

**Civil Society
and the
Political Imagination
in Africa**

Critical Perspectives

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Staging *Politisi*: The Dialogics of Publicity and Secrecy in Sierra Leone

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IN THIS CHAPTER, I explore the vicissitudes of postcolonial politics in Sierra Leone and their articulation within a public sphere, through an examination of elections that appeared to contradict their democratic potential. Sierra Leonean participants in the 1986 ballot considered the management of ambiguity and the coexistence of covert and public strategies to be central elements in electoral politics, and their ultimate goal was to build consensus through processes of consultation designed to eliminate public opposition. This, in the view of many participants, was the only viable avenue to a peaceful project of democratization. By contrast, the distinction between winners and losers at the ballot generated resentment, and hence the potential for violence. This feature of electoral politics in turn was linked in the local social imaginary to the historical development of the colonial and postcolonial nation-state.

An alternative logic of power to that of public debate and competition was at work, one of dissimulation. Individual success and political effectiveness were seen as being predicated on the ambiguous and sometimes illicit cohabitation with different powerful agencies. The ever-present possibility of politicians resorting to covert politics and the occult to attain power by unconventional means shaped how people decoded events in public, and made these

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very events unpredictable and potentially violent. The point here is not to romanticize an authentically "African" political idiom of consensus building and ambiguous outcomes, or to minimize the violent elements embedded in these processes. On the contrary, autocratic Sierra Leonean regimes have appropriated this indigenous idiom of consensus in pursuit of their own ends, through the skillful manipulation of symbols rooted in local and regional history. In modern Sierra Leonean politics, the idiom of consensual "hanging heads" (*ngu hitt* in Mende) articulated with that of competitive elections to create tension and ambiguity, and these together—not as dialectical stages alternating with peace and clarity—produced outcomes that were remarkably democratic in spirit, even under single-party rule.¹ The case I examine here underscores the different ways a society's membership can "be counted," and count, at the ballot, and make a difference in a collective act of self-construction.

I also raise questions about the relationship between covert strategies and principles of publicity, transparency, and open rational debate, which are central to normative definitions of democratic processes and of the public sphere. For if a defining feature of the public sphere is its accessibility to the broadest possible spectrum of citizens, then its existence in the Sierra Leone case is beyond doubt—except that the conditions under which so many can participate in creating "a public opinion" are that debates be as much secret as they are public, and that outcomes remain ambiguous. A central tenet to the continued existence of a public sphere in Sierra Leone is that its deliberations remain partly secret, especially when these deliberations concern the ballot, given the modern history of electoral abuses in the country. Only through the careful and sometimes unpredictable management of rumors of secret gatherings and strategies can the abuses of the electoral system be kept in check. At the same time, these covert strategies open the way to those very abuses. Both state agents and social actors opposed to them share a view of these shifting idioms and strategies of political culture, a complicity that has been identified as one of the defining features of postcolonial subjectivity under autocratic regimes in Africa (see Mbembe 1992). These shared terms of engagement further complicate the distinction between state and civil society—and the public sphere's mediating role between them—challenged by other contributors to this volume and by previous critical assessments of civil society in an African context (e.g., Harbeson, Rothchild, and Chazan 1994). An understanding of this complicity is at the heart of the African project of political modernity.

Public events in Sierra Leone must be seen in the context of polysemic symbols from the past, symbols whose open character makes them fundamentally appropriate for a variety of purposes. These events unfold on the terrain of a long history of earlier sedimentations. They are "built on the ruins of earlier symbolic edifices and use their materials—even if it is only to fill the

foundations of new temples, as the Athenians did after the Persian wars" (Casatoriadis 1987, 121). In this patently pre-postmodern world, political actors inherit cultural forms that shape their practices and visions of a moral community, even when these are aimed specifically at subverting a particular legacy (in which case the past is often consciously addressed), or when this legacy is relatively unconscious and emergent.

It is indeed the practices that most explicitly link societies to their past, such as rituals, that also bear within them the "experimental technology" necessary to make sense of, and respond to, novel and contradictory circumstances of modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, xxx). Thus, for example, Peter Geschiere (1995) has shown that "traditional" Cameroonian witchcraft beliefs and practices—because they potentiate *both* individualistic accumulation and social leveling—have become a potent idiom in national politics. The intrinsic ambiguity of witchcraft mimics the opacity of the affairs of the Cameroonian state. However, the unprecedented speed and scale of modern forms of enrichment in Cameroon have tested the fluid limits of existing witchcraft idioms, and have warranted the introduction of new ways of operating in the domain of the occult, a domain in which the Cameroonian state itself has become an actor (Geschiere 1995, 157–62, chap. 5). Hence the need to analyze the ways in which existing cultural idioms may also be mobilized, and transformed, to articulate unbridgeable gaps between past and present, albeit in the guise of a mediation between them.

Public Consensus, Secret Competition

In the rural Wunde chiefdom, the 1986 parliamentary elections were fraught with ambiguity and violence. These were widely perceived by participants to be common features of the political process in Sierra Leone at large. By contrast, the same elections were characterized by Western observers as among the least violent and the most "democratic" of the postindependence period (Hayward and Kandeh 1987, 27); for social scientists, of course, the *absence* of physical coercion, the presence of rational debate, and the peaceful exercise of free individual choice are the hallmarks of liberal democratic forms of participation.

Habermas ([1962] 1989), for example, links democracy in Europe, and the displacement of the absolutist state, to the rise of a bourgeois public sphere and its cultural institutions (the theater, the literary salon, the café, and especially the press), in which communities of interest can negotiate their differences. For Habermas, the substitution of physical force—which he sees as a symptom of the irrational—with the force of discursive argument is central to the emergence of modern political forms. So, too, is the presence of public spaces and procedures for transacting different interests—such as eighteenth-century English parliamentary and press debates—after the secrecy that had

characterized court politics (52). Indeed, Habermas perceives the potential demise of the bourgeois public sphere in the return to greater political secrecy in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European states, exemplified by the shift of deliberations and negotiations back to the restricted domains of ministerial cabinets and committees—while political institutions of the public sphere, such as parliament, were only left with a "rubber-stamping" role. This shift coincided with the transformation of public debate in the nineteenth century from an earlier focus on the *principle* of publicity, to the problem of the *enlargement* of the public sphere through electoral reform and the extension of the franchise beyond the property-owning, literate bourgeoisie (133).

From an anthropological perspective (e.g., Hann 1996; Rabo 1996; Spillbeck 1996), and especially from an Africanist one (e.g., Ekeh 1975; Woods 1992) Habermas's theory of political modernity appears partial and Eurocentric. The experience of colonialism, where European political and social institutions were applied in situations of racialized hierarchies of difference, often made "the bourgeois legal fiction of citizenship . . . a farce" (Chakrabarty 1992, 9). At best, it was a fiction applied to an emerging African urban bourgeoisie and not to the majority of rural "native" subjects: "civil society, in this sense, was presumed to be civilized society, from whose ranks the uncivilized were excluded."² In Africa and elsewhere in the postcolonial world, the colonial state has left a "bifurcated" legacy, where a hybrid juxtaposition of direct and indirect rule separates urban citizens from rural subjects governed by "native authorities" (Mamdani 1996, 16). More generally, indirect rule facilitated the practice by European and indigenous agents of the colonial state of "straddling" between administration and business, between "official duties and lucrative activities" (Bayart 1993, 70–71). The fusion of public and private spheres upon which these straddling practices were predicated has led to the privatization of many state functions in postcolonial Africa (Bayart 1993, 97–98). Indeed, an outright "criminalization" of the state has occurred: police prey on the civilian population they are supposed to protect, financial institutions falsify the extent of their insolvency, and so on (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1997).

While these developments in postcolonial Africa seem to contradict Habermas's normative definition of the public sphere, they have also produced critical spaces where "public opinion" has taken shape, albeit in hybrid, covert forms.³ Habermas himself saw in modern politics a return to covert, secretive practices, linked to the dramatic rise of the public sphere since the nineteenth century—a process marked by the growth of competing interests within the public sphere in such a way as to limit its critical role vis-à-vis the state; and, in the twentieth century, by a breakdown of the separation between the state and the institutions of civil society. Note that, for Habermas, it is the expansion of voting privileges, above all else, that enlarged and multiplied the institutions of the public sphere in the nineteenth century, and that dramatically

limited their "publicity." At the same time, the separation between state, civil society, and the public sphere began to be redefined; the state took on "private" roles (e.g., the oversight of social welfare), while societal institutions assumed statelike functions in the domain of economic activity ([1962] 1989, 142–60). These transformations, though, were not necessarily reflected in the public's continued self-image as a critical body—an image or fiction that, according to Habermas, was (and continues to be) an equally important element in the historical constitution of a public sphere. This is especially evident in the context of elections, which are at the core of participatory democracy and underpin the very idea of a free, transparent political society: party platforms, public debates, and critical press scrutiny are, after all, conventions that perpetuate "the liberal fiction of a public sphere in civil society" (211).

In the Sierra Leonean instance examined here, this fiction was called into question, even when it was invoked. The rituals and events of the electoral process were *not* articulated through the contestation and debate that constitute the main "periodic staging of a political public sphere" (Habermas [1962] 1989, 211). Rather, what was staged during the 1986 national ballot in Sierra Leone, and in others before it, was a performance of consensus and unity, which on the surface seemed inimical to democratic competition. Struggles for power and political argument did occur. But they took place elsewhere: in domains whose restricted access made them antithetical to those normally associated with institutions of the public sphere. Political debates straddled public and secret settings, but the general awareness that this was the case makes possible an argument that a public opinion of sorts was nonetheless being formed, one whose straddling techniques—in the interest of avoiding violence—owed its origins to the violent, alien logic of "outvoting." Like other intergroup negotiations,

voting, too, is a projection of real forces and of their proportions upon the plane of intellectuality; it anticipates, in an abstract symbol, the result of concrete battle and coercion. This symbol, at least, does represent the real power relations and the enforced subordination which they impose on the minority. (Simmel 1950, 242)

The electoral process might be an ill-adapted, alien political institution in Sierra Leone. And its introduction here may have been deformed by the single-party state. Yet, as its outcome suggests, the 1986 ballot produced unexpected results that seemed, indeed, to coincide with the will of the majority.⁴ Where they occurred, public displays of consensus were usually framed *both* in the idiom of "traditional" political culture *and* as shared values of modern national politics. Some rural people questioned the part played by competition in elections and decried the relationship between public and secret politics. But they saw them as an inevitable aspect of *politisi*, of national electoral politics, and of the violence engendered by this process.

The General Election of 1986: Kpuawala

The 1986 general elections were held a few months after the installation of a new president, Maj. Gen. J. S. Momoh, to succeed Siaka Stevens. At the time, the peaceful transition from the aging Stevens—who had led the country for most of its postindependence years—to his handpicked successor was hailed by the international media and by political observers as a rare event in Africa. All the more so because political and economic life in Sierra Leone were at a particularly low point. Hopes for real change were reflected in the high percentage of contested seats in this ballot—90 percent compared to about 71 percent in 1982—the first held after the declaration of a single-party state under the All Peoples' Congress (APC) in 1978 (Hayward and Kande 1987, 36). The electoral campaign and vote canvassing, the process of finalizing candidate lists, the elections, and their outcome were fraught with anxiety and ambivalence in the rural village of Kpuawala (see Ferme 1992, 66–82).

In addition to the public appearances and speeches made by politicians and their supporters at regular intervals, another kind of politicking was at work: in secretive, nocturnal conclaves. Initially these two domains existed in parallel to each other, the one shadowing the other. Open gatherings in the central communal spaces during daytime hours were followed by nighttime meetings known to only a few. These were held inside darkened houses or in the secluded forest enclosures of the men's Poro society; open, verbal allegiance to a candidate was often followed by private avowals of support to his opponent. Occasionally, however, the articulation of these different arenas became apparent through unexpected circumstances, highlighting the implicit connections between them.

The ambivalence about the elections among village people in Kpuawala was brought on, in part, by the configuration of a particular struggle. The incumbent member of Parliament (M.P.) for the area, who was the paramount chief's (P.C.'s) brother and a Freetown physician, was challenged by the brother of the local section chief. In Sierra Leone, rural villages and hamlets are grouped into sections, several of which make up a chiefdom, and each of these nesting administrative units are represented by a chief and his or her speaker, in addition to select elders. In sparsely populated rural areas, a political constituency may encompass multiple chiefdoms. Here, in Bo South I, it included two: Wunde and Jaama-Bongor. The candidates, however, came from the same chiefdom, Wunde, and, in fact, from neighboring sections and communities. Kpuawala was roughly equidistant from the chiefdom and section headquarters that were, respectively, to be identified with the opposing contestants. As a result, it would be caught in the middle.

Both candidates had close, overlapping kinship and social ties to all communities in Wunde. The challenger was a civil servant in the chiefdom administration known as "V.J." (for Vandi Jimmy, his surname). He had been begged

not to run against Dr. Dabo, the P.C.'s brother, who was his elder. This happened at a public meeting in early February 1986, when leaders and representatives of the chiefdom were called ostensibly to discuss the implementation of a national price regulation program. The introductory speech was given by the central chiefdom administration clerk, who stressed "our" need to "make sacrifices" in accepting price reductions and in resisting the temptation to hoard goods. "We," he told the audience, "are the government." This speech was delivered in English and translated simultaneously into Mende for the benefit of a member of the national press who had accompanied Dr. Dabo from Freetown to follow his campaign. The imprecise rendering of expressions such as "making sacrifices" with *saa gbua* (the vernacular term for ritual sacrifices of food and animals) must have given a somewhat surreal quality to the discussion of price controls and international loans. In any event, the assembled audience seemed not to pay much attention to the official speeches. It only perked up when the list of commodities and prices was introduced. After having reached an agreement on a uniform price list for locally produced goods, the gathering turned to other political matters.

Visiting dignitaries were introduced. These included B. A. Foday Kai, the elderly but energetic paramount chief from Jaiama-Bongor, the other chiefdom in the constituency. Foday Kai was also a figure of national renown and a member of the APC's central committee, and was thus asked to chair the proceedings.⁵ On this occasion, he wore his usual attire: blue jeans with a "Pierre Cardin" belt, a "Wisconsin" T-shirt emblazoned with his own initials, a "Miller Beer" baseball cap, and thick prescription spectacles. The chain-smoking Foday Kai cut a very different figure from the Wunde P.C., whose long, white robe, round skullcap, and abstention from smoke and drink identified him as a "praying," or practicing, Muslim. However, Foday Kai also had a leather whip casually draped around his neck, a traditional marker of Mende chiefship that complicated his cosmopolitan appearance. This blend of imported and locally manufactured commodities, of new and old, and of cosmopolitan fashion and the historic symbols of indigenous rule underscored Foday Kai's carefully crafted identity as a cultural broker. Widely respected for his knowledge of Mende "tradition" and his interest in and patronage of vernacular arts and crafts, he was consulted in matters relating to local culture and history by rural people as well as by foreigners and urban Sierra Leoneans.⁶ His roles as paramount chief and a member of the APC's central committee, as native ruler, and as one of a handful of chiefly representatives on the national scene extended his brokerage skills into the political domain as well. Foday Kai was a powerful reminder of the integral role played by "traditional" rulers in modern African politics, especially in bridging the gap between state and civil societal institutions, between democratic and lineage politics (whose idiom he always employed).

The political meeting had begun with a cheering drill, orchestrated from the dais by men wearing matching white trousers and red caps. These men incited the crowd to shout each letter of the ruling APC party logo, followed by slogans about unity. The attire of these cheerleaders, later referred to by Dr. Dabo as his "Unity Force," corresponded to the party's flag, or "symbol," a red rising sun against a white background. Their opening ritual set the stage for the official proceedings, situating them within the purview of the ruling national party. Then there was an announcement that the educated descendants of the chiefdom—those who had migrated to urban areas or abroad and who held white-collar jobs—had formed the "Sewa Descendants Association," which recently had met in Bo, the provincial headquarters.

At that gathering, they had discussed the upcoming parliamentary elections. Their secretary had told those present that two men had expressed a desire to run: the incumbent, Dr. Dabo, and V.J., the section chief's brother, who was a government clerk in the neighboring Sherbro district. The meeting was not able to reach a consensus on a single candidate to support, nor could it manage to convince either one to drop out of the race; so it decided to put the matter to the constituency itself. Members of the association in the audience, which included professionals, civil servants, and businessmen, were identified by their T-shirts silk-screened with the organization's acronym—which had been sent by a chapter in the United States. The composition of such associations in Sierra Leone further confuses the division between the state and civil society, and emphasizes the increasing importance in political processes at home of the wealthier and better educated expatriates in Europe and the United States. In the wake of the hardships brought about by previous economic policies, the financial support given by these foreign groups to the grass roots, and the networks they have established, has made them an important factor in constituting a transnational civil society.⁷

Following the announcement about the association, and its earlier meeting, V.J., the challenger, made a theatrical, late entry, conspicuously taking up a position with his followers at the back of the audience. By contrast, Dr. Dabo, the incumbent, was seated on the dais in front of the assembly, with the other dignitaries—many of whom were his relatives. P.C. Foday Kai stood up and spoke forcefully, saying that he disliked the gossip and the vicious rumors (*s/ke*, literally "noise") that might be generated by a contested election. He expressed fears about the infighting to which it would lead. It would have been bad enough if the candidates had been from two different chiefdoms in the constituency. But with both coming from nearby areas of Wunde, there was sure to be trouble. Foday Kai asked the interested parties and their supporters to "hang heads" (*ngu hiti*): to engage in consultations until they reached "one voice," or unity (*ngo yila*), and agreed on a candidate.

In making this request, Foday Kai was not merely rejecting competitive

Thus the search for consensus in this setting might be read both as a response, by the APC leadership, to recent experiences of similar electoral contests and as an evocation of an older, more encompassing political culture. Local political practices always carry a multiplicity of meanings and symbolic articulations.

After Foday Kai, virtually every one of the dignitaries from his chiefdom gave speeches openly supporting Dr. Dabo, even though some used ambiguous language suggesting that they did not oppose the challenger either. In following their P.C., these speakers exemplified exactly the consensus they were trying to elicit from the two candidates. They intimated that having an open contest would be embarrassing, and that it would be a disgrace if the matter could not be settled "in the chiefdom family." The reference to family immediately triggered a response from V.J.'s close relatives. They protested against the assumption that they had encouraged him to stand. The audience around Alhaji Vandy Jimmy, V.J.'s brother and the local section chief, murmured in agreement; it was well-known to them that the latter had tried to "sweet talk" his brother out of running (*i ngi ma nenta*). The very fact that Alhaji Vandy Jimmy—to whom no direct reference was made—presumed that he was being called into question is itself instructive. It suggests that political speech is always thought to comprise multiple, often concealed messages. The exchange offered a glimpse into that other, less visible domain of politics, as Chief Vandy Jimmy articulated what would normally have remained unsaid in public. At that point, various friends of the challenger scrambled to chronicle their efforts to dissuade him from his candidacy—acknowledging, in effect, that the hanging heads process had not succeeded at that level.

All through this discussion, V.J. stood in stone-faced silence on the margins of the gathering, conspicuously unaffected by efforts to provoke his participation. Then he was asked again, in front of everyone, if he still intended to run. He replied in the affirmative. This gesture indicated his unwillingness to go along with what was in effect a performance. Recall that the meeting had begun with a theatrical cheering session, a ritual expression of unity; also, the protestation of the section chief, which suggested that real political negotiations ought to be concealed, never more than partially enacted in public. English, a language well understood by only a handful of the audience members, was used earlier in the meeting, which added to the notion that substantive deliberations were a secondary aspect in this kind of open political gathering. Indeed, the proper domain for hanging heads and reaching consensus here is never the public arena, whose oppositional, competitive dynamics underscores the authoritarian logic of "open," rational debate. With his statuelike posture and his refusal to be drawn into the discussion, V.J. underscored the staged character of these proceedings, whose sparrings were a mere *over-ture* to both the electoral campaign and the negotiations characteristic of any

electoral politics out of a regressive attachment to tradition. He was affirming a principle central to single-party rule in Sierra Leone since 1978; the principle that also underlay the ritual display of unity at the start of the meeting. The move away from a multiparty constitution had been justified on the ground that it was inconsistent with the consensus building implied in the customary practice of "hanging heads." This, President Siaka Stevens had argued at the time, was a more "African" approach to the democratic process and would prevent the widespread violence and corruption that had characterized earlier elections (see Kpundeh 1995; Reno 1995, 66; Scott 1960, 187; Zack-Williams 1989, 125). Significantly, he had called a referendum to pass the constitutional change, to show that the process of transition had itself been consensual; that "hanging heads" had occurred on a national scale (see Hayward and Dumbuya 1983, 663–64). With this creative reading of "tradition," Stevens and his supporters implied—as other Africans have done—that democratization might be better served by being grounded in vernacular political styles, rather than in liberal theories without local resonances (see Haugrud 1995; Karlström 1996). But this modern appropriation of "hanging heads" could also be seen as antidemocratic: its fundamental premise, to enable participation in decision-making processes in a relatively egalitarian setting, was easily subverted by exclusionary strategies aimed at eliminating threatening political opponents. Simply put, Stevens had appealed to consensus politics as a preliminary step toward instituting a single-party state, because his APC party had barely won the 1977 elections. During that ballot, the APC's strong-arm tactics against candidates of the largely Mende-based Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) had gained the latter considerable popular sympathy. As a result, many believed that the SLPP would have won in future contests (see Hayward and Dumbuya 1983, 663). More immediately, in Kpuawala in 1986, the paramount chief sought to achieve an uncontested election by building on a modern use of *his own role* in politics; from the very first elections at the eve of independence, in 1957, local rulers used the strategy of "hanging heads" to run unopposed in their own local ballots and to support their favorite candidates on the national stage (Scott 1960, 185–87).

Unlike those early, uncompetitive elections, the move now to "hang heads" in search of consensus, and the fears expressed by Foday Kai of the consequences of a contested race, belied the very high percentage of contested seats fought in all Sierra Leonean elections since independence. Indeed, Foday Kai's concern may have been prompted by a recent ballot closer to home: in 1982, in the neighboring Pujehun district, the division of the constituency between two candidates from the same area resulted in unprecedented violence, deaths, destroyed property, and the burning of entire villages (see Kpundeh 1992, 96; Hayward and Dumbuya 1985, 80–81). Many refugees from those events were now living in Wunde and were among Foday Kai's audience.

political process (see Murphy 1990). The tension was palpable, until the P.C. changed the subject with a formal speech that made no reference to what had just transpired.

This last intervention signaled a shift. Negotiations over the issue of political elections would now move to another register, away from the public domain to the parlors and backrooms of village compounds. Accordingly, the gathering adjourned. Later, young men discussing the day's events in Kpuawala seemed quite skeptical of the public expression of support for the incumbent: "That's what they said, but who knows what is in their hearts?" They speculated that the backing for V.J. was much greater than was apparent—even if he was a newcomer with relatively few patronage networks in the area. Some criticized the M.P. for never having set foot in the villages of his constituency since his election; his rare visits had been confined to the chiefdom headquarters. They pointed out that his challenger had built a beautiful, modern cement house in his hometown (the most attractive house in the community), and took this to indicate that he would spend more time locally than his opponent did. Eventually, however, it was announced that the two candidates had come to an agreement. V.J. had withdrawn from the race.

The (Body) Politics of Ambiguity

V.J.'s change of mind turned out not to have been, in Mende terms, a change of heart. Nor had most people thought so. In the days following the February meeting, casual conversations in the village turned to the dangers of *politisi*, and to the "bad medicine" (*hale nyamui*, also "unattractive, ugly") often deployed to acquire power and wealth. One man remembered a court case in the neighboring chiefdom some years before; he described the metal claws found on an alleged member of the leopard medicine society indicted for murder. Members of this society and a handful of other banned secret cults were thought to mimic the attack techniques of wild animals to procure human bodies, whose parts were used to make amulets or substances that endowed their wearers or consumers with special capacities (Kalous 1974; Richards 1996a, 143–45). Women and children were said to be the most common victims of bad medicine, as they were easier prey. The covert manner in which these substances were thought to work under ordinary clothes and appearances was analogous to the way in which political speech was assumed to evoke hidden meanings and to project its significance to the outside world. When politicians or performers displayed unusual oratorical skills, when they seemed particularly charming and persuasive, Kpuawala bystanders often wondered what made them so attractive. Jokes about things hidden under clothes or inside bellies revealed the preoccupation with potency medicines, and brought the issue of bodily substance to the forefront of their evaluation of people.

Beyond the practices they address, such public discussions of bad medicine have political effects as well. Rumors, suspicions, accusations, and denials of witchcraft activities in the national media as well as village gossip circuits are the discursive extensions of power medicine's strategic, concealed deployment. Politicians enhance their reputations by circulating rumors of their own occult powers, while attempting to undermine their rivals with suspicions of consorting with much worse concealed agencies (see McCormack 1983); public accusations of involvement in bad medicine may trigger reactions of horror and fear toward the accused, but they also add to their power, especially when there is no evidence with which to prosecute in a court of law.

NOT A WEEK had passed after the February political meeting when it was rumored that V.J. was again a candidate. According to local gossip, as soon as the gathering had ended, the Jaiama-Bongor people who had publicly opposed V.J.'s candidacy had written to his brother, the section chief, declaring their secret support. Those who reported this rumor found nothing strange in this shift from a vocal public stance against somebody to surreptitious support for him—or vice versa. The backing for Dabo at a meeting of all the constituency notables, where even the national press had been present, was thus countered by a personal letter to V.J.'s brother; what is more, the latter was seen to reflect real loyalties more than the former. This domain of concealed actions and relations carried greater weight than did the open debate of political meetings.

The months leading up to the May ballot saw visits from both candidates and their supporters, who extolled the virtues of their man and the shortcomings of his opponent. At one point, V.J. reported the P.C. to the national election commission in Freetown for publicly backing his own brother and intimidating his subjects, instead of keeping out of the campaign. V.J. also mentioned being harassed by his opponent's allies when he went to Freetown to collect the party "symbol" that was necessary to stand in the election, and which would grace official candidate posters (see figures 6.1 and 6.2). Supporters of each side gave speeches saying that people should follow their hearts in "dropping the paper," in voting (*a wu k-bb gula wu li woma*), but then tried to turn those hearts in a particular direction through gifts of cash, food, and even drugs. On one occasion, a group of young men said that V.J. had brought a big bag of *jamba* (marijuana) for his followers. This substance was consumed mostly by young men, who made up the bands of escorts/thugs that protected the candidates and threatened their adversaries. V.J. courted this constituency most openly, thus reinforcing his image as the candidate for change and youth and against the status quo. In this aspect, this political struggle conformed to a generational conflict evident throughout Africa (e.g., Hutchinson 1996; Marchal 1993; Richards 1995, 1996b).

In addition to its formal public appearances, each camp held unan-

GENERRAL ELECTIONS 1986

DR. M. B. DABO

A. P. C.

IS DETERMINED TO ARREST

THE

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND

HEALTH PROBLEMS IN

BO. SOUTH - #1

COME AND

VOTE FOR

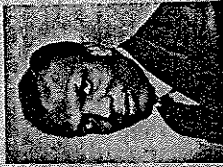
THE

RIGHT CHOICE

ALHAJI DABO

(ALHAJI) DR.

M.B. DABO



GENERAL ELECTION - 1986

Your Candidate For
BO SOUTH I CONSTITUENCY



Vote Sincerely For
Haruna Vandi Jimmy

**YOUR SON OF THE SOIL
COMMONLY KNOWN AS (VEE-JAY)
WHO IS THE POPULAR CHOICE OF THE PEOPLE
VOTE FOR PEACE, PROGRESS, UNITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL.
FOR EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATION YOUR TOTAL PROTECTION IS ASSURED.**

Fig 6.1. Incumbent M.P. (Alhaji) Dr. Dabo candidate poster, Bo South I constituency general elections, 1986.

Fig 6.2. Challenger Vandi Jimmy (V.J.) candidate poster, Bo South I constituency general elections, 1986.

nounced, "secret" meetings. One April day, I dropped by without advance warning at the section chief's house and found him surrounded by local notables and Kpuawala men, who were obviously embarrassed to be seen with him. Among those eating at his table were some of the most eloquent supporters of his brother's political opponent. Like the Jaiama-Bongor elders, these people seemed to be backing one candidate in public and another in private. Turning surprise to advantage, the section chief approached the man accompanying me—a known follower of his brother's opponent and a brother-in-law of the P.C.—and began "sweet-talking" him into changing his mind. In a context in which it was assumed that loyalties were often multiple and dissimulated, and where special attributes were thought to endow political figures with irresistible powers of persuasion, it was always worthwhile to sow the seeds of alliance. And, concomitantly, to court *all* potential voters.

Courting the voter is characteristic of democratic elections, where the undecided, who lack a strong commitment to any side, may determine the outcome. In Kpuawala voters are courted for a different reason: because an eloquent campaigner, aided by concealed powers, can always entice followers with *multiple* loyalties to turn—if only long enough to effect the desired result. The notion that unusual personal attributes, or persuasive ways, can alter political balances at any time also suggests that political contests remain undecided until the last.

When sweet talking was not enough, more or less open threats of action followed. A group of elders from the chiefdom headquarters visited Kpuawala in May to beg the gathered community to vote for the incumbent. Insisting that they had come at their own initiative, without the P.C.'s knowledge, they at first repeated the familiar litany that they were not there to campaign and that everyone should vote according to their hearts. But, on two separate occasions during the meeting, speakers reminded the audience that votes would be counted by village. It would be obvious, therefore, whether they had "followed" Dr. Dabo or V.J. This thinly veiled threat was also one of the few open acknowledgements that despite public declarations, the M.P.'s backers were aware that secret machinations might be afoot to put an end to his long political career.

The candidates' platforms shared common elements: both Dr. Dabo and V.J. focused on "development," on the benefits that would accrue to their constituents from their election, and on their kinship ties to the chiefdom. But significant contrasts were apparent as well. The two men could not have been more different, nor could the symbolism invoked by them. While they both ran under the same party icon, a red rising sun, each had a distinctive set of allegiances to its colors. The incumbent belonged to the country's educated elite: a European-trained physician who had spent many years abroad, he had a private practice in Freetown and traveled upcountry in a Mercedes. His

electoral poster portrayed him in suit and necktie (figure 6.1). His pilgrimage to Mecca had also earned him the title of *Alhaji*, but this was bracketed in his poster, which privileged the "Dr." Nonetheless, Dr. Dabo's Muslim identity helped bridge the distance between his European education and his political reliance on the religious rural leadership in the constituency.

Despite the kinship rhetoric in Dr. Dabo's speech and his appeal to a common Muslim faith, he remained for many constituents a distant, foreign relative. Much was made by his opponents of the fact that he did not own a house in the chiefdom or spend much time there; also that his family was of Mandingo origin, from neighboring Guinée. Dr. Dabo's speeches emphasized the public works projects he had steered toward the chiefdom, but whispered comments from the audience suggested that, by living in the capital, he distanced himself from his constituency. A story circulated about how, when the local men had helped clear a large farm for the M.P. after his previous election, they were fed "white people's food"—sweets and finger food instead of the customary rice meal—and had left hungry.

By contrast, his opponent was said always to feed people generous meals when they assisted him in major farming tasks. "At least with V.J. we will eat rice and fill our stomachs," declaimed his supporters. In his campaign, the challenger exploited the rich political symbolism of his populist appeal to earthiness and full stomachs. V.J. also capitalized on the fact that he had not received a sophisticated education, or traveled abroad. He labeled himself a "son of the soil," whose closeness to his homeland and its problems was demonstrated by his having built a house there (figure 6.2). Another strand of V.J.'s strategy to claim the higher moral ground was in the very domain of religious symbolism in which the opposing camp appeared to have its most solid credentials. In contrast with the urban, professional attire of Dr. Dabo in his campaign poster, V.J. chose to be portrayed in the white gown worn by the P.C. and all other local Muslim clerics.⁸ His followers presented him as a candidate for change, one who would spend more time locally than his opponent ever did. As evidence, they stressed the difference between V.J.'s section chief brother, who worked on his farm every day, and the paramount chief, who "stayed in town." While Dr. Dabo's identification with the APC regime was brought home by the constant presence of an escort wearing the party logo and chanting its "unity" routines, V.J.'s campaign bore no such markers; to wit, his distance from the ruling party took on even more radical overtones as events unfolded.

The campaign came to a fever pitch with the approach of the elections in May, and the fear of slander and violence in local communities increased apace. People from the neighboring chiefdoms—where the 1982 elections had been marked by assault and destruction—had begun to arrive over the preceding weeks. Carrying their possessions and settling in with local friends

and relatives, they hoped to avoid the worst political turmoil. It was said that at times like these, such places as Kpuawala, being in the "bush," were far safer than the big towns.

The isolation of these bush communities was not accidental. The work to maintain roads and bridges within the chiefdom was scheduled by the P.C. and local authorities, and depended on voluntary cooperation. Thus one of the ways in which political sympathies in the various areas could be gauged at election time was through the willingness of people to participate in such communal labor. For a long time now, the palm log bridges and paths leading to Kpuawala had been left to deteriorate, and things were getting worse with the onset of the rains. Residents complained about the state of the road every time a vehicle tried to get through. But no effort was made to clear the vegetation engulfing it, I was told, in order to limit the risk of thugs coming in from outside to cause trouble. Kpuawala, in short, had deliberately pushed itself farther into the bush through the strategic neglect of road maintenance. This tactic also bespoke the political factionalism that divided the chiefdom, cutting off the village, now increasingly opposed to Dr. Dabo, from the P.C. and his headquarters, which had come to be identified with the incumbent.

Three days before the elections, two rotting bridges were finally repaired so that a vehicle carrying the electoral commission and ballot boxes could get through. The voters' roll was wildly inaccurate. It included over twice the number of people recorded by the national census five months earlier. No attempt was made to update the lists by dropping duplicate entries and by deleting the names of the deceased and departed—or by registering immigrants and those too young to vote at previous elections. As before (see Scott 1960, 197–200, 245–51), the lists were treated as inviolable documents. As a result, several young men and women were not mentioned in the roll call preceding election day. After some objection, the commissioner said that people on the list who were still in Kpuawala would vote first; those not on it could do so later.

Election day saw people converge on Kpuawala from the four other communities that were to vote at this polling station. Crowding around the meeting place where their names were read, voters received a blue marble and had their fingers marked in green to prevent them from casting more than one ballot. They went alone to a nearby house, where two boxes were placed. Each was marked by a photographic portrait of a candidate, and voters were instructed to drop the marble into the box of their choice. Nobody left the village for the whole day. Despite these arrangements, which were intended to guarantee the secrecy considered crucial to "free and fair elections" —and the fact that nobody openly discussed their ballots—everyone seemed to assume that voting preferences would be known to the opposing camp. When asked how this could happen, people said that there were ways in which what went on inside the closed room could be ascertained. Some seemed particularly

uneasy about having the candidates' portraits looking on. These pictures were alluded to as indexical symbols of the human beings they represented, rather than being neutral icons to differentiate ballot boxes.

At the end of the day, when the polls closed, the electoral commissioners were besieged by complaints about irregularities; some people even refused to let them leave with the ballot boxes. After arguments and physical struggles, they were allowed to depart in a vehicle sent to fetch them—but with an escort of young male leaders who went along to register their objections and to prevent further irregularities. The following two days were spent in almost unbearable anticipation of the results, and hardly anyone went off to their fields. Slanderous speculation began even as we were waiting, when one local man said loudly—to nobody in particular—that, if V.J. won, the Kpuawala chief was sure to be replaced; that nobody would ever listen to him or respect him again. This chief had never wavered in his support of the M.P., whose brother, the paramount chief, was his son-in-law.

Finally, at daybreak on 2 June, the third day after the elections, the arrival of a crowd of shouting people from the path to the section headquarters made plain that V.J. had won. Most of the community broke into song and dance. The losing M.P.'s most prominent supporters were slandered—including the village chief. Piles of palm branches were left in front of his house—the first public display of a different party symbol in a supposedly single-party election. The palm tree had been the symbol of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), which had led the government in the pre- and postindependence years, and had then been the APC's main opposition until its suppression (discussed in the following section). The crowd intoned a song addressing the local chief by his first name rather than the respectful *maada* ("grandfather") and the Dabo surname, and he was told that he was now an "ordinary person" and would soon be replaced. The song went on to say the same of the paramount chief; also that a new chief would "sit in Wunde." This was a play both on the word for chief (*mahɛi*, "he who sits upon") and on the fact that Wunde is, at once, the name of the chiefdom and the name of the particular village where V.J. was from and where his brother lived. The implication was that the section chief was being put forth as a likely successor to the P.C. Other local people were accused of having acted as spies for Dr. Dabo's campaign during the preceding months, and they were beaten or driven out of town over the following days. The same happened in neighboring communities.

Later, a large crowd gathered in the section chief's village to celebrate his brother's victory. His compound was surrounded by palm tree branches planted in the ground, and palm fruits were hung on strings from the eaves of his house. The section chief proclaimed, publicly, that palm trees had been the source of his wealth, adding: "This is where I found money for my brother's campaign. The Dabos are rich [from diamonds and trade and politics], but [palm] oil is what made *me* rich."⁹ People ate and collected the palm fruits

throughout the day. One Kpuawala man came back from the celebration proudly displaying what by his own reckoning were 150 palm fruits: he said that he would plant them and begin his own palm tree nursery. Thus it was that palm fruits, the symbol and instrument of V.J.'s election, became a tangible expression of political and economic patronage, helping others to reproduce wealth elsewhere.

Palm Trees against the Sunset: Political Symbols and Their Transformations

Alhaji Vandy Jimmy's victorious display of palm leaves and fruits was more than a celebration of hard work and honestly gained wealth. It also tapped into political symbolism with deep historical roots in Mendeland. The palm tree, as I mentioned, was the symbol of the illegal, mostly Mende-based Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), which dominated the national scene from before independence to 1969, when it became the opposition. During the 1973 general elections, the SLPP was marginalized by the APC; it was formally outlawed with the establishment of single-party rule five years later. Thus Alhaji's celebratory display could also be interpreted as an assertive resuscitation of the SLPP, as a challenge to the process of "hanging heads" associated with decades of oppressive APC rule, and as a rejection of the leadership of the likes of Dr. Dabo. Indeed, V.J.'s campaign, beginning with his defiant stance at the margins of the APC-dominated meeting in February, might be read as the symbolic reenactment of a suppressed oppositional politics, appealing specifically to Mende ethnicity.

The periodic evocation of ethnic sentiment has been an increasingly common feature of modern party politics in Sierra Leone (Kandeh 1992) and elsewhere in Africa. In particular, it has been linked to political dynamics in single-party states, where ethnicity "became the home of the opposition" in the absence of other unifying factors such as a developed class consciousness (Vail 1989, 2). Ironically, oppositional ethnic politics have been exacerbated by calls in the early 1990s for multiparty elections across Africa on the part of international donors (e.g., Moore 1996, 589-92).¹⁰

In sum, the "son of the soil" rhetoric accompanying that display of palm leaves went beyond a generic opposition against the foreign values and cosmopolitan lifestyle of Dr. Dabo, whose wealth was based both on professional and political activities and on family mercantile enterprises. It also had a more specific link to modern party politics in Sierra Leone, pointing toward the emergence of an opposition. In addition, the image of V.J.'s generously nurturing roots in Mendeland invoked a specific local history. Among the claims made by some of his relatives was that they were "warriors" descended from the legendary Ndawa of Wunde, founder of their village. A century earlier, Ndawa had led a blockade against the coastward transport of commodities on

demand by European merchants—a move that resulted in the intervention of British colonial authorities (Abraham 1978, 37, 85; Fyfe 1962, 483).¹¹ Their connections to a lineage of landowners and warriors was contrasted with the alien origin of Dr. Dabo and his brother, the P.C. It was pointed out that being tall and fair, the Dabo family even *looked* different from "real" Mende, and still spoke among themselves the Manding language of their Guinée homeland, which none of the local villagers could understand.

The palm leaf also carried another yet deeper historical significance in this Mende setting. It was said to have been the signal sent among communities by leaders of Poro, the men's secret society, to organize a rebellion against the imposition of taxes, in 1898, in the Sierra Leone Protectorate (Abraham 1978, 159; Chalmers 1899). Thus its association with unity and consensus went back a long way, much longer than the red-and-white "Unity Force" of the APC. By appropriating this symbol to express discontent with the government, V.J.'s supporters recast their victory as continuous with those century-old events. The secret role of Poro and other esoteric societies in orchestrating political outcomes has long been a preoccupation in modern Sierra Leone (e.g., Cohen 1981; Kilson 1966; Little 1965, 1966; Scott 1960, 174); this was underscored in a comment made by a still-furious Dr. Dabo several months later. After referring to the palm leaves, he said that the election turnout had been secretly arranged by the Poro initiation chapters in the villages of the chiefdom. "They kept on meeting in the bush," he said, and promised that this was not the end of the story. His meaning was clear: he, too, had recourse to covert ways of getting even.

Of Bees, Warriors, and Politics by Other Means

The official vote count in the Bo South I constituency was reported in Kpuawala a few days after the ballot. A representative from the electoral commission toured the chiefdom villages accompanied by the P.C.'s messenger, and posted a typed copy of the vote breakdown by polling station near the main meeting places (see the appendix to this chapter). V.J. had won a majority of votes in all polling stations of both Wunde and Jaiama-Bongor chiefdoms, with the exception of the headquarter towns, Gboyama and Telu, and of P.C. Foday Kai's hometown of Bendu. In other words, despite the ambiguity surrounding Chief Foday Kai's political loyalties, and his followers' covert support for V.J., both P.C.s and their closest allies ended up backing the incumbent candidate. This outcome underscores the strategic linkages between "traditional" authorities and politicians at the national level in modern Sierra Leone. The profile of the two candidates in this election suggests why this is the case: there is no fundamental discontinuity between these two kinds of political elites, their formation, and the sites they inhabit. Within the same family, close brothers may hold "traditional" or national political office, or, as in the case of P.C.

Foday Kai, both at the same time. Though the continuity between "traditional" and modern educated elites has been seen to be especially strong in postcolonial Sierra Leone (see Bayart 1993, 148; Kilson 1966, 71–79), and their political alliances a feature of single-party states elsewhere in Africa, this linkage also owes much to the institutional legacy of the colonial state and its role in shaping "native authorities" (see Geschiere 1995; Mamdani 1996, 16–23). In particular, Mamdani has seen a major obstacle to the development of a modern African civil society in the racist exclusion of rural peoples from full citizenship in the colonial state, and their subjection to "traditional" authorities and "customary" laws that differed from the citizenship rights of urban dwellers. However, this chapter points to a more optimistic future for civil society, given that in practice the same social actors can straddle the two domains of traditional and national politics, and of rural and urban locations.

During the weeks between the elections and the inaugural celebrations for the new M.P. on 15 July, supporters of Dr. Dabo, relatives of the paramount chief, and local authorities were harassed, insulted, and threatened. Some relocated to the chiefdom headquarters, which had become isolated from all other communities despite its prominent location on the main road. Bush paths and back roads connecting villages suddenly came alive with travelers, thus opening up an alternative geography—one previously concealed—to that associated with the out-of-favor regime. On inauguration day itself, the "unity" conveyed by the uniform attire of the crowd—*ashabis*, clothes made especially for the occasion from a single fabric pattern—belied the uneasiness of the new M.P.'s followers. They were less than delighted to hold the festivities, according to protocol, at the political center of the chiefdom, right "at the feet" of the losing M.P.'s constituency; many of them stayed away. But a large gathering, with masked dancers and a variety of other entertainments, took place anyway. As was customary, these were accompanied by licentious language and political and social satire.¹² Chiefdom officials and visiting dignitaries spoke about mending old enmities and "forgiving" each other, to general applause and vigorous nodding in the audience. But, at the high point of the festivities, a war dance was performed by P.C. Foday Kai and some of the elders. On this, his first visit to the chiefdom since the February meeting, Foday Kai put aside his jeans and baseball cap. Along with his cohort, he wore "traditional" warrior garb: a rust-colored, kola-nut-dyed tunic, breeches, and a cap made from strip-woven local cotton, on which were sewn amulets and animal horns filled with protective medicines. In this attire, the handful of elders performed one of the carefully choreographed dances for which Foday Kai was known, waving swords over their heads and staging mock duels.

Although intended as a form of celebratory entertainment, this dance seemed to speak of political battles of another time and kind, and to relate them to the contest just concluded. In the event, the dancing warriors' protec-

tive garb was put to the test not by bullets or blades, but by a swarm of dangerous killer bees, which suddenly descended on the crowd in the midst of this performance. In a few minutes, the village's open spaces were deserted as people ran shouting in all directions, shutting doors and windows behind themselves. Amid the eerie silence, the only sound was the drone of insects and the running engine of a single abandoned car: its doors were open and its white interior was alive with bees.

One of the paramount chief's brothers said that the bees must have been nesting in the roof of an abandoned kiosk nearby, a building whose fading sign read "Post Office." Perhaps it was fitting that the bees had chosen this site. It stood as a reminder of the collapse of state services and of the severed communication links between outlying rural areas, the country's urban centers, and the world beyond. The man argued, quite reasonably, that the commotion from the unusually large crowd must have disturbed the nest. His sister, however, seemed skeptical of this explanation. Eventually the swarm began to lift and people emerged from hiding, many with multiple stings on their bodies. Visitors were anxious to get away as fast as possible. Few doubted that this attack had been the work of witches (*hnabla*), unleashed by vengeful, disappointed Dabo supporters.

"*Hnabla mia a tie, kpɛkɛ!*" "They are all witches!" one woman said excitedly, adding that she just *knew* she should have stayed away. An alternative gathering was held in the new M.P.'s hometown, where the main topic of songs, speeches, jokes, and other performances was the bee attack, whose meaning was interpreted with variable degrees of explicitness. All along, most people seemed to think, there had been intentions other than reconciliation in the minds of the P.C., the losing candidate, and their supporters. They had tricked people into coming to their territory, only to unleash their evil medicines on them, even to try and kill them. Thus the unpredictable, terrifying bee attack that put an end to the "celebration" hosted by the losing candidate's brother spawned an open discussion about the relationship between public and secret political practices. Among its recurring themes was the impossibility that the losing party would accept the results. This followed the assumption that it was driven by witchcraft. But the violence was also seen as an inevitable consequence of electoral politics in general, a process that produced winners and losers rather than consensus through negotiation.

Because it played into a long history of oppositions, and called upon powerful symbols, the conflict continued for a long time after the elections. Seven months later, when I left Sierra Leone, followers and relatives of the P.C. and Dr. Dabo were still being harassed and ostracized; in extreme cases they had abandoned their home villages. Procedures were under way to depose chiefs who had been too openly supportive of the losing candidate, and others were made to apologize profusely with gifts, money, and public humiliation. Then my farewell party in Kpuawala turned into a political confrontation, in which

Foday Kai had yet again to intervene as peacemaker in order to avoid open violence. This was the fate of most major gatherings in the chiefdom thereafter. The bee attack came to be accepted as conclusive proof that the losers were not going to resign themselves gracefully and were planning to use witchcraft to even scores. It should be said, however, that some people in the P.C.'s compound at the time of the attack interpreted the event in very different terms: as a covert punitive action by V.J.'s supporters. Secret strategies and connections were seen to have been a major factor in his victory; hence Dr. Dabo's comment about V.J.'s "meetings in the Poro bush."

In March 1987, only a few months after his inauguration, the new M.P. was implicated with five others in an alleged coup attempt against President Momoh, supposedly mounted by a Mende antimuggling agent with the support, among others, of Vice President Minah. A prominent Mende politician from the neighboring Pujehun district, Minah was also considered responsible for the violent *ndgb>swi* attacks there following the 1982 elections. The accused men were imprisoned and most of them were executed. V.J. managed to get his sentence converted to house arrest in Freetown, where he died in 1990, apparently from complications from diabetes (Paul Richards, personal communication, London, March 1997). In Wunde, however, his death was imputed to more mysterious agencies.

These events turned politics inside the chiefdom upside down, as the persecuted supporters of Dr. Dabo regained control of the local scene and began to exact their own revenge. Some of those who had been chased from their villages as spies were installed as village chiefs, albeit very unpopular ones. The section chief was deposed and heavily fined by the P.C., with the backing of police sent in by the national government. The police also helped track down, imprison, and mistreat many elders who had followed V.J. Had Dr. Dabo been prophetic when he had said, in 1986, that the political fallout of the election was far from over? Or had he been at work behind the scenes, marshaling his own resources and networks to bring all this about? Many Kpawala people felt they knew the answer as soon as the bees attacked.

In light of the conflict, the president of Sierra Leone, Momoh, decided to pay a visit to the chiefdom to "settle the land" (*a ndb> hugbat*), arriving by helicopter with the inspector general of police, Bambang Kamara. But resentment continued to brew over the crackdown by the P.C. after V.J.'s death. Rumors began again to circulate about gatherings in the Poro bush. As it happened, the civil war overtook the affairs in the chiefdom. The military regime that seized power in 1992 weakened the authority of all P.C.s installed under the APC government, accusing them of having been corrupt. When elections were held again in February 1996 to establish a civilian government, they were open to more than one party for the first time in twenty years. Among those fielding candidates were several with names harking back to "pre-APC times," including the SLPP, which won the ballot.

Conclusion

I began this analysis of the 1986 elections outlining some of the challenges posed by the straddling strategies and bifurcated historical legacies that make the application of normative models of the public sphere and civil society problematic in the context of the postcolonial Sierra Leonean state. The permeability in Africa between spheres that might arguably have limited autonomy elsewhere, if only under specific circumstances, is also an aspect of the "illicit cohabitation" between authority and its subjects in postcolonial regimes (Mbembe 1992, 4). In the Sierra Leonean case, this cohabitation was exemplified by the shared idiom of covert power at different levels of state and civil society. Regardless of the implications for struggles in local, national, or even transnational political arenas of any electoral reforms in Sierra Leone, the continued link between these domains is also ensured by a shared political culture among their actors. One of the defining features of postcolonial subjectivity in Sierra Leone is the fundamental ambiguity of political intentions, practices, and agencies. Modern politics and life also presume the coexistence of multiple public and covert dimensions of reality. That "numerous contents of life cannot even emerge in the presence of full publicity" (Simmel 1950, 330) is taken for granted; but this, as Habermas himself has noted, has come increasingly to characterize the "democratic" formations of late capitalist societies as well.

The potent social imaginary of ambiguity, rumors, and occult forces deployed in the more "ordinary" political setting of the 1986 ballot and its aftermath also provides a context for understanding the extraordinary forms of violence that took place at the outbreak of civil war some five years later.¹³ Both events drew on symbols linked to the historical genealogy of the modern state, its violent genesis in colonialism and its more recent history under the corrupt, sometimes brutal APC regime. This genealogy includes previous instances of belligerent resistance, such as the 1898 "tax war"; and of bitterly oppositional party politics, such as those evoked by the silent deployment of SLPP icons during the 1986 elections, itself a protest against single-party rule.

The SLPP's rapid transition from banned party to majority government in the 1996 elections was foreshadowed by the continued invocation of its key symbols in major political events during the years of its suppression. Its existence in peoples' memories and desires, as they lived through the excesses of what came to be known as the "APC time," conforms to Mende notions of how power operates. Power is seen to work in secret, covert spheres, whose existence is tantalizingly evoked by the use of polysemic symbols in the public domain, such as the palm branches displayed by the section chief or the rhetoric of hanging heads. These symbols are sufficiently rich in their resonances to conjure up many other meanings as well. Palm branches speak of ancestral links to the land, of a commitment to feed one's followers, of Mende political

history in both postcolonial and colonial times. Hanging heads may be understood, generically, as a means to achieve unified, concerted political action through consultation and compromise; but it is also associated with the introduction of a single-party constitution, and with the APC era. Furthermore, the polysemy of political symbols like the palm leaf—as icons of authority in some contexts and as oblique calls to resistance in others—challenges any simple antinomy between hegemonic and counterhegemonic signs.

After V.J.'s involvement in the 1987 coup attempt, his brother was not reinstated as section chief, although he commanded a loyal personal following. By contrast, the paramount chief displayed remarkable staying power. He continued to hold office, despite periodic threats to his authority posed by changes in government and by the civil war that has displaced him and many of his subjects. However, the 1996 (multiparty) elections did not resolve the issue of the M.P. for the constituency, and the post did not return to its previous holder.

On the face of it, the discourse of democratization and reform that has engulfed Sierra Leone and other African states seems to favor the concentration of electoral politics in urban centers. In Sierra Leone, the civilian government elected in the 1996 multiparty elections, and restored to power in 1998, ran on a platform that included electoral reform proposals. Future elections might restrict voters to a choice of parties, not individuals, and this might shift competition for political patronage and office from the local constituency to the party headquarters in Freetown. At the same time, multiparty elections may also facilitate the politicization of ethnic identities; witness, for example, the formation of new, ethnic-based parties in the 1995 Tanzanian elections (see Moore 1996).

What is most striking, finally, about the 1986 elections in Wunde is the remarkably democratic spirit at their core. And this in spite of real anxieties and fears of violence; in spite, too, of the "foreignness" of the idiom of government and of the electoral process embodied in *politisi*. The counterpressures to conform and compete, to renounce political ambitions in favor of consensus and yet to struggle to the very end, is embedded in the logic of covert politics. While electoral politics enact the fiction of free and fair competition, many Sierra Leoneans are uncomfortable with the way in which this creates winners and losers; for them, it is a process, more akin to court cases, that inevitably causes resentment and potential violence. Throughout the relatively short history of elections in Sierra Leone, therefore, efforts have been made to transform political institutions and practices inherited from the colonial state through their integration with local political idioms, like that of hanging heads. While the autocratic potential of these idioms was demonstrated both by their appropriation on the part of the APC and by the role of paramount chiefs in national politics during the early postindependence years, they remain a powerful symbolic resource. In any event, recourse to covert strategies, to the

occult, and to the rumors that amplify their potency in public domains provide a powerful check to political excesses.

Together, these features of modern Sierra Leonean political culture give voice to another kind of civility. It is one—and here is the crucial point—that resituates civil society and moral discourse at the very center of national politics; that treats these things as inseparable in the first place. This, to be sure, is the corollary of a public sphere based, in the local imagination, on a dialogics of compromise, of consensus forged through both overt and covert consultation, of communal and sectarian interest, of civility.

Appendix 1986 Sierra Leone General Election Results for Bo South I Constituency

Polling Station Number	Polling Station Name	Votes for Dr. Dabo	Votes for V.J. (Vandi Jimmy)
1	Mendekelema	162	245
2	Mano	31	234
3	Pelewahun	75	179
4	Ngelehun	45	232
5	Largor	62	205
6	Koribundu I	64	131
7	Koribundu II	53	137
8	Koribundu III	50	220
9	Jombohun	13	249
10	Kpetema	48	214
11	Bendu	219	129
12	Kandor Old	128	162
13	Mamboma I	153	282
14	Mamboma II	42	152
15	Mamboma III	130	277
16	Telu	268	75
17	Bawomahun	114	372
18	Gbaama I	222	309
19	Gbaama II	230	274
20	Hegbebu	77	172
21	Ngogbebu	39	130
22	Kponima	94	219
23	Gboyama I	1,050	19
24	Gboyama II	746	31
25	Gboyama III	504	14
26	New Dia	180	445
27	Kpuawala	112	199
28	Fanima	137	189

Polling Station Number	Polling Station Name	Votes for Dr. Dabo	Votes for V.J. (Vandi Jimmy)
29	Wunde I	22	537
30	Wunde II	8	259
31	Yengema	81	358
32	Yanihun	68	151
33	Niagorehun	99	180
34	Pelewahun	70	161
	Total	5,396	7,132

Note: Roman numerals following a location's name indicate that these are larger towns encompassing several polling stations.

The first half of the polling stations on this list are located in Jaiama-Bongor chiefdom, the remaining ones in Wunde. Note that the only places where Dr. Dabo won a majority of votes were the chiefdom headquarter towns of the constituency, namely Telu (16) and Gboyama (23–25). Also notable is the disparity of votes cast in each chiefdom, especially compared to figures from the national census carried out only a few months earlier. The December 1985 census of Wunde chiefdom reported a total population figure of 6,973 inhabitants, while the Jaiama-Bongor population was roughly three times as large. However, the table shows that Wunde voters outnumbered those from Jaiama-Bongor.

Several factors may account for this discrepancy. Seasonal population movement is one: the census was conducted in early December, a dry-season month during which many people visit relatives and attend social occasions. This is also the season in which younger men travel to alluvial diamond-mining areas to supplement their income during a gap in the farming cycle. By the time elections were held at the end of May, the dry season was at its end, and most people returned home. Furthermore, the fact that Jaiama-Bongor chiefdom was itself the site of significant diamond-mining operations, which accounted for its larger population, also meant that it contained a greater number of strangers, including non-Sierra Leoneans. The latter, although not entitled to vote in elections, would have been counted in a census.

Despite these factors, the discrepancies remain significant. It suggests that, at the very least, a large number of people not normally resident in Gboyama (Dr. Dabo's hometown)—where by far the largest number of votes were cast—were encouraged to return home to vote. The results may give substance to accusations of vote tampering, but if improprieties did occur in Gboyama, it is remarkable that they did not succeed in obtaining a victory for the home candidate.

Notes

1. The February 1996 ballot, held ten years after the events analyzed in this chapter, was the first attempt to reestablish multiparty politics and state accountability in

Sierra Leone in some twenty years—a result of both internal popular demands and international pressure. Fifteen months later, the government elected in 1996 was ousted by a coup. However, in March 1998, it was reinstated to power, thanks to the military efforts of Nigerian-led West African troops.

2. For the relationship between notions of civility, civilization, and civil society, see chapter 4 and Elias 1978.

3. Habermas's analysis of the rise of the bourgeois public sphere as a set of institutions that enabled the political participation of increasing numbers of citizens has also been criticized from the perspective of European and American history. The exclusion from the public discursive exchanges of the voices of women, the illiterate, the propertyless, slaves, and other significant portions of the population has always raised questions about "the limits of actually existing democracy" (Fraser 1992, 110; see also Eley 1992; Ryan 1992). Even when these groups have gained access to this conversation, the shift away from an engagement with formal politics—signaled, for example, by the failure to exercise the right to vote—underscores the need to move beyond identifying who is "legally eligible to participate" to reach an understanding of the changing forms and sites of the political (Schudson 1992, 147–48).

4. A high degree of control over results at the local level is possible in single-party states precisely because power tends to become more personalized, and patronage negotiations take place locally rather than on the national scene (see Hayward and Dumbuya 1985, 79). Throup (1993, 377–80) argues that in Kenya, too, single-party rule has not excluded electoral competition and real political change. In addition, Fauré (1993, 324–26) explores the diffidence of Ivorian voters toward openly competitive electoral contests as a feature of African forms of political culture that directly challenges prevailing Western notions of democratization.

5. Chief Foday Kai was related to the village chief in Kpauwala. He was also a graduate of the prestigious Bo School, a former civil servant, and a recipient of the Order of the British Empire.

6. Foday Kai supported in his chiefdom the few weavers who could still make the older, complicated cloth patterns using only natural dyes, and he ensured that a younger generation was trained by them. He also supervised in his compound the training of dance groups in largely abandoned forms of performance. Foday Kai had represented Sierra Leone at a number of international cultural events in Nigeria (e.g., FESTAC 1977), the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as being a regular lecturer for the Peace Corps and the international diplomatic community in Freetown. For his role as cultural broker and interpreter-inventor of his peoples' traditions for outsiders, he was once referred to as "Mr. [Mende] culture" (Lamp 1987, 72). See James and Tamu 1992 for Foday Kai's biography.

7. The notion of a transnational civil society deserves a more sustained discussion, which space limitations prevent me from undertaking here. Guyer (1994) explores its implications for Nigeria, and Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994) discuss the role of U.S.-based transnational Asian and Caribbean communities in political and other developments in their home countries.

8. V.J.'s brother, the section chief, had gone on pilgrimage to Mecca several years ahead of Paramount Chief Dabo, and was thus himself an *Alhaji*.

9. *Mbeindo ngi nato majja nya ndee va. Daboisia, ti gbatengo, ke nya ta, ngub mia a nya gbatka.*

10. The link between multipartyism and an oppositional ethnic politics was explicitly made by factions in the Sierra Leone civil war. In 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)—the main (non-Mende) rebel group in the civil war—launched its first incursions into Sierra Leone through Mende territory on the Liberian border and tried to stir up ethnic rivalries in the region through, among other things, the display of SLPP symbols. Though the rebels were unsuccessful in this effort (Richards 1995: 139), their move points to the likelihood that in the 1986 elections, the display by V.J.'s supporters of palm fronds could also be read as a sign that the APC faced a growing threat from a Mende opposition.

11. V.J.'s supporters drew parallels between their candidate's opposition to a corrupt government and Ndawa's (literally, "big mouth," "big name") activities against the colonial administration. They made much of the fact that Dr. Dabo had been sacked in 1984 from his ministerial post in social welfare and rural development because of financial irregularities. They also claimed that V. J. had stronger roots in the area because of his putative links to a famous indigenous lineage. However, the paramount chief could trace his own family's presence in this region for at least as long as V.J.'s. The P.C.'s father and grandfather had preceded him in the chiefdom's leadership, even though their family came during the nineteenth century from the Guinée-Sierra Leone border region.

12. For a discussion of the politics of masking and the masking of politics in Sierra Leone, especially under the APC regime, see Nunley (1987: 203–15).

13. During the civil war, for example, the resistance to cleavcut oppositions, and the effort to blur boundaries, gave form to the figure described by the Krio neologism, *sobel*, the soldier-rebel. Unable to distinguish between the attire or behavior of the government's military forces and their rebel enemies, the civilian population recognized the shifting boundaries between these purported opponents well in advance of the events that in 1997 brought just such a paradoxical alliance to power. The saying "Soldiers by day, rebels by night" (Richards 1996b, 7) located the articulation of these identities in the relationship between day and night, open and covert action, in a dynamic of shape-shifting that has its antecedent in the Mende political imaginary in the figure of *ndgbysui* alluded to in connection with the 1982 elections in the Wunde region. More generally, *ndgbysui* is an anthropomorphic trickster, a shape-shifting figure common in Mende lore (see Harris and Sawyerr 1968).

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