured him that he would soon secure her release.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, he was particularly concerned that Nyarroh's ransom not become a pretext for enriching the kidnappers and the negotiators. For his part, Mackavoreh did indeed ask for more money to give to Ndawa to secure Nyarroh's release, but insisted that Nyarroh would be able to repay any money spent by the government when she was free.<sup>63</sup>

From the beginning of her travail, Nyarroh sent personal messages to the governor, begging for his intervention. Not only does her message reveal her assumption that she could call on the governor, but also she included the only racialized analysis ever expressed in any of these letters or transcripts of meetings by one of the Africans. Her initial cry for help is described by the trader, William Dixon:

I was instructed by Queen Nyarroh, when she was to be taking [*sic*] away to Wainday as captive on the 19th April, to write to his Excellency peradventure if I am not killed and should be taking to Sulymah or elsewhere, that if ever the British Government never [*sic*] did any kindness for a black man he must try to [*sic*] her away from the hands of her enemies. She had been taking away to Wainday, Dawah's town, near Mackah Furay's town, Ticonkoh, after so many brutal treatment [*sic*]. Hence she call with the hands of mercy on the English Government to get her away from this captivity. Farewell.<sup>64</sup>

In this message, Nyarroh challenges the Governor to help her out of his desire to do a 'kindness for a black man,' and thus expresses a consciousness of the condescending Victorian attitudes she had learned were prompting, at least in part, English interference in the affairs of her country. Nyarroh's appeal seems to indicate her awareness – one not expressed by any of the other chiefs or kings – of the scope or motivations of the British colonial enterprise.

The correspondence regarding the negotiations for Nyarroh's release ends by August 1887. Though it is not clear from this record exactly what happened, official correspondence from 1889 mentions that Nyarroh was in Freetown late in 1888.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps Ndawa accepted a ransom payment or perhaps Nyarroh was released after Ndawa was killed in battle by one

---

chief who had angered him. Arthur Abraham, *Introduction to the Precolonial History of Mende in Sierra Leone* (Lewiston NY, 2003), 99, 119.

<sup>62</sup> PP 1887, LX (C 5236:159) no. 117, Hay to Holland, 1 Aug. 1887.

<sup>63</sup> PP 1887, LX (C 5236:152) no. 117, enc. 2, Report of Privates Parkyns and Johnson who were dispatched with an Official Letter to Chief Marcofolie of Tikonko on 1st June 1887, 2 July 1887.

<sup>64</sup> PP 1887, LX (C 5236:118–19) no. 88, enc. 4, Dixon to Commandant, 2 May 1887.

<sup>65</sup> PP 1889, LVI. 853 (C 5740:89).

of Mandegla's warriors in July 1888.<sup>66</sup> By September 1889, Nyarroh was back home in Bandasuma. Traveling Commissioner T. J. Alldridge describes his visit to Bandasuma and the aftermath of the years of war. In 1889, he wrote:

My object was to consult at Bandasuma the great chief Mendingrah of the Gaura country ... We had not gone far ... before ... I saw many white objects on the ground which at first I hardly noticed, but which upon inspection I found to be bleached skulls ... In the line of destruction extending over many miles, not a town was to be seen ... Bandasuma, in the Barre country, was then and still is a very noted town, but it too had been destroyed during the war and was being rebuilt. The Queen, Niarro, of that country, had returned and was there with her sub-chiefs and some few people.<sup>67</sup>

Alldrige goes on to discuss the very large meeting at Bandasuma, which Mendegla (Mendingrah) attended, and at which Nyarroh was present. In this account, Alldrige gives no details of her involvement, other than the remark about having escorted her to the *barri*. I have earlier speculated that, as the host of the meeting, she would have personally overseen its planning and logistics. In 1890, she began receiving a government stipend, as did dozens of other chiefs who signed Alldrige's 1890 Treaty of Friendship. Some of her later recorded activities surround the meeting with Governor Fleming which took place in Bandasuma in 1893. She was still in place during the war of 1898 and in 1899 when the census of chiefs was made by the colonial government. Her daughter and namesake succeeded her as chief in 1914.<sup>68</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

This account of Nyarroh's life and career is part of an effort to recover the lives of women and locate them as agents in the historical events shaping the socio-political landscape of the past. Through the reconstructed quotes of several interlocutors, her own voice reshapes the parameters of African women's history as she is thus rendered a subject in this story, not merely an oddity in the larger masculinist narrative of the region's history. Her experiences expand our understanding of the ways women participated in both the continuities and turning points of history.<sup>69</sup>

Her story demonstrates that women could legitimately hold high executive office in the precolonial era. Nyarroh inherited her chieftaincy from her husband, gained more territory as a gift from her lover, and then held onto it through her own political maneuvers. She was a land chief and an equal partner in the alliance of land chiefs in Upper Gallinas when the British

<sup>66</sup> The death of Ndawa is described by Abraham in *Precolonial History of Mende*, 98–100, and reported in an 1889 dispatch from Sgt. Ben Johnson. Sierra Leone Archives, *Aborigine's Minute Papers* (1889) no. 209, Sgt. Johnson to Captain Le Poer, 28 Oct. 1889.

<sup>67</sup> Alldrige, *The Sherbro and Its Hinterland*, 166–7.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 259–62; Sierra Leone Archives, *Records of Paramount Chiefs* (1899), 177; author's interview with A. B. M. Jah, Pujehun, 26 May 1981.

<sup>69</sup> The introduction to Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson and Jane Rendall, *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (Bloomington, 1991), sets out a roadmap for historians attempting to articulate a feminist epistemology of the discipline.

arrived in the region. She carried out her basic responsibilities to her people, her allies and her overlord in the same manner as other land chiefs. Carol MacCormack's supposition that in the precolonial era women legitimately held posts as chiefs of the land, a position later codified as 'paramount chief', is supported by the evidence in this case.

However, as Abraham suggested, a female land chief was not the same as a male chief and was seen as fundamentally different because of her gender. Separate though complementary spheres of gender responsibilities led to an avenue of agency for this woman leader, such that, though a member of a war alliance, she took an active and central role as a peacemaker, a special and often cooperative relationship with the colonial government that on one level could certainly be interpreted as 'collaboration'. And indeed, Abraham rightly directs our attention to the effects of British colonial penetration and nascent market capitalism on their authority. While it is true that the separate spheres and responsibilities marking gender role distinctions in Mende society presupposed an autonomous location for female land chiefs, the forces of colonial rule and market capitalism undermined many pre-existing authority structures, though their effect on the rights and prerogatives of female leaders was neither simple nor uni-directional.

The *ndo-maheisia* of the Mende interior faced the challenges of escalating warfare and violence on the one hand and the encroachment of British authority on the other, leading to a need for creative responses as they sought to maintain or increase their power and protect their people. Though women chiefs operated within and alongside existing patriarchal structures, women exercised a type of autonomy in parallel spheres of influence and, as a mediator accepted as such by both the Mende chiefs and the colonial government, Nyarroh operated outside the confines of the rules generally set for male chiefs. In resisting the impulse to binary opposition, we can see that she self-reflexively positioned herself to respond to this pivotal moment in the history of the region.

Nyarroh's position at the intersecting boundaries of gender opened the way for her to make new rules and, perhaps more quickly than others, to see the way of the future. In the existing structure of alliances and clientship, Nyarroh fearlessly inaugurated a clientship relationship with the new and potentially most powerful, certainly the richest, overlord of all, the Colony Government. As a peacemaker and therefore 'friend' to the government, the successful negotiations for her release from captivity were carried out between high-ranking chiefs and the newest power brokers, British colonial officials. As her own capture and ransom demonstrated, the changing power dynamics at the end of the nineteenth century meant that fluidity in alliances, including one with the colonial government, could spell the difference between survival and death. Indeed, those who did not cooperate with the colonial government could be arrested and deported, the fate of the war leader Mackiah in 1889.<sup>70</sup>

This interrogation of a nineteenth-century Mende woman chief suggests that the paradigm of separate but complementary male and female spheres of responsibility informed understandings of legitimate authority and impacted

<sup>70</sup> A. B. C. Sibthorpe, *The History of Sierra Leone* (New York, 1971, edited with a new introduction by Robert W. July [London, 1906]), 108.

the gendered social structures within which African political relations operated. In Mendeland, gender was a separate category of social division, though mediated significantly by lineage, class and individual agency. As colonial officers sought to extend their influence in the Mende interior, legitimate representatives of the ‘owners of the land’ were prepared to preserve and defend their class position, the interests of their ruling lineages and their chiefdom’s people by any means available to them. The Colony Government, based then in Freetown, did not present the imminent threat of pillage, enslavement and death demonstrated by the war chiefs and their bands of armed men then menacing the interior. We have seen that colonial agents supported Nyarroh’s rights and prerogatives given that she shared their interest in establishing peaceful trade networks in the Mende interior. Nyarroh was a woman and a chief who, at the inception of the colonial era, represented the power that could be wielded on the borders of gendered authority.