

Unsettled Authority and Humanitarian Practice: Reflections on Local Legitimacy from Sierra Leone's Borderlands

Abstract: Calls to localise humanitarian practice and to engage communities in emergency responses have gained prominence in recent years. Using the case study of the response to the 2014-16 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, this article probes into the assumptions underlying efforts to mobilise “community stakeholders” to legitimise emergency measures, revealing how they envision authority within communities as static and independent of experiences of humanitarian intervention. Drawing inspiration from Raufu Mustapha’s intellectual legacy, it shows the limitations of these assumptions by paying attention to structural factors, historical legacies, and the empirical workings of power. Through an ethnographic account of how the Ebola response was experienced and remembered in a remote border town, the article proposes instead the concept of unsettled authority. Stories from these borderlands show how the legitimacy of local authority was dynamically negotiated, made and unmade, through encounters with humanitarian interventions as these became intertwined with longer-term contestations of power with unpredictable consequences.

In July 2015, a year after the declaration of a state of emergency to combat an unprecedented outbreak of Ebola virus disease, Sierra Leone’s National Ebola Response Centre (NERC) published its *Getting to a Resilient Zero* strategy. One of the core pillars of this strategy, was to “adopt a systematic focus on community ownership”, identifying the importance of engaging communities, and in particular local “influencers” such as village chiefs and other “key community stakeholders”, as a core lesson from the country’s fight with the deadly disease. Over the preceding year, this lesson had been gleaned when in parts of the country communities took matters into their own hands, whilst in others failures to build trust resulted in resistance to outbreak response measures (Richards, 2016). Stark criticism of initial efforts that lacked respect and understanding of communities’ experiences resulted in the development of more sophisticated approaches for involving these communities in the design and implementation of the emergency response. The *Getting to Zero* strategy thus highlighted that local leadership was essential to ensure the local legitimacy of interventions such as quarantines, movement restrictions, the reporting of illness and deaths and the introduction of safe burial practices.

The lessons from West Africa’s Ebola outbreak have cemented the role of community engagement as a core component of health emergency responses (Bedson et al., 2019; Gillespie et al., 2016). This is in line with the emphasis on local ownership to ensure effective interventions that has been at the centre of recent debates in the humanitarian industry about localisation. The 2016 *Grand Bargain*, signed by over sixty major donors and humanitarian agencies, for example, made an open commitment to recognising the key role of local responders in humanitarian action. Outlining plans to increase transparency and redesign funding mechanisms, the *Grand Bargain* acknowledges that local actors are often the first to respond in times of crisis, being closer to affected communities and having the necessary knowledge to support context-appropriate interventions (Roepstorff, 2020). These efforts to valorise community and local leadership are not simply a gesture towards shifting enduring inequalities in the global infrastructure of humanitarian action. Undoubtedly, promises of a “participation revolution” (IASC, 2017, p. 10) reflect the democratic value that affected communities have a right to be involved in humanitarian programming that concerns them. However, these arguments also rest on expectations of heightened efficiency, as the involvement of local stakeholders is seen to increase the acceptability and legitimacy of humanitarian programming.

Without challenging the intentions and significance of these commitments, not least during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa where community involvement has been widely identified as a key factor in bringing transmission under control, scholars have highlighted the pitfalls of using concepts like “community” and “local” uncritically. Roepstorff (2020, p. 285) for example argues that localisation “remains strikingly undertheorised”, noting a lack of clarity on who counts as a local actor and challenging the prevailing dichotomy between local and international. In the context of the Ebola response, Wilkinson et al. (2017, p. 3) show the limitations of notions of community as “homogenous, bounded and static”. These conceptualisations are problematic particularly because in these interventions the “concept of community is not only used descriptively, it is used instrumentally”, as communities are recruited as “means to an end” to ensure local “buy-in” for example for behaviour change efforts during emergencies like epidemics (ibid.). Uncritical imageries of “community” or “the local” can efface difference within communities, for example neglecting the salience of gender, class, and ethnicity. In other words, localisation and community engagement paradigms need stronger conceptual foundations to come to grips with the empirical complexity of community and in particular how power is exercised and experienced, by whom and with what consequences in crisis-affected communities.

This article focuses on the role of local authority in community engagement paradigms to argue that existing assumptions about the legitimacy of local leadership that underpin humanitarian calls for localisation are not only disconnected from the lived experiences of those they seek to describe; they also play an active role in the production of these power dynamics. It illustrates this through an analysis of the gradual inclusion of community stakeholders in the Ebola response in Sierra Leone, a complex assemblage of national and international actors, in an effort to legitimise challenging outbreak response measures. Focusing specifically on the role of chiefs, in the context of their fraught place in the country’s history, the article explores how narratives about community engagement relied on static notions of power that envisioned authority as something that exists independently of humanitarian interventions. Efforts to achieve easily accessible interpretations of the Ebola crisis unfolding across the country, and to devise operational solutions to legitimise interventions, crystallised power relations and required the “invention” of sources of authority as fixed. At the same time, in seeking to harness local realities to make the Ebola response successful, the humanitarian gaze actively moulded the subjects of interventions into what it needed them to be.

The article contrasts these static notions of authority with ethnographic accounts from Senabee¹, a remote town on the country’s border with Guinea, taking authority as something to be studied empirically and dynamically. This allows us to uncover how power is negotiated, reproduced, and contested through everyday practices and encounters. Taking seriously local imaginations of power, the article traces both how the “Ebola response” was experienced as a powerful external force, and how local authority was reconfigured by these experiences. These perspectives were influenced, though not determined, by structural conditions, long and short historical memories, and particular political cosmologies, as extraordinary experiences during the epidemic’s state of emergency became enmeshed in longer standing contestations over legitimacy and competing sources of power.

¹ The name has been changed

This article thus makes a case for an ethnographic approach to studying power, one that privileges experience and local epistemologies. This encourages us to conceptualise authority as open-ended and indeterminate, or unsettled, rendering visible how it changes over time, how it is constantly re-negotiated and how humanitarian interventions are directly implicated in its production. These negotiations extend far beyond the short-lived presence of emergency responses in liminal spaces like Sierra Leone's borderlands. Challenging static conceptualisations of power, even if it makes it less predictable or amenable to operationalization, can offer the foundations for normative re-imaginings of the role of local authority in humanitarian practice.

In line with this Special Issue's theme, the inspiration for this perspective is drawn from Raufu Mustapha's intellectual legacy, discussed in more detail in the next section. The material for the analysis is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Sierra Leone, and in particular on observations undertaken whilst I was deployed as a social scientist for the Ebola vaccine trials in the Kambia District between 2015-16, and five months of fieldwork in 2017 during which I studied how the emergency had shaped experiences of citizenship, including through research in Senabee.

Abdul Raufu Mustapha's Legacy

In taking an empirically grounded approach to understanding the workings of power and highlighting the impact of these misconceptions on policy and practice, the article is influenced by Raufu Mustapha's scholarship and teachings in general and in particular from his lesser known article 'Rethinking Africanist Political Science' (RAPS) (Mustapha, 2006). In this characteristically authoritative manifesto for better, more nuanced scholarship on Africa, Mustapha encouraged scholars to engage with African polities as they really are, rather than through ready-made (Western) ideal types. His article aimed to address what he perceived to be a "disjuncture between the current developmental needs of African societies and the ways that [...] important concepts of state, market and civil society are conceived and related to each other" (Mustapha, 2006: 11). Deep-rooted misconceptions about the functioning of African politics and society were not only problematic as analytical blind spots, but also because they had been a "fetter of African development" (ibid.). Mustapha thus went beyond a review of existing scholarship, offering a critique of how particular conceptualisations of political and social relations had profoundly shaped policy and interventions on the continent.

Mustapha offered three techniques to redress Western reification of African politics. First, he highlighted the importance of paying attention to structural factors to counter conceptual frameworks and policy approaches that pathologise contemporary African societies. Mustapha took issue in particular with "culturalist" analyses that posit an intimate relationship between cultural values and political behaviour, as if we could deduce the latter from the former. Foreclosing an understanding of structural factors, including for example how economic characteristics influenced political and social relations, these culturalist approaches were analytically weak and politically problematic, distracting attention from the role of policy and other variables. Second, in RAPS Mustapha argued that a focus on structure must be complemented by an appreciation of history. A focus on culture is often an alibi for misremembering and for what Mustapha called "ideological obfuscation" (2006, p. 9). Using the example of economic informalisation, Mustapha noted how culturalist approaches fail to consider the effects of liberalisation and discount colonial distortions that profoundly influenced the relationship between the state and the economy. In later work,

Mustapha continued to insist on the “importance of a historical perspective on the present” (Hyden cited in Mustapha & Whitfield, 2009, p. 5). The third lesson was that culturalist approaches that are pathologising and ahistorical must be redressed through a robustly empirical approach. In RAPS, Mustapha made concrete normative assessments, for example in favour of a developmentalist state, derived from an engagement with states, markets and society as they are, stripping them of existing ideological preconceptions and cultural assumptions that are masked as descriptors of reality. As Mustapha and Whitfield argued: “it is critical not to confound the empirical and the normative, but to see them separately and clarify their relationships” (2009, p. 2).

Here in this article, I use Mustapha’s lessons to propose a dynamic, empirically grounded and historically informed assessment of the role of local authority in the Ebola response and consider its normative implications for humanitarian practice. I complement an analysis of structural and historical dynamics with ethnographic reflections to propose a concept of authority as unsettled, that is, as made and unmade through encounters with a humanitarian assemblage, as they become intertwined with longer-term negotiations of power with unpredictable consequences.

The Ebola Response: Imagining Community and Local Authority

The first case of Ebola was identified in Sierra Leone in May 2014. The virus is thought to have entered the country from the Eastern District of Kailahun from Guinea, during the funeral of a traditional healer (Wauquier et al., 2015). The Sierra Leone government announced a state of emergency at the end of July 2014, comprising of a number of measures to restrict movement and practices that were identified as vectors for the spread of disease. The international community was initially slow to respond, with the WHO declaring a Public Health Emergency of International Concern only in August 2014, as cases were reaching the hundreds every week (Dubois et al., 2015).

In the months following the declarations of emergency, the Ebola response continued to take shape as an assemblage of different actors, bringing together varied perspectives and operational structures (Ross, 2017). Partners ranged from the Ministry of Health, to local and international NGOs, British and Sierra Leonean militaries and newly established bodies like the NERC and decentralised District Ebola Response Centres (DERCs). As the crisis evolved, this humanitarian assemblage had to adapt its interventions and approaches, over time bringing together containment efforts, including punitive measures and restrictive regulations, with engagement approaches to encourage communities and individuals to change their behaviour (Enria, 2019). Tracing the evolution of these approaches reflects these different actors’ efforts to grapple with questions of “culture” and the role of communities, and specifically local authority, in the emergency.

Practices such as burial rites that involved washing the body of the deceased or traditional healing were leading to rapid increases in infections. In the early days of the response this led to culture itself being identified as a barrier to disease prevention, a source of misconceptions and risky behaviour as well as cause of resistance in some places (Abramowitz et al., 2018). This initial approach was counterproductive to building trusting relations with affected groups. In addition, these culturalist explanations, as Mustapha would have called them, failed to take into account the social, political and economic factors that structured collective and individual experiences of the outbreak and its control measures. First, as social scientists actively engaged in the region during the outbreak noted, culture ought not to be seen as a

barrier but as adaptive, showing it was possible to work *with* existing practices (Abramowitz et al., 2015). Second, the degeneration of the outbreak also had to be understood through the lens of structural adjustment and post-war neoliberal policies that had undermined the development of a strong and accessible health system (Abdullah & Kamara, 2017; Benton & Dionne, 2015). Deep levels of mistrust in government and international interventions, manifest in people avoiding health centres, hiding sick relatives or resisting regulations, had deep foundations in long histories of extraction, exploitation and political exclusion (Wilkinson & Leach, 2015). Similarly, caring for sick relatives was not a cultural misconception but rather reflected complex human instincts and priorities that individuals faced during the emergency (Chandler et al., 2015). Culture was, then, a poor explanatory factor and reliance on culturalist readings of the crisis made it difficult to implement key interventions that relied on community acceptance, such as the imposition of quarantines.

The approach of the response changed over time, not least as the direct engagement of social scientists in the humanitarian response apparatus influenced its transformation, though not always in linear or consistent ways (Martineau et al., 2016). Initial stumbling blocks led to a gradual shift in the role of communities, with a focus on gaining their trust. Activities were transformed to take local context into account. For example, religious rituals were incorporated into proscribed practices for safe burials. The integration of community engagement as a pillar of district response structures included efforts to legitimise activities by gaining buy-in from community representatives. In some Southern Districts evidence from early on in the epidemic had shown that some villages and towns had organised themselves, following the leadership of charismatic leaders such as chiefs (Richards, 2016). Over the course of the epidemic, these lessons were operationalized and standardised across other districts culminating in the central role given to “community stakeholders” in the *Getting to Zero* strategy. In the summer of 2015, as the District had become a hotspot and the focus of the military-led Operation Northern Push, Kambia also published its community ownership strategy asserting the key role of chiefs and other stakeholders like faith leaders and secret society heads. In particular, chiefs across the District were not only invited to chair and initiate community engagement activities, but they were also encouraged to enforce by-laws and fines for regulation violations.

Whilst this signified a much stronger commitment to placing community perspectives at the forefront of response measures and to build trust in particular interventions, this local turn continued to rely on implicit assumptions that communities were homogenous and mobilisable as one entity (Enria et al., 2016). In addition, making categories of stakeholders, such as chiefs, mediators of response measures reflected the implicit assumption that the key to gaining trust and to making interventions legitimate would be to find the appropriate leadership with recognised (even “traditional”) authority that could command the respect of the “community”. From this vantage point, authority appears static, as something out there to be discovered and as such independent of the response itself. This understanding of authority could not effectively take into account how power dynamics and the legitimacy of local leadership were contested, re-negotiated and produced, including through community engagement efforts and Ebola regulations themselves. To illustrate this, I focus in particular on the role of chiefs in these processes.

Historicising authority: The chieftaincy on the eve of the Ebola outbreak

Paying attention to the complex history of the chieftaincy in Sierra Leone is a first step in understanding the contested and unsettled nature of authority. In its contemporary guise, the

institution of the chieftaincy was established under British colonial rule as a way to maintain social order in the rural hinterlands (Harris, 2013; Reno, 1995). The “territorialisation” of the chieftaincy, formalised and crystallised more fluid avenues to power, derived from landlord-stranger dynamics, integration and the accumulation of dependents (Ferme, 2018, p. 164; Brooks, 1993; see also McGovern, 2012).² The legitimacy of chiefs, as chosen intermediaries of the British administration, was based on “half truths”, that is, partly on recognised claims to land and ancestry, and partly as an invented tradition that re-imagined itself to justify its power at different points in history (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2018, p. 9; Wilkinson & Fairhead, 2017). Chiefs’ role as gatekeepers or mediators of colonial administration and later of post-independence leaders, in some instances facilitated forms of rural “despotism” (Mamdani, 1996) including in the practice of imposed community labour. These were cited as significant factors in the alienation of rural youth, contributing to the grievances that escalated into civil war in the early 1990s (Peters, 2011).

Debates about the fate of the chieftaincy were lively during post-war reconstruction efforts, with widespread continued support for the chieftaincy in rural areas qualified by calls for reform (Fanthorpe, 2005; Jackson, 2005). Chiefs maintained their powers but their authority was also challenged by decentralisation in 2004, which established parallel mechanisms for revenue collection and administration (Conteh, 2017). As development opportunities increased in the post-war era, competition for power and for being gatekeepers of aid intensified (Ferme, 2018).

The resurgence of chiefs during the Ebola outbreak is particularly interesting given the historical trajectory from post-war threats to abolish the institution altogether to their being identified as trusted, legitimate authorities during the emergency. Undoubtedly, this recognition did not go unnoticed, and chiefs themselves saw it as an opportunity to reinforce their authority. One chief from Kambia District, for example, recalled how the war had “made some chiefs not want to be chiefs” because they were “targeted by rebels”, but during Ebola:

We had the power; people listened to us. You know, people have traditional respect for chiefs. Our people do not know government [...] they only know the chiefs.

Despite appeals to closer links to the population and the value of tradition, this chief also acknowledged the challenge of maintaining this relationship as evidenced by challenges to chiefly powers during the war. Chiefs were therefore not straightforwardly discovered as legitimate authorities; trust in the chieftaincy was lost and re-won at different times in history, and in different ways across the country. Their role as gatekeepers and implementers of interventions played an active role in these processes. In the following stories from a town affected by the Ebola emergency I explore how perceptions of “the response”, interpreted through historical memories and experiences of marginalisation, coloured contestations and re-negotiations of chiefs’ legitimacy during and after the crisis.

² Relations between landlords and strangers have been central to explaining authority, hierarchy and social dynamics in the Upper Guinea Coast, as the region was (and remains) characterized by migratory patterns as well as conquest and integration through norms of hospitality and reciprocity (Brooks, 1993).

Asserting authority in the borderlands: Ebbs and flows

Senabee is at the end of a long road, about three hours on a motorbike from Kambia, the headquarters of Sierra Leone's North-Western district bordering Guinea. The road is sandy and slippery, almost inaccessible during the rainy season. Some stretches require crossing water through makeshift bridges made from tree trunks. Several turns in the road lead to informal border crossings into Guinea. As one approaches the town, the road narrows, reduced to a slither of earth banked in the middle of green rice swamps. The entrance to the town is via a checkpoint, from where military officers observe movements to and from the border. The first cluster of houses is the old part of town, where the Section Chief and other elders descended from the first Bullom³ settlers live. Another sand road leads down to the wharf where every Monday boats arrive from Freetown to collect fish, rice and other commodities to bring back to the capital. On the way to the wharf, a swamp path leads to the beach and a cluster of fishing villages.

For residents, roads are a symbol of a long-term struggle to be 'seen'. Their poor condition and the fact that they are mostly a result of local youths' efforts to be connected to nearby towns and markets are a marker of this struggle. "It's like they don't see us as Sierra Leoneans", a fisherman told me, using "they" to refer to abstract "big people", those in power who had it within their means to bring development to the border town. In fact, in Senabee's collective memory it was a history of state retrenchment, and particularly the reduction of state subsidies since the 1980s that had pushed residents closer to Guinea. To survive, farmers had to barter part of their harvest across the border in exchange for fertiliser.

Ebola, however, made Senabee visible in unprecedented ways. Remote towns and border areas had a very particular place in the imagery of the response: a stone's throw away from Guinea, but at hours' distance from the district headquarters from where the response coordination happened, they were at risk of becoming hotspots. Response teams saw these areas as especially dangerous precisely because of their geographically and politically marginal status. In addition, local response workers who had been active in community engagement and contact tracing described them as places of cultural difference, where kinship ties across the border made it easy to maintain secrecy and bypass the state of emergency regulations. DERC briefings make several references to communities in the area insisting that rumoured secret burials were happening in Guinea and not their town. Their location also meant that when a suspected case was reported, it was very difficult, especially in the rainy season, for teams to be quickly deployed. Response workers told stories of wading through mud and arriving by sea through treacherous waters. In one of Senabee's adjacent fishing villages efforts to quarantine contacts of a confirmed Ebola case resulted in an attack on a military officer (Enria, 2018). The boats going to and from Freetown to Senabee wharf were another source of concern. This fear was confirmed when a young girl who died in town and was suspected of being Ebola positive was discovered to have escaped a quarantined home in the capital. She arrived by sea to stay with her relatives, who did not report her arrival or illness until she died, flouting the by-laws of the chiefdom. The girl later turned out to have died of malaria, but as the response apparatus moved to quarantine her relatives, the dangers of porous borders and multiple entry-points seemed to have been confirmed.

³ An ethno-linguistic group considered to be indigenous to Sierra Leone

Underpinning these concerns was also a deeper question around people's allegiance in the borderlands. "They are more Guinean than Sierra Leonean", a former community engagement officer told me, remembering her experience of working in Senabee and neighbouring villages. The self-perceptions of people in town were far more complex, but the assumption of questionable loyalty and mistrust were an important feature of the intervention imagination. The challenge then was how to localise the response, in these risky and seemingly mistrusting communities with strong ties across the border. Community monitoring groups and task forces were set up, with local leaders taking charge. As in other places, the Paramount Chief (PC) was tasked with setting by-laws to control the influx of strangers, and imposing fines on violations like secret burials or hosting strangers.

Senabee's inhabitants initially experienced "the response" as a powerful intervention by an external entity, perceived to be monolithic like the "they" who had long kept the town out of reach from the centres of power. This experience was characterised by previously extremely rare, if not unprecedented, encounters with health officials, soldiers and "white people in jeeps", which for a while became daily features in town. The by-laws and various engagement and surveillance activities raised tensions and concerns. Amara, a teacher, remembered a time of profound social disruption: "here we are used to our tradition and religion [primarily Islam], when somebody dies, they pray over him, they wash him, but at the time of Ebola all of that stopped: they did not wash bodies again, they just put them in that plastic [body bag]". The PC of the chiefdom where Senabee is located had until recently rarely been present, often away in Freetown on official duty. He suddenly found himself in charge of supporting outbreak control in the borderlands, entrusted with having to impose these deeply disruptive regulations. This meant he came to be associated with "the response", finding himself trapped between the demands of central government and the DERC on the one hand, and the concerns of his people on the other. Rumours circulated that the PC was at risk of being removed by the President if he did not prove to be able to tame the dangerous areas over which he presided.

As the epidemic worsened, the PC had various occasions to demonstrate he was capable of exerting his authority even at the extremities of his chiefdom, in towns like Senabee. One of the town chiefs who was in charge of collecting taxes and settling disputes by the wharf, for example, was unseated and replaced by an interim chief (a Regent) because the former had failed to report the arrival of the young woman, the stranger, who had arrived by boat to stay with her relatives and was presenting Ebola symptoms until she died. Another occasion that remained etched in the minds of the inhabitants of Senabee, was an incident that had occurred in the local cinema hall, also situated in the wharf area. Despite a curfew that had been imposed across the district during the military-led Operation Northern Push in July 2015, the hall had remained open showing films in the evening in defiance of regulations. One night, those that lived near the cinema heard cars arrive and saw a group of soldiers destroy the cinema hall. Amara the teacher recalled how the next day people had begun grumbling: "this PC is a wicked PC, and he came to destroy [our] houses and the way [we] make a living". These kinds of critiques resonated across the District, as those implicated in the response were also assumed to be "eating Ebola money" at the expense of normal citizens faced with restrictions on their livelihoods (Enria, 2015; Shepler, 2017).

As the emergency ended, the PC, having lived up to his task as enforcer of the state of emergency and "chief social mobiliser", now found himself challenged from within his chiefdom:

When Ebola ended, the PC sent someone to go and talk to his people, to say that what happened had not been his wish. He said ‘the law was from central government, I am their subject, I just had to abide by the rules. If I offended anybody, let them forgive me’. Because there came a time that people protested and said they did not want the PC. Here in this area, some of those people whose houses were destroyed...they wrote a letter of protest.

In an effort to regain his legitimacy, in other words, the PC tried to distance himself from the distant power of “the response”. These memories highlight the ebb and flow of authority, and in particular the chief’s challenging position as mediator and the expectations placed on him as posited holder of the community’s trust. His authority depended on his ability to ensure the compliance of his population, so it was both augmented by his renewed powers under the emergency and undermined by the difficult position these put him in with his subjects. The aim of this vignette is not to show an example of poor engagement, or even to argue that this chief was not trusted, but rather to show the contingent nature of legitimacy. Contestations over the legitimacy of his actions were partly based on previous feelings of his absence, further heightened by his association with a response that was experienced as an external intrusion in an already marginalised town, and partly on his decision to use force to implement the regulations possibly out of fear of losing his position. The process of seeking forgiveness that followed relied on a re-casting of the chief’s role as powerless in the face of a centrally led emergency response.

Short and long histories: The local tax dispute

Contestations of the uses and abuses of chiefly powers re-emerged, despite initially successful efforts at reconciliation, a year later in Senabee during a seemingly unrelated dispute about local tax. In October 2017, residents of the border town bemoaned tough economic conditions including fears over the year’s harvest. An elder mused that this was likely a curse resulting from their inability to pray in the mosque during Ebola. The elders struggled to raise enough revenue from the taxes on boats arriving at the wharf, but the biggest challenge presented itself around the time stipulated for the collection of local tax.

The Section Chief (SC), following the established arrangements under the Local Government Act of 2004, had been given the tax book to “sell” tax to those in his section. The SC, responsible to the PC, resided in the old town and had delegated tax collection in the wharf area, as was customary, to the Regent town chief. Some people near the wharf had refused to buy the tax, and even worse in the eye of the SC, had taken out their own tax book from the chiefdom headquarters and were collecting tax on their own. The dispute escalated one afternoon, as the Alimamy Special (the PC’s right-hand man) was spotted in Senabee and summoned to the SC’s Court. He promised he would come after a visit to the wharf, but was later seen on a bike, escaping at full speed. The soldiers in charge of the checkpoint were hastily called to go and stop him and they brought him back to a crowded *palava hut*, where most of the town had congregated to listen to the case.

The SC was extremely agitated, shouting that the Alimamy Special, having presumably had knowledge that the tax book had landed in the hands of anyone other than the Regent, was trying to break up his Section. The anger was palpable in the crowd too, as everyone recognised that this was an affront to the Section Chief’s authority, worsened by the fact that those close to the PC might have had something to do with this display of insolence. One of the Senabee elders highlighted the gravity of a situation in which the Chiefdom’s ruling

house was suspected of having been complicit in undermining a Section Chief's authority. "the Section Chief is like a woman you married, if somebody treats her badly, you have to deal with them", he asserted. As representatives of the ruling house defended the Alimamy Special to diffuse the tension, the meeting was adjourned to the next day at the District headquarters where the District Officer would be brought in to settle the dispute. When the next day the Alimamy Special did not show up, this reignited discontent against the ruling house.

The Section Chief's anger and his serious accusation that some people were trying to 'scatter' his chieftom revealed much deeper issues that were at stake beyond the local tax. The story had many layers, and each layer shows the interplay of short- and long-histories in negotiations of authority. In the first instance, tensions from the Ebola outbreak lingered on and permeated everyday disputes such as this one over local tax. The authority of the Regent was quietly questioned in different parts of town because he had been appointed under the emergency, due to the replacement of the previous town chief who had violated Ebola regulations. Tensions between the PC's ruling house and his subjects that emerged during the outbreak, continued to simmer as he and his Special were seen to be mingling in the Section's business. In the neighbouring town, another Section chief who had been demoted for Ebola-related infractions had managed to force his way back to his position by going through higher channels (some said through the President himself). Challenges to the PC's perceived overreach travelled fast. The local tax dispute in Senabee was also particularly sensitive because of the political implications of local taxation. For example, payment of local tax is a requirement to act as a Chieftom Councillor (formerly Tribal Authority), and therefore to be eligible to vote in chieftaincy elections where each Councillor represents twenty local tax payers (Van den Boogaard, 2018; Fanthorpe, 2004; Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), 2009). Being able to control collection and payment of local taxes is therefore important for exerting influence over the institution of the chieftaincy.

Peeling back another layer, as the local tax dispute unfolded, conversations amongst the elders of the old town revealed much longer standing grievances and concerns about disunity in Senabee. The fluidity of the border and intermarriages meant that whilst the elders, descendants of the first settlers, were Bullom, the most spoken language in Senabee was Susu, Guinea's *lingua franca*. Even the children of the elders had not learned to speak Bullom and their fathers spoke about how they had 'become' Susus. Such fluid notions of identity were subverted as the dispute led to the tightening of boundaries between landlords and strangers. Old town elders pointed out that that the people at the wharf, the area where the dispute had originated, were strangers who had been given land by the first settlers and then later by their descendants, the *lasarie*, sons of the soil. For generations, the people of the wharf had had to pay a produce tax to the *lasarie* but of late had stopped.

Their refusal to buy tax from the Regent was taken as a further signal that they were refusing to acknowledge the authority of the landlords and a statement of intention to secede and create their own section. The Section Chief had admonished wharf residents on several occasions that betraying this agreement was dangerous: "the *lasarie* have risen, o!" he had told them. One individual, Kandeh, a teacher who had settled by the wharf from a neighbouring village, was singled out as a suspect for leading the rebellion. "Kandeh should be careful, he is not from around here". When someone pointed out that he had been looking unwell recently, someone from the old town darkly pronounced: "he has not even begun to get sick". The PC's perceived meddling heightened these tensions and reignited disaffection towards his ruling house.

This vignette shows how sources of authority and the boundaries of community are always up for redefinition. Long and short histories can be mobilised at different times to challenge and reinforce different claims to legitimacy. Experiences of the crisis and the response became a chapter in a much longer story of negotiations over rights to land, the institution of the chieftaincy and neighbourly relations. Pre-colonial landlord and stranger dynamics intertwined with recent memories of the Ebola outbreak, tightening divisions that were once fluid, destabilising any fixed notion of undisputed authority.

Discussion: Unsettled authority in humanitarian practice

What contribution do these stories from the margins make to debates about the role of “community” and local authority in humanitarian responses to emergencies like Ebola? As Das and Poole note, the marginality of places like Senabee is not simply a territorial observation: “the margins are simultaneously sites where nature can be imagined as wild and uncontrolled” (2009, p. 8) and where “modes of order” are constantly being re-imagined. As spaces seen to require control, the margins are fertile ground to destabilise the humanitarian gaze that seeks to categorise and order, revealing more universal realities about the unsettled nature of authority.

This article has demonstrated the unsettled nature of authority, drawing on Raufu Mustapha’s legacy, in three ways. First, a critical review of the evolution of the role of “community” in the negotiations and interventions that made up the Ebola response in Sierra Leone, reflected how culturalist approaches to preventing the spread of disease obscured the more complex social, economic and political factors structuring citizens’ experiences of the emergency. We saw how a gradual shift from seeing communities as a barrier towards mobilising community authority as gatekeepers for building trust and enforcing Ebola regulations continued to rely on homogenous notions of “community”. The standardisation of community ownership struggled to account for power dynamics, implying static social relations and notions of authority as given, simply to be discovered by the response apparatus. Focusing on the role of chiefs in these processes, the article historicised their unsettled place in Sierra Leone’s trajectory, from pre-colonial times, through independence, the civil war of the 1990s and their post-war repositioning as gatekeepers of development. Thirdly, the article explored the role of chiefs in a border town, tracing how the Ebola emergency was experienced from this town to make visible how power was negotiated and chiefly authority contested and reconfigured in Senabee’s encounter with the response, including how these renegotiations lingered well beyond the end of the crisis.

The aim of this article was not to make a normative assessment of the success of chiefs’ involvement in strategies to combat Ebola. Rather, the role of chiefs serves as an illustration to caution against uncritical approaches to community engagement and the localisation of humanitarian practice that see authority as inherent or as independent of specific interventions. The case of the PC’s relations with his subjects in Senabee during and after the outbreak revealed the ebb and flow of trust and authority: gained through mediation and appeals to ancestry rights, lost through perceptions of overreach, always up for negotiation. Encounters with “the Ebola response”, made up of its regulations and different actors, were not external to these negotiations of legitimacy—experienced through histories of exclusion, memories of the emergency became implicated in distributions of power and integrated in longer-standing disputes over sources of legitimate authority. This analysis suggests methodological and conceptual insights with implications for policy.

Methodologically, influenced by Mustapha's call for empiricism, the article made a case for an ethnographic perspective on power and authority. This means privileging a focus on power as it is experienced and exercised, thinking of "theory not as a network of concepts that is put on a flux of data as a fisherman puts his net on the swirling waters of a river, but as generated from our ethnographic encounters" (Das, 2018, pp. 71–2). The lifeworlds of "small people" like the dwellers of Senabee (often only remembered as undistinguished masses) can act as a window into much bigger questions of social and political reproduction (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992). Their experiences for example encourage us to pay attention to the interplay of moments of rupture, or "critical events" (Das, 1995) like the Ebola emergency, and the everyday, seeing how they are mutually constituted. Furthermore, contrasting the imagination of Senabee as a place of resistance and cultural difference needing to be tamed with its inhabitants' perspectives on the Ebola response as external and occasionally violent, and the role of the chief within it as compromised, compels a reconsideration of static notions of authority, pointing to its indeterminacy. In their efforts to make claims on and challenge different sources of authority, Senabee's dwellers actively mobilised long and short histories. Historical, political and social dynamics were not simply context to their experiences, but agentively appropriated in contemporary negotiations. In the same vein, the integration of tensions from the emergency in longer-standing disputes between the wharf and the old town during the local tax clash allowed us to see how social divisions and claims to authority were fluid and subject to redefinition, for example as the material basis of landlord-stranger accommodations (land and produce) were subverted, tightening boundaries and causing rifts within the town.

These reflections are reminiscent of McGovern's analysis of "high levels of social and cultural flexibility [in Upper Guinea Coast societies] that aided them in negotiating situations of endemic insecurity caused by inter-village raiding spurred by the Atlantic slave trade" (2012, p. 21). In his work on Guinea, McGovern shows how the pre-colonial fluidity of social relations was countered by processes such as colonial chieftom partitions that contributed to the invention of fixed identities ('ethnogenesis') and, as others noted, 'invented traditions' (Ranger, 1997). The stories from Senabee show that this historical trajectory is open-ended, not a permanent fixing of once fluid relations by external processes. It is rather an uncritical approach to the conceptualisation of power dynamics that can make it difficult to see how authority remains subject to redefinition. A view from Sierra Leone's borderlands reminds us that we would do well to:

...understand that narratives can be constituted according to conventions ...which make it **possible** to describe and perpetuate an *unstable sphere of authority*, one which came under colonial attack, and which has been hidden from us because our own definition of reason hangs like a veil before our eyes (Feierman, 1999, p. 209).

Beyond drawing parallels between humanitarian practices and the invented traditions of a colonial past, this also points to the practical consequences of uncritical conceptualisations and their lessons for practice.

As Mustapha taught us, the concepts we use to understand how power works in African societies (and beyond) determine the design of policies and interventions as well as their effects. Efforts to render complex terrains legible and accessible in the short time frames of emergency, as we have seen, have long-term social and political repercussions. Practitioners can look suspiciously on invitations to see social life as more complex, noting that these

critiques are hard to operationalize. Yet the experience of Ebola in Sierra Leone shows us that taking on board the diversity of “community” and the “local”, addressing head on the power dynamics underpinning local understandings of authority is possible. Social scientists’ involvement as active partners in the design of outbreak response efforts began to create new spaces to draw on an analysis of the world as it is, rather than as we would expect it to be (Lees et al., 2020). There is a danger however that social scientists’ role becomes that of cultural brokers who are expected to support an emergency response by discovering pre-conceived truths about “communities” to facilitate and legitimise implementation. Instead, this article suggests the value of taking legitimacy as the object of study, which develops and changes, including as a result of encounters with humanitarian interventions. Countering culturalist assumptions and static notions of power, we can engage historically informed, structurally sound empirical analysis that interrogates how emergencies and their responses are experienced by those directly affected and how power is reproduced and contested at the crossroads between the extraordinary and the everyday.

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to Raufu Mustapha’s memory, in gratitude for his teaching. I would also like to thank Susan Shepler, Gillian McKay, Jamie Hitchen, Portia Roelofs, the Guest Editors and two anonymous peer reviewers for insightful feedback. I am also grateful to participants of the workshop “Celebrating the Legacy of Abdul Raufu Mustapha”, and in particular Kate Meagher for her suggestions. I am indebted to Maseray Fofanah, Fouad Bangura, the elders of Senabee and Alimamy for their assistance and patience. Any errors remain my own. The research and writing for this paper were made possible by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (Fellowship Reference No. ES/N01717X/1).

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