

Poro on Trial: The 1913 Special Commission Court case of *Rex v. Fino, Bofio and Kalfalla*

Katrina H.B. Keefer

Abstract: In 1913, a Special Commission Court in Sierra Leone saw a series of trials concerning members of the Human Leopard Society, and conflated this society with the regional Poro Society. This article examines one of those trials and unearths motivations for murder and questions of bias. With the reinvention of identity in the shadow of slavery, a nuanced and complicated picture emerges of the situation. Though more questions than answers are offered by the details of the case, this article problematizes Sierra Leone under British authority, and shows a nuanced snapshot of power struggles playing out in a murder trial.

Résumé: En 1913, un tribunal de Commission Spéciale en Sierra Leone a vu une série de procès concernant des membres appartenant à la société humaine de Léopard et a confondu cette société avec la société régionale de Poro. Cet article examine l'un de ces procès et met en évidence des questions de partialité et de motivations de meurtre. Avec la réinvention d'une identité dans l'ombre de l'esclavage, émerge de cette situation une image nuancée et complexe. Bien que les détails de l'affaire offrent plus de questions que de réponses, cet article examine la Sierra Leone sous l'autorité britannique et offre un aperçu reconsidéré des luttes de pouvoir qui se déroulent durant un procès pour meurtre.

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Introduction

This article closely examines a trial from the early twentieth century in Sierra Leone that was prosecuted under the Special Commission Court there. The Court was convened largely to hear cases concerning ritual murders associated with “human-leopards.” This micro-historical analysis of a single case offers a view from the courtroom, so to speak, revealing the actual implementation of colonial legal mechanisms in Sierra Leone. It demonstrates how a variety of disparate interests coincided through the framework of a judicial process; those involved with this case and their testimony present snapshots of religious differences, tensions concerning domestic slavery, and conflict between colonial authority and indigenous spiritual power. This case also corresponds with a period of suppression of regional authority systems by colonial forces within Africa, but is nevertheless important due to Sierra Leone’s own unique history of settlement and the tensions between the long-established central Colony and the Protectorate of the interior.¹ This case may be better understood in terms of how it affected a central figure: the sole witness to the murders, a young man named Momo Baraka. As an enslaved man who had attempted to free himself by fleeing to Freetown only to be forcibly returned to his master, and as a Muslim who had recently been initiated into the regional Poro Society, many of the threads which this case represents circle around his experience. Unfortunately, all that can be known about Baraka is what is present within the records of this trial, which leaves any analysis with unanswered questions, but the ongoing tensions illuminated in this case are all present in what may be known about him. Analysis of the transcript permits scholars to see how individuals chose to re-fashion themselves within the legal context of a British courtroom, with Baraka seeking to reframe his status or by one of the accused publically distancing himself from the local Poro Society.

The case of *R. v. Fino, Bofio and Kalfalla* of January 1913, which the Special Commission heard concerning possible ritual murder, is a microcosm of various strands within the socio-cultural framework of the region.² It revolves around the southern part of the country, and the local chief there, whose removal through judicial action was a central element of this trial. Paul Richards has examined the crisis of chieftaincy which the reported rise in murders associated with both leopards and chimpanzees reflected around the end of the nineteenth century, and the inherent difficulties in unpacking this form of ritual killing.³ How the colonial authorities responded to the rise in reported murders of this nature, in the aftermath of the Hut Tax War of 1898, is an important nuance within which to examine this case

in detail alongside the efforts of the authorities to reify ways of approaching indigenous power structures and authorities.

The case in question concerns the murder of a young man being initiated into the regional Poro Society by a killer wearing the attire of the illegal Human Leopard Society. Two of those present were slaves, and the headman accused of the murder, Fino, was the master of Momo Baraka.⁴ This case is one in which realities on the ground concerning the structure of domestic slavery practiced at that time became a crucial feature for both the Crown and for the defense. Though this case was published in brief in 1915, a detailed analysis of the actual transcript demonstrates that not only did the author in question—Kenneth James Beatty, then Acting Attorney General for Sierra Leone—not accurately represent the events which took place, but more importantly, cannibalism was the least of the issues on hand in this case despite being a major stated fear surrounding “human-leopards.” Indeed, it was under laws enacted to criminalize membership in the Human Leopard Society that the defendants were prosecuted.⁵ Beatty’s analysis, which may be considered a snapshot of judicial opinion at that time given his role during the trials in question, directly conflates the Human Leopards with Poro, which makes the case a conflict between a major quasi-governmental structure and the aegis of British colonial rule.

Momo Baraka, in whose life many of these interweaving tensions cross, was the sole witness to the murder and ultimately had excellent motivation to see his master removed.⁶ His presumable interests, and the interests of the colonial judicial system in reducing the power of Protectorate chiefs and targeting members of the Poro Society, seem to have coincided. This trial offers a narrative of one man’s effort to use European fears for his own gain and to seek his emancipation in the context of domestic slavery; it also permits a glimpse of the motivations and flaws of the way that English criminal law was enacted in the early Protectorate. Broad parallels between the microhistory here and how colonial governments created strategies for grappling with indigenous systems of authority may also be drawn. Although it was in the scope of prosecution for murder and membership in the Human Leopard Society that this case was prosecuted, the witnesses within the case persistently use the word “cannibal” both to describe themselves and to describe what the case concerns, adding a nuance to the proceedings which cannot be ignored.⁷

The case deserves study for these reasons as well as for the variety of ways in which it may be analyzed and understood, presenting as it does a variety of simultaneous threads which must be teased out in order to better analyze the complex situation it describes. It is an example of one of a number of cases brought during the creation of the Special Commission Court of the time, and represents a number of important sociocultural narratives in Sierra Leonean history. The record of the case in question is a transcript held in the Sierra Leone Public Archives at Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and the typed court transcript replicates testimony and includes handwritten marginalia describing speakers. Although six other

cases were conducted during the period of this Special Commission Court, none have been unearthed as yet in the archive, despite continuing efforts.

Poro and the Upper Guinea Coast

Poro and its associated societies such as Sande, Sumoe, and Bili all act to control and maintain the boundaries between the realm of spirits and the material sphere of humanity, ritually inducting youths into an accepted otherworld for their initiations before returning them to the world of their families, changed by their contact with the spirits. Each society possesses a sphere of influence—for Poro, it is the initiation of young males. This initiation marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, and serves not only to cement social ties but also to educate youths about their role in society and the expectations which are to surround them for their lives as adults. In the early nineteenth century, the word “purrah” was generally used to describe the West African secret society reserved primarily for boys. Captain C. Braithwaite Wallis, a former militia officer from England who worked as a tax collector in the hinterlands of Sierra Leone, described Poro in a 1905 article, stating that “Poro” directly meant “law,” and from personal experience, he defined the society as being “the governing and ruling power of the natives, and embodies everything or anything good or bad in the country, that requires framing into order, keeping secret among the masses, guarding as public property, and making into law” (Wallis 1905:183). Christopher Fyfe’s history of Sierra Leone defines the governing role of Poro as being consistent throughout the history of the region, and as serving to frame social order. “Its origins like its mysteries remain hidden from the uninitiated... it kept the country quiet, enforced obedience to its orders, and forbade woman and the uninitiated to witness its rites” (Fyfe 1962:3). This level of secrecy lent credence to colonial fears concerning cannibalism or any other ritual behavior which they as outsiders could only imagine, forbidden as they were by taboo to witness what took place in Poro meetings. Perhaps more importantly, the pervasive and longstanding Poro authority regionally presented a direct challenge to British hegemony and ambitions within the Protectorate.

Poro further works as a judiciary, enforcing cultural norms and adjudicating wrongdoing, often leading to execution. Some evidence suggests that those who were responsible for such executions were those inducted into the Leopard Society, making them essentially enforcers of Poro. Diplomacy and matters of alliances between chiefdoms was also a Poro matter as with its central organizing function during the Hut Tax War. However, what was even more of a challenge to British ideas of government and centralized structures of authority was that the nature of Poro was unlike European systems of authority (Fulton 1972:1218–1219). The Poro society’s activities, specifically their consumption of human beings, has been remarked upon by George Harley and subsequent scholars, but the evidence behind that assertion can be difficult to prove.

Poro was and remains an organization which educates, governs, and regulates life throughout this large region spanning multiple ethnic groups, but it is not itself a singular centralized government. When boys reach a certain age, they are removed from their families to enter the “Poro bush,” an initiation camp where they are subject to masked adult males; these men, in the guise of spirits, educate the youths concerning the roles to be played in their adult lives. Richard Fulton observed that for many outsiders, only the location within which boys learned their adult roles was generally seen:

All sacrifices and ceremonies are held within the 'sacred grove' of the Poro society; only the 'bush school' of the Poro is visible. This institution is the ritualistic, cultural socialization mechanism used to initiate adolescents into the adult community. The 'schools' are conducted to teach men and women (in separate sessions lasting now for some weeks, but traditionally for some years) farming, cooking, herb techniques, sex education, hunting, and rules of the culture not already assimilated (with special and added emphasis on authority structures)-in short, anything that a person needs to know in order to survive in this culture. It is not hard to comprehend the power of the Poro when we realize the variety of functions that it performs, educationally, religiously, medically, and politically. (Fulton 1972:1222)

The “bush school” and its role in education, together with the hierarchies of men who run it, tend to be agreed upon in their general composition between scholars after Harley. Each Poro is slightly different, depending upon which ethnic group practices it, but all share the function of the forest initiation camp or “bush school,” and the fundamental hierarchy of initiation through ranks within Poro. For smaller chiefdoms without a sanctified forest area, ritual observances have to be met through the aid of a neighboring Poro initiation camp, as seen in the testimony from the case at hand; the removal of the boys from their original school was central to the murder, as it removed them from the normal initiatory practice and the oversight of Society authorities.

Recognizing the initiation camp's importance and how even an outsider could not fail to know its function and meaning locally became a matter later on in the case discussed here. One of the accused, the Alimani Kalfalla, states that he was taken to the initiation camp's sacred precincts and was deeply fearful for his life, while the events of the case took place after initiates were removed from their assigned school.

The Human Leopards

Later beliefs concerning anthropagus elements within Poro offer a complication of efforts to clearly differentiate Human Leopards from Poro Society members, and deserve mention for that reason alone, as the conflation of the two by barristers who presided over this series of trials is troubling.⁸ In Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, it was Poro which acted to

regulate all matters concerning adult males, and the connections between Poro and the Leopard Societies was a matter of concern to the Christian government officials for reasons both religious and political. The belief seemed to be, among the barristers like Beatty who were engaged in these cases, that every member of Poro was a Human Leopard, and every Human Leopard was a member of Poro (Beatty 1915:20; Gray 1916:196). This assumption would have been difficult to disprove, as a major element of the Society is its secrecy even today, but was clearly an oversimplification and misunderstanding of a very much more complex system. Anthropologists and ethnologists studying Poro have found it difficult to examine in large part due to the taboo against allowing outsiders to understand the hierarchy and rituals of the society. However, scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did differentiate between Poro and the Human Leopards, and noted that various chiefs had considered the Human Leopards a criminal group. That Beatty was either unaware of these conclusions or disregarded them is notable.

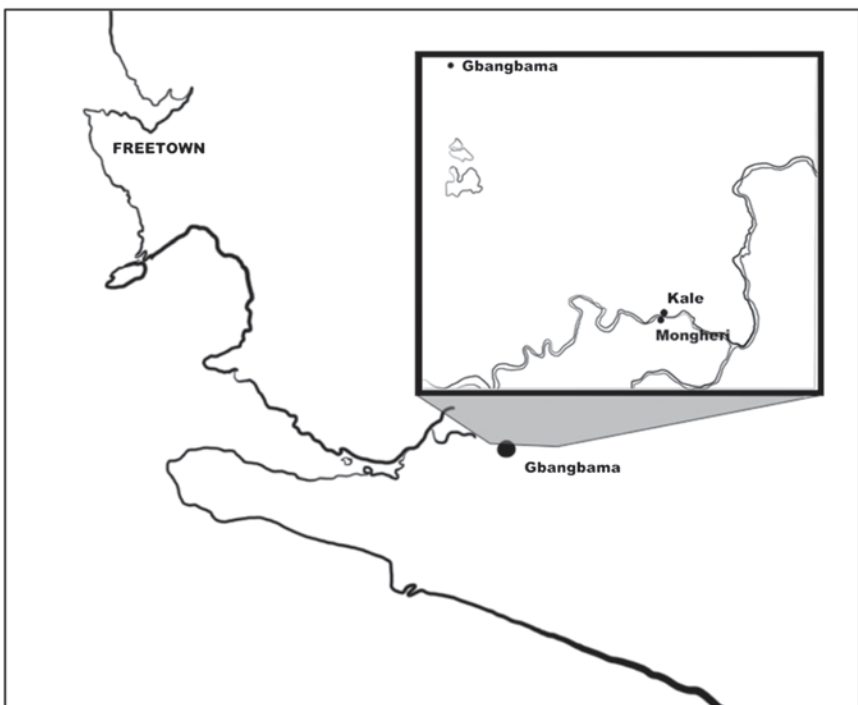
According to evidence given at the enquiry before Sir D. P. Chalmers into the insurrection in Sierra Leone in 1898, it appears that about 1880–81 the chief of Tyama detected nearly 100 members, and burnt them. In 1883–84 a chief of Mano, called Cardini, burnt a sub-chief and about 80 others as members, and there are other instances. Nevertheless the society survived, and it was found necessary in 1896 to pass “The Human Leopard and Alligator Society Ordinance” for its suppression.⁹

To the British barristers and legislators involved with the colony and governance, Poro was a challenge and threat to civil society, and the “Human Leopard Society” specifically was an overtly cannibalistic group which “terrorised large provinces of the Protectorate” (Gray 1916:196). The Special Court cases and the widespread arrests and punishments for those found guilty are treated by such accounts as a reasonable response to an “outbreak” of supposedly “suppressed” secret societies (Newland 1916:130). Again, this narrative and the language which was used during this period to stigmatize membership in what had been a form of regional government should be considered in light of British ambitions within the inland regions of Sierra Leone at that point.¹⁰ This rhetoric must also be seen within the narrative of colonization as a civilizing factor, with ritual murder, possible cannibalism, and human sacrifice all serving as examples of the “barbaric” in need of European enlightenment.¹¹ That said, it should not be over-emphasized that the British colonial authorities were targeting Poro directly or even consciously. As Thomas Spear has argued, colonial use of customary laws and the expansion of judicial systems over outlying regions is often examined and framed in ways which overstate the efforts of the colonial rulers to establish a hegemony (Spear 2003:5–6). In practice, Spear suggests that cultural traditions and judicial practices are shaped by far more complex factors and tensions. This is supported by the various social, religious, and colonial pressures visible in this single case.

R. V. Fino, Bofio and Kalfalla

This trial was held at Gbangbama in the Northern Sherbro District and Imperri Chiefdom (See Figure 1) in December of 1912 and into 1913 according to Beatty, and the Court comprised Sir William Brandford Griffith (Chief Justice of the Gold Coast until 1911) and Acting Attorney Generals Van der Meulen and Beatty.¹² The charges laid concern a so-called leopard murder in the spring of 1911; testimony places it as approximately two years prior, but the overall timing is unclear within the transcript. Four young men entered into the “Forro bush” of Senehun under the Poro headman or Kumrabui Senesi that year, summoned by a “Forro Devil” to enter into their initiation.¹³ However, for reasons which are given variously during the testimony but which tend toward needing help with farm work like the planting of rice, Fino, and his close friend Bofio went to the initiation camp to recover the four boys—Momo Baraka, Joe, Bangaun, and the victim, Kalfalla the son of Fino. According to Bangaun, Fino argued vehemently to move the boys from the Senehun Poro camp to the Kale forest camp, begging and pleading with Senesi before it was permitted. Fino was the headman of Kale, and his line reportedly held that rank due to the authority of the Alimani Kalfalla and his predecessors at Mongheri, while both

Figure 1. Map of Region with Places Marked



answered to the Paramount Chief Bunting Williams. Fino elected to have the boys undergo their initiation at Kale, reportedly building a structure for them to remain within to preserve their ritual isolation. His justification was his need for the boys for agriculture, and he reportedly swore to preserve their ritual isolation during this period.

However, the structure he had the young men sleep in proved to be infested with insects (jiggers), and upon discovering this, Joe's account states that Fino ordered them to sleep in a barry (a cleared area with walls built at the back and sides) near the town by the Kale Poro camp. Notably, a law is mentioned later in the trial which penalized sleeping in an open place like a barry, but Fino nonetheless had the boys move there. The barry belonged to Fino, and each boy slept on a mat on the ground for four nights.

On the fourth night, after the Alimani Kalfalla had come that day, Momo Baraka woke the rest of the group and the local people by crying out that a "*korɛ*" had caught the boy Kalfalla. The victim was agreed to have suffered a considerable wound to his face, literally tearing or cutting the cheek open enough that witnesses stated that they could see his teeth through his cheek. Additionally, Kalfalla's throat had been slit so that it gaped wide, and a stab wound was present in his skull. The town was roused, and Fino, his friend Bofio, and Kalfalla of Mongheri took counsel with the other men, some of whom took the time to examine the body. Fino's step-son Bangali indicates that upon the discovery of the murder, Fino wept and cried out. It was decided to bury Kalfalla hastily, and to tell the story if asked that his death had been a tragic accident caused by a snake bite, although the explanation for this decision was unclear and varied from witness to witness. This was a flagrant violation of Poro law, and Senesi, whose Poro camp the victim had been removed from, took umbrage at the way in which the town's headman had chosen to bury the young initiate. Senesi demanded that the victim be unburied for examination, and eventually required a heavy bribe not to pressure Fino further. This was the agreed-upon narrative of the events which took place that March on the fourth night of the initiates in the barry near Fino's home by the Kale Poro camp near the town of Kale. Fino and Bofio were accused of the murder and of belonging to the Leopard Society, while Kalfalla of Mongheri was accused of covering up their crime and of also being a Human Leopard.

Examination, Analysis, and Cross-Examination

Notable features begin to emerge from the details of the testimony upon a closer examination. Religious differences emerge, with the revelation that the Crown's primary witness is Muslim, though he was sworn to tell the truth by the "Mendi religious oath." Kalfalla of Mongheri, also a Muslim, claimed that he endured a level of persecution for his beliefs from Poro members who had given testimony at that stage of the proceedings, presenting a fascinating glimpse of ongoing tensions in that region of Sierra Leone at that time and distinguishing himself from testimony by Poro members asserting that he was

trusted to enter the initiation camp. Perhaps the most intriguing narrative which gradually emerges is that of Momo Baraka himself, presented by the defense as a rebellious slave of Fino who had already fled to Freetown once only to be reportedly brought back to Kale by Fino and his step-son Bangali. He is also later revealed to have been himself a Human Leopard, having joined that group after the murder, and having been convicted and turning Crown witness.¹⁴ Unlike his comrade Joe, who willingly agrees that he belongs to Fino as a slave alongside Baraka, Momo Baraka's choice to bring evidence against a man revealed conclusively to be his owner is noteworthy for the purposes of analysis in the context of domestic slavery within Sierra Leone.

As each witness is introduced into the record, they were sworn to speak the truth, and it is within this portion of the transcript that regional tensions between Poro members and Muslims are made clear. For the majority of those who speak, their oath is defined as either the "country oath" or "swearing by Mendi." The colonial authorities were well aware of what they called medicines, and demanded that Mende witnesses say the following words:

I (name of witness) swear by this medicine to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Should I tell a lie, if I go to the farm may snake bite me, if I travel by canoe may the canoe sink, and may my belly be swollen. I swear by my liver, my lungs, my kidneys, and my heart that, should I tell a lie, may I never be saved, but may I die suddenly. (Beatty 1915:26)

Only three of the men examined took another oath, and their circumstances make their testimony of particular interest. Momo Baraka was first given the "country oath," but was then called back and examined later on during the trial when it was discovered that he was Muslim.

Q: Are you a Mahomeddan?

Momo: Yes.

Q: Who gave you the name Baraka?

Momo: Bokari

Q: You took the country oath?

Momo: Yes

Q: Was that and is that binding on your conscience?

Momo: Yes, because as I swear if I tell a lie I will die.

Kalfalla of Mongheri, one of the accused, swore on the Qu'ran, as did Baraka's former master Bokari. Kalfalla claimed persecution by the Poro members despite holding high status as Alimani of Mongheri under which Kale was controlled. He claimed that he was intimidated by the other men to acquiesce to their plan of a hasty burial of the victim, and that his fears of the Poro society had kept him isolated from the rest of the townsfolk.

According to Kalfalla, his presence in the Poro initiation camp at Kale, reported upon by every other witness, was due to having been tricked into following others there, and when he realized where he was, he was terrified. He believed, he explains, that the Poro men intended to do him some

injury within the sacred space. Only Poro men, Kalfalla testified, ever go to the camp, and he was manifestly not of the same belief system nor a member of the society. Kalfalla also makes an allusion to his understanding of the nature of Poro membership in his estimation:

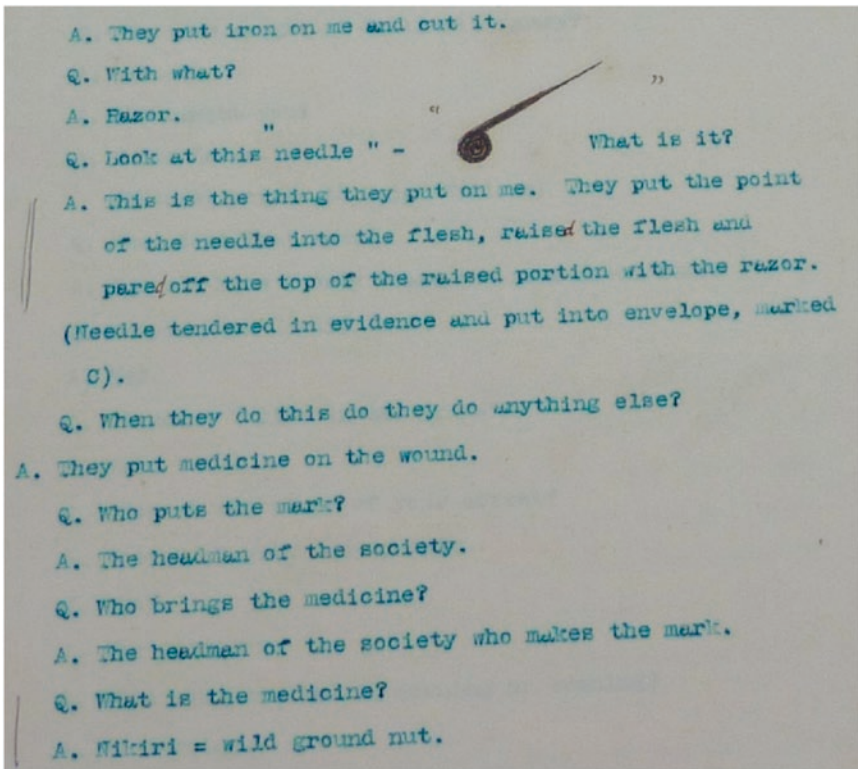
Kalfalla: ... I myself am not a Forro man....
 I got no power on the Forro people.
 They get more power than I as the Government gets greater power than us.
 I am not a cannibal man.

This statement is of particular interest, and it is unfortunate that the only language here is English in translating Kalfalla's association of "Forro" with cannibalism. Whether this connection arose from the charges which Kalfalla had been accused of, and the awareness that for the Europeans at least, Human Leopards bore some association to the "Forro" and both implied cannibalism, or whether his denial refers to a deeper belief stemming from the fears he claims to have felt as a Muslim living within a community which he felt had persecuted him is a question which is difficult to answer, but which must be posed for consideration. It also represents a decision by Kalfalla to publicly declare himself against the local Poro members.

The primary evidence for identification offered by the Crown to designate a member of the Human Leopards was a physical demonstration of scarification "proof" by the convicted Human Leopard Vandi whom the Crown brought to examine each of the accused.¹⁵ (See Figure 2) Vandi, a Vai man from Galinhas, and his fellow convicted cannibal Kong Xangba agreed in finding two marks each on Fino and Bofio, but both expert witnesses were unable to find any conclusive examples of the correct scar on Kalfalla's body, though they found potential marks which Kalfalla explained were the remnants of a smallpox infection. On Fino, Xangba took considerable time to find marks, as the court prompted him to look further, demonstrating coaching in evidence to a troublesome degree. On Bofio, both expert witnesses located marks on the right buttock and the right shoulder near the top of the arm. The marks were described in detail both on the witnesses and on the accused, and it was agreed that while Kalfalla's scars were inconclusive, Fino and Bofio's scars bore a noticeable similarity both to one another and to those present on the bodies of the cannibal expert witnesses.¹⁶ Vandi's and Kong Xangba's examination of the accused provided the court with a "solid" foundation for conviction, though the proof they had thus gained was further without real weight after both testified on the stand that they were unaware that they even were Human Leopards, and that their identification as such had come about because of British interference:

Vandi: ... we were all called to the barry, then the white man said that something had happened in the country which they wanted to get rid of. We asked him 'What thing.' He said 'Kori palaver.' The chiefs then said that they did not know anything about it, but Gumbo Kabbo [British officer

Figure 2. "Human Leopard" scar



Major Williams] said he would bring somebody who could find it out. Then Gumbo Kabbo took with him a man called Konyangba who looked over the whole of us and pointed out a mark till he was finished. All of us who were marked were arrested.

Vandi and Kong Xangba ultimately acted to support the evidence which the crown's star witness, Momo Baraka, had earlier given under a non-binding oath, and their testimony was only offered under considerable coaching by the Crown. Moreover, their status as convicted Human Leopards who were evidently unaware of their crimes prior to British intervention is notable. Why the colonial court and officials decided that these men were Human Leopards is not fully explained within the court documents of the time, but demonstrates the British colonial legal process's serious problems. Ultimately, the court found the accused all guilty, and Fino and Bofio were hanged, while the Alimani Kalfalla was sentenced to hard labor. Despite the grief which Beatty later described Fino clearly showing over the death of his son, the victim, and despite no clear motive at any time indicated beyond obedience to the Leopard Society and ritual murder, the court clearly found the case compelling enough to merit execution and imprisonment.

Momo Baraka and Shifting Social Status

Momo Baraka was the sole witness to the murder itself, and he named Fino and Bofio as the killers. His problematic status and the possible motives he may have had were never described or discussed in Beatty's published account. When asked about Fino's relative status to him, Baraka's answer is simple: "He is not my friend—he is not my equal." He disavowed any meaningful connection to Fino, despite other witnesses variously answering that Baraka was Fino's son, servant, boy, or slave.¹⁷ He described himself as being older than Joe, Bangaun, or Kalfalla "by a head." It was Baraka who claimed that Fino was wearing a leopard skin as he grappled with the victim Kalfalla, his son. It was he who explained that he heard footsteps of men in the bush—not animals. Moreover, as the sole witness to the crime, Baraka swore that he had been made to promise his silence on the Borfima itself by Bofio, friend to Fino, and Lamin Goba. He claimed that his heart and liver would be taken if he broke this oath, but that his sense of duty to the country itself overcame his fear and caused him to testify against those who had demanded his oath. Like the rest, Baraka described the wounds, and while other elements of his testimony are unique, the condition of the corpse was consistent with the others examined.

Momo Baraka is described by the other witnesses to be a foreigner from the Galinhas region, and a slave, but under oath, again and again he refused the latter designation:

Q: Fino sent you to the Forro?

A: Yes.

Q: Fino took you out?

A: Yes.

Q: After that can you say you are not Fino's boy?

A: Yes. I am not Fino's boy.

Q: Not under him?

A: No, I am under my father.

...

Q: Did your father know you were out?

A: My father does not live in that town.

Not unlike the microhistory followed by Paolo Gaibazzi, Baraka uses his testimony to try to reframe himself, refusing the title of slave (Gaibazzi 2016). Joe calls him Fino's slave, but also notes that he is an outsider. The court was evidently concerned about the inherent motives of their eyewitness, and called the man who was revealed to have first owned Baraka and sold him to Fino. Bokari's testimony makes Baraka's self-identification intriguing in the extreme, for like Joe, he confirms that Baraka had indeed been his slave:

Bokari - sworn on Koran -
I live at Mattru

I am a trader.

...

Q: You know Momo Baraka?

A: Yes.

Q: What was he to you?

A: My son.

Q: Son or slave?

A: Slave.

Q: Tell the court how you got him.

A: My father had him; he was a small boy, my grandfather gave seven heads of money to chief Gbese Kobbo; the chief had my grandfather's money, my grandfather died, war took place, the chief and my father saw each other, my father asked for slaves in place of the money; the chief said the country was full of war then. My father said he would lodge a complaint if he did not get a slave. The chief said he must not do so and he gave Baraka to my father. My father said he did not want him because he was small but my mother said he must take the boy and my father took him and told my mother to look after him.

This case's evidence makes it clear that Baraka was a young man who was either born into Islam or converted by his Muslim first master Bokari, but was then sold to Fino, who was not Muslim. Furthermore, his enslavement seems to be related to a system of pawning or to a loan. As Allen Howard (1994:267) has noted, Sierra Leone's systems of pawnship served as a means of shifting labor and products from one place to another. Pawnship within this case is an important element; by moving the group of young men back to Kale, Fino was shifting their labor with them. Baraka's described enslavement as a child resembles the pawning of children which was prevalent during this period as the British tried to suppress the slave trade, making pawning itself illegal when the Protectorate was declared in 1896. Baraka, older by a head than the three teenagers present that night, was born prior to that declaration, and the ambiguities in how he is described within the testimony emphasizes the fluidity between pawning, wardship, and enslavement which Howard elaborates upon and which John Grace described (Howard 1994:270; Grace 1975:13–14). Pawning children for a debt was deemed to be slave dealing, and was criminalized in the early twentieth century, but that is clearly what served as the cause of Baraka's initial enslavement from the evidence brought by his former master Bokari. It is possible also that Baraka's seizure by Fino from Bokari may have been more closely related to the practice of panyarring, which Benjamin Lawrance (2014:103–105) explains often involved the capture of pawns or slaves from a debtor by the individual to whom the debt was owed, or that his relationship to Fino was one of bonding, although no debts are ever mentioned by Bokari or Fino.

Importantly, despite his stated beliefs, from the testimony, Baraka had been initiated into Poro recently. As he self-identifies as a Muslim, it may be that he had been initiated as a control mechanism after his unsuccessful attempt at freedom. Given the status of slavery at this point in Sierra Leone's

history, it is puzzling that Baraka had actually fulfilled the requirements to achieve his emancipation by reaching the soil of the Colony, but within the court, he was still defined by his status as Fino's slave—a status he rejected.¹⁸ The narrative which these factors present strongly suggests that much of the most damning evidence against Fino was provided by a slave fighting for a freedom which in his estimation he had already acquired when he escaped to Freetown. His subsequent return to his master may have been a considerable motivation to find another way of emancipating himself from Fino. In his initial testimony, it is Fino who is described as having journeyed to Freetown to retrieve Baraka, while Joe's testimony states that Baraka was indeed a slave, ran away to Freetown, and was returned by Fino and Bangali. Bangali himself states that Baraka accompanied Bokari to Kale, and remained in Kale after Bokari left, as servant to Bokari's aunt Yema, who had become Fino's wife. Following her departure to Mattru, Fino kept Baraka, according to Bangali, and Baraka had to be retrieved from Freetown after he fled there.

Slavery within Sierra Leone occupied an ambiguous position at the time of this case. Indeed, domestic slavery was only abolished in the entirety of the region in 1928, after years of effort, and after the League of Nations took notice of legislation permitting slave-owners the right to capture runaway slaves (League of Nations 1927; Little 1955:14). After the Hut Tax War of 1898, one of the ways that colonial officials like Cardew worked to explain and understand the causes for the insurrection was to claim that it was symptomatic of a rejection of British governance, and an effort to protect traditions of slave-dealing. Alongside the claims that the rebellious chiefs wished to return to widespread slavery were concerns regarding what can only be understood to be Poro membership. The British effort to stamp out slavery was a gradual one after the Hut Tax War, according to Grace, who argues that Cardew did not wish to spark another such conflict. As a result, a slower approach was taken in the Protectorate in the early twentieth century to eliminate slavery and pawnship (Grace 1975:70–2). Between 1870 and the 1920s, Howard states that there were no serious food shortages to stimulate extensive labor transfers such as pawning or enslavement, which partially served to reduce these forms of exploitative labor regionally at this time.¹⁹ Slave-dealing and raiding were increasingly illegal, although domestic slavery was acceptable. Should a slave escape and make it to the Colony, he or she was legally entitled to claim freedom.²⁰ This legal means of emancipation, and Baraka's failure at achieving his liberation despite successfully reaching Freetown, emphasizes why he might seek alternatives.

Evidence which arose during the summation by the defense included the facts that Baraka's account was given after he had become a King's witness, and that he was an admitted Human Leopard himself. There is a large piece therefore missing to our appreciation of this case, as the particulars of Baraka's arrest on charges of association with the society are only mentioned at this point. The court recognizes the potential motivations for Baraka's evidence after the defense brings these matters up, but nonetheless accepts it and sets it into the record as the accurate rendition of the facts of the case:

The evidence of Momo Baraka has to be received with great caution as we think that he was prepared to overstep the bounds of truth in his anxiety to fix the murder upon the three accused; but after carefully considering the evidence we can come to no other conclusion but that from what he saw and heard at the moment he identified the two accused Fino and Bofio as being engaged in the actual murder of the boy. It was dark, he was quite a junior in the village, about 20 years of age, was in Forro, he was still suffering from the effects of circumcision, it was probable that he had not then been initiated into the mysteries of the Human Leopard Society, he had seen his master, the head of the village, and his master's so-called brother murder his companion in Forro...

This summary offers an additional twist by mentioning Momo Baraka's circumcision—as a Muslim, Momo Baraka should have been circumcised long before the events of this case. How he was suffering the effects despite being an avowed Muslim with a former owner who was himself Muslim is perplexing, and no additional explanation was offered to clarify this peculiarity. Poro members were circumcised upon their initiation, considerably later than is the customary practice for Muslims (Harley 1941:7). With Baraka having been pawned to Bokari's family as a child and agreeing that he was a Muslim, it is peculiar that he would only be circumcised in adulthood. Whether Poro was being used by Fino as a possible means of controlling his rebellious slave is a question which the document does not provide answers to. Indeed, whether Baraka willingly entered into Poro as another means of changing his social status cannot be ignored either.

British Hegemony and Leopard-Men

Due to the composition of Sierra Leone's first settlers, the English Common Law was dominant in the Freetown peninsula, and efforts were made to gradually implement it throughout the nineteenth century.²¹ In 1896, the British Protectorate was declared over the so-called hinterland, essentially claiming all territories not already under a French or Liberian influence. The long-standing divisions between the Colony and the Protectorate were very much in evidence in the early twentieth century, and intersections between the two regions were due to the role of the westernized Krio, who navigated between the spheres and spread views largely in line with the Colony's way of thought. These men and women tended to be educated, Westernized, and Christian, and worked primarily among Temne and Mende who were Muslims or belonged to Poro. It should be noted that according to Beatty, the Special Commission Court at Gbangbama had European triers of fact and Crowns, but Krio members of the bar serving as defense for the accused. Understandably, tensions and problems of enforcement of laws or acceptance for British governmental authority were hardly uniform (Little 1955:14, 16–17).

Courts in Sierra Leone saw criminal matters in a fashion very like the English Common Law of the time with some minor variations.²² As Martin Chanock has noted, however, criminal law in this period was often conceived

of and implemented in terms which reinforced the colonial elite's primacy while emphasizing the "degeneracy" of subject populations.²³ For the most part, criminal cases in Sierra Leone after the Hut Tax War were heard by judges as opposed to juries as a result of the Ordinances of 1898 (Jearey 1960:37). Trials by jury in Sierra Leone were primarily confined to "those parts of the territories which are (or were) colonies (as opposed to protectorates)" (Jearey 1960:398). The Ordinances reported during this period increasingly demonstrate a profound concern with the Human Leopard Society by the legal authorities in the colony, although whether this increase in proposed legislation was due to attempts to address an increase in reported murders, or was due to colonial efforts to control the Poro Society is never explicitly stated.²⁴

During this time period, a veritable spate of trials and convictions took place in various West African countries, revolving around the notion of the "cannibalistic savage" which had maintained a place in the European psyche since antiquity (Gray 1916:197; Rich 2001:619–638; Pratten 2007). The targets of these trials tended to be identified as having some symbolic connection ideologically with leopards, and were described by authorities as "men-leopards," "leopard-men," or "human leopards." The concept of ritualized murders gave the colonial authorities an excellent reason to extend the sphere of their authority more stringently, and in short order, even affiliation with a Leopard Society was cause for the gravest punishment the legal systems could offer (Zehnle 2015:222–223). As Rosalind Shaw (2002:226–229) has examined, some of the earliest European accounts of Sierra Leone report instances of cannibalism and the consumption of human flesh. The account by former Chief Justice Griffith presents a clear example of the sense of unease which European authorities brought to bear even as presumably impartial triers of fact, which lends a problematic nuance especially given Griffith's past rulings concerning other accused human leopards elsewhere:

... there is something about the Sierra Leone bush, and about the bush villages as well, which makes one's flesh creep. It may be the low hills with enclosed swampy valleys, or the associations of the slave trade, or the knowledge that the country is alive with Human Leopards... The bush seemed to me pervaded with something supernatural, a spirit which was striving to bridge the animal and the human. Some of the weird spirit of their surroundings has, I think, entered into the people, and accounts for their weird customs. (Beatty 1915:8–9)

The targets for this Commission primarily belonged to the Poro Society, which fundamentally existed beyond the space which the British authorities could easily conceptualize in a European framework. In effect, the Poro Society presented a rival authority which the British had already seen at work during the Hut Tax War of 1898 and had good reason to try to nullify. The way in which Poro was practiced and understood as a quasi-governmental system and the motivation for these Human Leopard trials should not be

considered separately from the events of the Hut Tax War, which aggravated tensions between colony and Protectorate. During the lead-up to the conflict, Poro was the unifying factor which afforded the rebellious Temne and Mende chiefs who rose up a means of resisting British control.²⁵ Cardew had openly set himself against Poro by making it illegal to place a Poro-driven injunction against palm-trees (as had happened in late 1897, affecting production considerably) (Hargreaves 1956:68). The legislation against Human Leopards in the early twentieth century may have been a more carefully couched challenge by the colonial government, but due to misunderstanding of the society by the British judiciary, it was in effect another attack on Poro.

The prevalence of Poro and the ongoing narrative which had been circulated in the early twentieth century, as well as all efforts to conflate Human Leopards with Poro, ultimately led to a targeting of the society by the Acts and legislation passed by the governing bodies in Sierra Leone in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These laws specifically banned membership in the Leopard Society, which colonial officials stated was synonymous with membership in Poro, making it illegal to possess anything which the authorities believed indicated such membership.²⁶ The justification was the fear of cannibalism. Notable in this legislation are the instruments which legislators believed were essential elements of this criminalized group (Beatty 1915:7). The knife used to kill victims whose flesh was to be variously eaten or used in preparing or treating the so-called “borfima,” as well as a leopard-skin, were illicit possessions for anyone to own, lest they indicate membership.²⁷ According to Beatty, a “borfima” was a leather bag, which contained “the white of an egg, the blood, fat, and other parts of a human being, the blood of a cock, and a few grains of rice; but to make it efficacious it must occasionally be anointed with human fat and smeared with human blood” (Beatty 1915:23). This process described would, according to Beatty, (who claims to have heard it described in case after case brought before him) make the owner all-powerful, and capable of enforcing Poro oaths sworn before him or her.

By 1912, further amendments were made to the Ordinance, and provided for the Court and for the death sentence to be handed down by it:

This Ordinance further makes it an offence punishable by imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for any term up to fourteen years, to be a member of an unlawful society, or to take or have taken part in any operation or meeting of such a society... By the second Ordinance, a Special Commission Court is constituted to deal with this class of crime, with power to inflict sentence of death, and to report convicted persons for deportation and expulsion in accordance with the provisions of the first Act. (Casswell 1914:189)

While Beatty mentions the strict added articles which were added to Ordinance 15 which gave his fellow barristers their mandate, he does not mention the capital punishment that was only added for the Special Court in 1912.

Conclusions

This lone transcript and the microhistory arising from it presents more questions than answers or solutions, let alone the identity of the killer that night. It illuminates complexities and ambiguities in how slavery was treated within the colony and the Protectorate alike by the British if we follow the individual narrative of a man seeking his freedom. Momo Baraka's own life is unknown beyond his presence within the case, but speaks to debt bondage, the struggle for emancipation, and ultimately a redefining of self before a judiciary.

Poro presented an undeniable challenge for colonial authorities, and the cannibalism which they claimed was taking place was sufficient reason to enact legislation permitting capital punishment and exile. Poro and the authorities within the Protectorate were rivals for power, and one reading of this case may well be that the British colonial officials were determined to reduce that power despite dubious evidence. In effect, the Human Leopards were the excuse which the colonial authorities needed to expand British hegemony inland. The testimony of Crown witnesses in the trial demonstrates how flimsy much of the evidence was to convict the accused, muddying any real understanding of what actually took place that night in the barry.

This case illuminates the decision to criminalize membership in Human Leopard Societies which extends beyond Sierra Leone. Much of what took place through the Special Court established precedents which could be applied throughout the British territories in Africa, such as the use of expert witnesses and the examination of the bodies of the accused for evidence. Particularly interesting is the British judiciary's use of African belief systems such as the Mende oath and swearing on "medicine," which subverted precolonial traditions into service within a colonial court. The nature of those chosen to serve as expert witnesses and the coaching which the transcript reveals to have taken place together demonstrate that this case is emblematic of opportunism on the part of the British authorities through judicial means, especially as they targeted men of importance and removed them from power. From a glimpse of the turbulence of individual lives to broader conclusions around empire and changing dynamics in power, this Human Leopard case and others like it deserve closer consideration by scholars as they are unearthed.

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Notes

1. This case is also one which is not included in Kalous’s exhaustive collection of excerpts within the Sierra Leone documentation which mention human leopards. Although he does provide a number of other cases concerning human leopards, Kalous does not offer full transcripts, nor does he offer this court case among those he transcribes. See Kalous, *Cannibals and Tongo players*, 50–68.
2. *R.v. Fino, Bofio and Kalfalla*, 55. Sierra Leone Public Archives, Fourah Bay College, Freetown, Sierra Leone. This transcript does not exist elsewhere that the

author has discovered, and is only one of seven such cases. It does not appear or has not yet been found in replica among the Colonial Office and Public Record Office archives in London.

3. Richards notes that chimpanzees, crocodiles, and leopards have all at varying times been believed by Mende-speakers to be associated with those who murder young people to acquire magical parts to craft “bad medicine.” He emphasizes that often, the translations of their titles can be misleadingly read as “cannibalism,” and that in some versions of the belief, “cannibal people” can appear as animals through shape-shifting magic. Using special knives to simulate specific animals’ claws or teeth, those accused are believed to be engaged in the undermining of society through excessive individualism. See Richards, “Chimpanzees as Political Animals in Sierra Leone,” 78. He further discussed the burnings in the late nineteenth century of accused human leopards discovered through divination, and the spate of false testimony associated with British colonial attempts to prosecute subsequent accused human leopards prior to the 1898 uprising. This specific case fits well within his conclusions and analysis of efforts to criminalize human leopards. See Richards, “Land Grabs in Africa and the Sherbro Leopard Murders.”
4. There will inevitably be some confusion concerning duplication of names. Fino, the main accused, was father to the victim, Kalfalla, a point which Beatty and others emphasize as being shocking given their father-son relationship. At the same time, another of the accused is a ranking Muslim, Kalfalla, whose shared name with the victim can at times be confusing. There is no explanation of why they share the name and whether it is wholly coincidental or due to past friendship between the adult men. Within testimony, there is a shared past and grandfathers who acted in similar roles as headman and Alimani previously, so it is not impossible.
5. Richards also notes this in an earlier analysis, emphasizing that due to problems of translation, he prefers to use the Mende term for these ritual murders, but that “It is an open question whether or not *bɔna hinda* murders actually take place, or are largely or mainly conjured up in the minds of those who fear the possibility.” See Richards, “Chimpanzees, Diamonds and War,” 143.
6. Had the case been seen under the process of African Customary law as it was implemented throughout the rest of the British territories in Africa, ironically, evidence from a single witness concerning a matter this serious would not have proven sufficient, and questions of hearsay would have required additional testimony. However, the traditional legal process regionally was known by the legal theorists of the British Empire to be Poro, which posed a problem given the scope of the cases. See Elias, *African Customary Law*, 216–217, 242–243.
7. As MacCormack notes in her analysis of meaning among the Sherbro when referencing cannibalism, the word itself is a political weapon. Her informants reported how grandparents would go to the British authorities accusing others as cannibals as a way to discredit their local authority. By making such accusations, the discourse concerning actual cannibalism becomes problematic unless parsed with an awareness of political ends and means. It also can seem over-represented in colonial judicial proceedings when taken without this important nuance. See MacCormack, “Human Leopards and Crocodiles,” 51–52.
8. The Mende word used during the trial to indicate a wild bush leopard is *'dogbohani'*, which counsel examining the witnesses pointed out as proof of a differentiation. However, some confusion exists within the manuscript, as Baraka's

- testimony defines *Kori* as a man-leopard, while Joe's testimony states that *dogbohani* and *kori* are synonymous and mean an animal of the forest.
9. Wright, "Fetishism in Sierra Leone," 426. Wright also states that the Human Leopard Society in Sierra Leone has only been in existence since the mid nineteenth century.
 10. Richards has spoken on the colonial efforts to claim land in conjunction with ritual murders around this period. See Richards, "Land Grabs in Africa and the Sherbro Leopard Murders."
 11. Law provides a cohesive overview of much of the early humanitarian discourse concerning practices which Europeans justified first the slave trade and subsequently colonial expansion with. He characterizes many of the expeditions of the late nineteenth century as possessing this line of reasoning. See Law, "Human Sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa," 53-54, 56; see also Zehnle, "Of Leopards and Lesser Animals," 231-233.
 12. While he was Chief Justice of the Gold Coast, Griffiths oversaw the trials of 100 accused members of a Leopard Society, and the hangings of 40 of those accused. See *The Advertiser* June 4, 1913 (Adelaide, S.A: 1889-1931), 16. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/960820> (accessed August 9, 2017).
 13. For the purposes of describing the facts of the case, the terminology used within the transcript of the testimony is replicated here, though I recognize that many of the terms are antiquated or incorrect when they concern accurate names for Poro elements.
 14. Unfortunately, no documents have been found which would illuminate these events or Baraka's conviction as a Human Leopard and how it came to be.
 15. Vandi calls the society "Kori Society" under cross examination, but this term cannot be relied upon as it is determined through a series of leading questions.
 16. *R. v. Fino* - Vandi's examination from 94-95; Kong Xangba's examination from pages 115-117.
 17. Terminology for domestic enslaved persons includes such descriptors in translation as "son" according to Grace's 1975 study. See Grace, *Domestic Slavery in West Africa*, 4-9. While Joe is never described by this epithet, and Bangaun's status goes entirely unmentioned, Bangaun's own testimony within the transcript clarifies that as far as he understood it, Kalfalla was indeed Fino's "proper son." See *R. v. Fino*, 63.
 18. It is possible that in part due to his references to his own father and his rejection of the status of slave, Baraka saw himself as a pawned (also called pledged) child, not as a slave, and steadfastly rejected the effort to further reduce his social status to a permanent state of enslavement.
 19. He does note that local market forces actually encouraged slaving and pawning, and many of the reported cases described by Grace and Howard were for pawning or pledging. Importantly, if Baraka was indeed a pawn, part of that system meant that he would eventually be redeemed. His rejection of the term slave as a descriptor for himself may represent his belief in his eventual freedom which under the pawning system he was due. If he was unredeemed, he was at risk to be sold as a slave, and he may well have been by Bokari, though due to the ambiguities in testimony, this is unclear. See Howard, "Pawning in Northwest Sierra Leone," 270-271.
 20. Hargreaves, "The Insurrection of 1898," 57. Intriguingly, the defense barrister during the case cross-examines Momo Baraka, and makes a point of asking

- whether he knew of the events or ramifications of the Hut Tax War and its aftermath. Baraka claims that he does not. *R. v. Fino*, 32.
21. Comprised of the so-called Black Poor from London in a first wave of settlement in 1787, and subsequently rebuilt in 1792 with the participation of Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia, Freetown was heavily westernized from its very beginning. Jamaican Maroons who arrived in 1800 and waves of Liberated Africans acculturated in the evangelical Anglican Church Missionary Society schools ensured that the Colony followed English legal systems from its first establishment.
 22. This usage within the bounds of the colony stands in contrast to the imposition of so-called Customary Law, which has been criticized by later theorists and scholars as a codification of what colonial officials believed were traditional or indigenous systems of law. In what Comaroff has called “lawfare” after the Tswana references, “vernacular dispute-settlement institutions, their jurisdictions and mandates severely restricted, were everywhere formally, sometimes forcibly, incorporated into the colonial state at the lowest levels of its hierarchy of courts and tribunals; furthermore, local cultural practices deemed “primitive” or “dangerous” were statutorily criminalized.” See Comaroff, “Colonialism, Culture and the Law,” 306.
 23. While Chanock’s examination of early twentieth-century criminal law is centered on South Africa, with the problems inherent in the regional sociocultural fabric, much of his argument can be extended to the British West African context. Chanock, “Criminological Science and the Criminal Law 1900–1930,” 915–916.
 24. It should not be misrepresented that the colonial and judicial enactments disproportionately dwelled upon Human Leopards. Of the 309 Orders, Regulations, Ordinances, and laws passed between 1908 and 1911, only six concerned Human Leopards and their prosecution.
 25. Ferme asserts that the conflict originated not only with the imposition of taxes but with the declaration of a Protectorate and the permanent loss of regional authority represented by the placement of Frontier Police in the region. Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 24, 233.
 26. Butt-Thompson in 1929 maintained this narrative, though he classified Human Leopards as separate from Poro, in what reads as effort to rehabilitate a society that was pervasive and common throughout the upper Guinea coast. See Butt-Thompson, *West African Secret Societies*, 282–283.
 27. Beatty *Human Leopards*, 23. Interestingly, in 1907, scholars differentiated between Poro and the Human Leopard Society, and claimed that the “borfima” was a “made up fetish” belonging to Bai Bureh. See Wright, “Fetishism in Sierra Leone,” 425. How this argument fits with Beatty’s lengthy descriptions of the ritual practices he personally saw criminalized through his role as Acting Attorney in 1908 bears consideration.