

MATACONG ISLAND: A SHORT HISTORY OF A SMALL ISLAND ON THE WEST COAST OF AFRICA

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Abstract

This article aims to examine how Matacong Island, a small island just off the coast of the Republic of Guinea, West Africa, was claimed its possession by local chiefs, how it was leased to and was used by European and Sierra Leonean merchants, and how it was colonized by Britain and France in the 19th century. In 1825 the paramount chief of Moriah chiefdom agreed to lease the island to two Sierra Leonean merchants, and in 1826 it was ceded to Britain by a treaty with chiefs of the Sumbuyah and Moriah chiefdoms. Since the island was considered as a territory exempted from duty, British and Sierra Leonean merchants used it as an important trading station throughout the 19th century. Major exports of Matacong Island included palm kernels, palm oil, hides, ivory, pepper and groundnuts, originally brought by local traders from the neighboring rivers, and major imports were tobacco, beads, guns, gunpowder, rum, cotton manufactures, iron bars and hardware of various kinds. In 1853 alone, some 80 vessels, under British, American, and French flags, anchored at Matacong Island. By the convention of 1882, Britain recognized the island as belonging to France. Although the convention was never ratified, it was treated by both countries as accepted terms of agreement. The article considers various dynamics of usage, property, and territorial possession as relates to the island during the 19th century, and reveals how complex they were, widely making use of the documents of *The Matacong Island (West Africa) Papers* at the University of Birmingham Library in Britain. The collection purchased by the library in 1969 is composed of 265 historical documents relating to Matacong Island, such as letters, agreements, newspaper-cuttings, maps and water-color picture.

Keywords

Matacong Island, West Africa, colonial partition, Britain, France

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1. Introduction

Just off the coast of Forécariah Prefecture, in the Republic of Guinea, lies the small island of Matacong (*Île Matakong*). I first became interested in this island in 1993. At the time, I was studying for my master's degree at the Centre for West African Studies, which was attached to the University of Birmingham, England. One day, when I was searching the university library's archives, I discovered that they contained a collection titled *The Matacong Island (West Africa) Papers* (hereinafter referred to as "MIP"). The MIP were originally acquired by the library in December 1969 and were composed of 265 historical documents primarily from the 19th century, relating to Matacong Island in West Africa. I had never come across the name "Matacong Island" before. Although I would go on to develop an interest in the MIP, at that point I was unable to set aside enough time to examine these documents closely. Without pursuing the matter further, I ended my period of study in the fall of 1993 and temporarily returned home to Japan. However, in January of the following year, I was once more able to visit Birmingham, this time to carry out an investigation of the MIP. I made the trip to the library daily, looking over each individual historical document within the MIP and transcribing its details in my notes. Although I had started out entirely unaware of Matacong, I gradually came to understand something about this island as I proceeded with this arduous work: it had actually served an important function in the 19th century, during the colonial partitioning of West Africa by the British and the French.

In this article, I will use the MIP documents for the purpose of clarifying the history of Matacong Island in the 19th century. This was a time when the term "West Coast of Africa" was more commonly used than the term "West Africa." I will also seek to shed light upon various dynamics of usage, property, and territorial possession as relates to the island during that period.

Accounts of Matacong Island in the 19th century can occasionally be found in documents relating to the national histories of Sierra Leone or Guinea, or the history of the colonial division of West Africa by Britain and France. However, the volume of information in such sources is quite limited. It should be kept in mind, therefore, that the picture I provide in this article of 19th-century Matacong Island is only a so-called *bricolage*, a re-construction of relevant fragments that I have gathered from multiple different sources. Nevertheless, we can address many questions through securing a micro-level perspective on the discrete, concrete location that is Matacong Island. For example, how did merchants use the island? How did local chiefs assert their possession of it? And how did Britain and France colonize it? Although our focus is one specific island, such a study can actually serve to deepen our understanding of the broader topic of West African society in the 19th century. That is the goal of the present essay.

Thus, before we begin our examination of 19th-century Matacong Island, let us first undertake a general survey of the West Coast of Africa. In particular, we are concerned with the region that English speakers in the 19th century referred to as the "Northern Rivers" but that today is more or less the coastal region of Guinea.

2. A Geographical Overview of the Northern Rivers in the Early 19th Century

2.1 *The Advance of European Merchants*

The so-called “Northern Rivers” region of the 19th century is a river basin that extends across practically the entire coast of Guinea. It extends from Nunez River in the north to the Melakori (Mellacourie, Mellacorée, Mélikhouré) River and Little Scarcies River in the south (see Map 1). The region gained its name from the fact that it was further north along the same coastline as the Settled Colony of Sierra Leone, which was established by British settlers in 1787. By comparison, from the perspective of Senegal, France’s base for expansion into West Africa, this same region was located to the south. It was for this reason that French speakers referred to it as *les Rivières du Sud*.

As the name indicates, the Northern Rivers (or *les Rivières du Sud*) is geographically characterized by a series of rivers. These rivers run more or less in parallel from the Fouta Djallon Highlands and surrounding hilly country in the northeast, down to the Atlantic Ocean coastline in the southwest. From the 15th century on, European merchants visited this stretch of coast, developing trade contacts with the local Africans. These rivers became important routes through which trade goods from Europe (such as firearms, gunpowder, tobacco, iron bars, cotton fabric, metal products, beads, etc.) could be brought to the interior of the continent, and local goods (gold, cola nuts, ivory, slaves, etc.) could be brought to the coast for export.

Captain John Matthews of the British Royal Navy, who resided in Sierra Leone from 1785 to 1787, has provided the following description of the trading that took place in the Northern Rivers region at that time:

When the adventurer arrives upon the coast with a suitable cargo—which for this place consists of European and Indian cotton and linen goods, silk handkerchiefs, taffeties, coarse blue and red woollen cloths, scarlet cloth in grain, coarse and fine hats, worsted caps, guns, powder, shot, sabres, lead bars, iron bars, pewter basons [sic], copper kettles and pans, iron pots, hardware of various kinds, earthen and glass ware, hair and gilt leather trunks, beads of various kinds, silver and gold rings and ornaments, paper, coarse and fine check, and linen ruffled shirts and caps, British and foreign spirits and tobacco—he dispatches his boats properly equipped to the different rivers. On their arrival at the place of trade they immediately apply to the head man of the town, inform him of their business, and request his protection; desiring he will either be himself their landlord, or appoint a respectable person, who becomes security for the person and goods of the stranger, and also for the recovery of all money lent, provided it is done with his knowledge and approbation. This business finished, and proper presents made, (for nothing is done without) they proceed to trade either by lending their goods to the natives, who carry them up into the country, or by waiting till trade is brought to them.—The former is the most expeditious way, when they fall into good hands; but the latter is always the safest (Matthews, 1788[1966]: 142–143).

As we can see in the above description, European merchants who sailed to the Northern Rivers region in the second half of the 18th century would frequently split up the goods they brought from Europe amongst a number of canoes or boats. These various vessels would be sent along multiple rivers, with trade carried out at settlements along the banks. The rivers served as routes for the transmission and conveyance of people, things, and information, while also performing an important role as a stage for trade activities. That being said, the Northern Rivers have a complex way of intersecting with a coastline that is also broadly covered by mangrove forests and swamps. This made passage using vessels quite difficult for Europeans, such that trade in the region was not necessarily an attractive prospect. It is for this



Map 1: The Northern Rivers and Sierra Leone. Source: Fyfe (1962).

reason that the conduct of trade via the Northern Rivers remained on a relatively small scale until at least the mid-18th century. It was conducted by a fairly limited number of individuals, primarily the Portuguese and their descendants.

As it happens, there is a theory that the first Europeans to voyage to the West Coast of Africa (including the Northern Rivers) and trade with the African population were French merchants who arrived in 1364 at Cape Verde (this cape is the westernmost point of the African continent and the site of Dakar, present-day capital of the Republic of Senegal) (Ogawa, 2002: 3–4). However, from a broader perspective, we can conclude that mariners and merchants of the maritime empire of Portugal were the first to expand into the West Coast of Africa and establish a serious trade presence. Portugal was well situated for vigorous overseas expansion during the so-called “Age of Discovery” that began in the 15th century. To begin with, it benefitted from its advantageous geographical position; namely, it faces the Atlantic Ocean, which links the three continents of Europe, Africa, and America. It should be further noted that Portugal centralized power under royal authority before other European nations did. The Portuguese had rounded Cape Verde by approximately the mid-1440s and by the 1470s had gone beyond the coast of Guinea and proceeded as far as present-day Gabon. Later, in 1482, they would construct a fort at Elmina, on the coast of what is now Ghana, in order to secure the profits they were making through trade in gold, ivory, and other goods.

Portuguese merchants and mariners who voyaged to the West Coast of Africa at that time included those who were fleeing persecution or punishment, such as Jewish people and fugitive criminals (Donelha, 1977: 239). Before long, some of these individuals would come to permanently reside on the African coast. These individuals who had left Portuguese society for the West Coast of Africa were known as *lançados* (literally, *the thrown-out ones*). Some of the men amongst them would take African wives and concubines, leading to the emergence of a mixed-race class. From the 15th century onwards, these children with European names and African mothers, who were frequently of Catholic faith, would play an important role in the trade that took place in the Northern Rivers (Newitt, 2010).

As we saw above in the description by Captain Matthews, when European merchants visited this region to conduct trade, the customary first step was to consult with the local chiefs. It was necessary to have the chiefs or other influential figures act as their protectors. The African protectors would grant European merchants the use of land that they could reside upon or use for trading purposes and would guarantee the safety of their lives and goods. In exchange, they received various forms of reward from the Europeans, including rent, taxes, commissions, and so forth. The descendants of the *lançados*, who were familiar with the trade goods and languages of both the Europeans and the Africans, became active intermediaries between the two.

From the end of the 16th century, Holland, England/Britain, and France began to advance into the coastal regions of West Africa. Rivalry intensified between Western nations over coastal trade. As a result of this rivalry, Portugal would lose many of its trading posts on the West Coast of Africa during the 17th century, its

regional influence entering a period of continuous decline. Yet the *lançados* were so-called outcasts of Portuguese society to begin with, and their descendants were also frequently looked down upon by the Portuguese. As the situation changed on the ground, these descendants were able to respond in a nimble manner, engaging in trade with non-Portuguese merchants. In the Northern Rivers region, at least, it is thought that they continued to trade until the rise to dominance of British merchants in the middle of the 18th century or later.

From the mid-18th century, trade activity expanded broadly across the Northern Rivers, conducted primarily by the British. In 1791, the Sierra Leone Company was established as a chartered company in control of the Colony of Sierra Leone. The company was instrumental in furthering trade activity in the region, viewing the Northern Rivers as an important region for securing food supplies for Sierra Leone, as well as a promising route for trading with Fouta Djallon. In 1795, it would build its own factory in the Pongas (Pongos, Pongo) valley and employ as its agents European merchants who were active in the basin between the Nunez River and the Melakori River. The Sierra Leone Company would pull out of the region in 1802, partly because of the conflict between Britain and France, as well as because of its distaste for the slave trade conducted in Northern Rivers. Stepping in to fill the gap were those white merchants who were already present, along with the Creoles of Sierra Leone, who acted as small-scale merchants and as employees for British merchants.

What about Matacong Island? Located within the Northern Rivers region, Matacong Island is situated off the tip of a peninsula covered in mangroves and sandwiched between a number of river mouths. On one side is the estuary of the Moribiah (Moribaya, Morébaya) River, and on the other side is the estuary of the rivers Bereira (Bereire, Beriera, Berie Erie, Berrie Erie) and Fouricariah (Forecariah, Forekaria, Kise Kise, Kiskey). Documents within the MIP state that Matacong Island is 22 miles (approx. 35 kilometers) to the southeast of Îles de Los (which in turn are located off the coast of Guinea's present-day capital of Conakry).¹ When a special correspondent for *The Illustrated London News* visited Matacong Island in 1854, he reported that it was located 42 miles (approx. 67 kilometers) to the northwest of Freetown, the current capital of the Republic of Sierra Leone.² Although the origin of the name "Matacong" is not certain, according to one theory, it dates back to when visiting Portuguese hid wealth upon the island, referring to it as their "hiding-place."³

In 1802, British Captain Richard Bright was dispatched to the Northern Rivers to demand that rebels fighting against the Colony of Sierra Leone be handed over. In a journal entry on September 29th of that same year, he described the landscape of Matacong Island in the following manner: "Matacong [Matakong], gently sloping from the water's edge, has a pleasant and fertile aspect. It appears to be an intermixture of Grass and wood-land. It abounds in wild hogs and has a spring of excellent water." (Bright, 1979: 32).

It is not entirely clear what kind of role Matacong Island played in coastal trade before the 18th century. What we can say is that historical documents dating back to before the 18th century do not give any indications that European merchants were

engaged in significant trade on the island. Yet, once we reach the early 19th century, we can observe a gradual change in the situation. Although we do not possess detailed information, by the time the above-mentioned Captain Bright sailed by Matacong Island in 1802, a British merchant by the name of R. Simmons was already residing there (Smith, 1979: 134–135).

2.2 Ethnic Groups and Chiefdoms

The peoples believed to have lived in the Northern Rivers from the earliest of times are the ethnic groups that speak the so-called Atlantic (formerly “West Atlantic”) languages, a subgroup of the Niger-Congo language family of Africa. It is thought that it was the speakers of these Atlantic languages whom the Portuguese mariners referred to as “Sapes” (Sapi, Çapes, Çapeos). The Sapes were not originally from the Atlantic Ocean coast but dwelled primarily in regions such as Labé and Timbo, in the present-day Fouta Djallon Highlands (see Map 1). However, in the 13th and 14th centuries, they began to be pushed from the interior to the Atlantic Ocean coast, as a result of pressure from the movement of groups speaking the Mande languages of the Niger-Congo language family. It is thought that until at least the 14th century, the Baga people of the Sapes resided to the north of present-day Conakry, in a region that stretched from the interior to the coast. Their presence was confirmed by Portuguese mariners who visited this region in the 16th century (Nelson et al., 1975: 62–65). Another two ethnic groups belonging to the Atlantic languages were the Nalou, who resided by the mouth of the Nunez River, and the Landouma (Landoma), who resided further upriver. It is believed that both groups remained within these areas until at least the 16th century. Amongst the Atlantic languages, the Bullom people in particular (who belonged to the language group known as the “Mel languages”) were by the 14th century already residing in an area between the southern part of Guinea and the coastal region of Sierra Leone. The Temne people of the same Mel languages group are believed to have arrived in the northwestern part of present-day Sierra Leone around 1500.

Meanwhile, the Susu people (Soussou, Sosso, Soso, Suzeés), who belong to the Mande languages group, are the largest ethnic group in present-day coastal Guinea. They speak a language that is similar to that of the minority ethnic group known as the Yalunka (Dialonke, Djallonke, Jalonke, Jalunka), who reside in Central Guinea. It is believed that this similarity indicates that the Susu and the Yalunka once split off from the same subgroup of the Mande languages, whose speakers lived in Fouta Djallon. The proposed cause of this split is the movement of the Fula people (Fulani, Fulbe, Peul) down from Fouta Toro (present-day northern Senegal) in the north. Another possibility is that rather than a split, the impetus provided by the Fula exacerbated slight differences that already existed. It seems likely that the Susu moved to the Atlantic coast from the Fouta Djallon Highlands to flee the pressure and dominance of the northern Fula. Meanwhile, the Yalunka, who belonged to practically the same original group, instead remained in the highlands and became subordinate to the Fula. The Susu would proceed to absorb other ethnic groups during the course of

their migration, while also continuously clashing with the various groups belonging to speakers of the Atlantic languages who already lived in the region. As a result, by no later than the 18th century, they had come to inhabit a broad region of coastline, stretching from the northern bank of the Pongas River in the north to the vicinity of the Great Scarcies River in the south.



Map 2: Chiefdoms in the Matacong Island Region. Source: Mouser (1979: 17).

The origins of the Fula, meanwhile, who occupy the hinterlands of the Northern Rivers, are not entirely certain. However, their language belongs to the Northern group of the Atlantic languages. Starting out from Fouta Toro, the Fula began to migrate from around the 11th century. They reached present-day Northern Nigeria by the 17th century, Cameroon by the 18th century, and Sudan by the 20th century. Over a span of one thousand years, the Fula have expanded across a truly vast area of West Africa. In the case of the Fouta Djallon Highlands, it is thought that they began to arrive by the 15th and 16th centuries at the latest, after which they continued to flow into the region intermittently. The Fula who first arrived at Fouta Djallon were not yet Muslims. Yet, by the 17th century, the Fula who moved into the region, and into Timbo in particular, included many Muslim merchants and Islamic teachers. Initially, the Fula co-existed with the Susu and Yalunka, or with their parent group. That said, they also frequently came into conflict with them on matters such as land usage. This was the state of affairs when, in the 1720s, the Fula chiefs assembled at Timbo and granted the title of “Almamy” (Islamic instructor) to the Fula known as Alfa Karamoko (Musa Ibrahim, Alfa Ibrahim Sembegu). Following the bestowal of this title, Alfa Karamoko announced a jihad, subordinating surrounding ethnic groups one by one, and constructed an Islamic state. Despite periods of internal strife, the Islamic state at Fouta Djallon persisted until 1896, when it came under the effective control of France. It played an important role as a site of Islamic education and long-distance trade (Clarke, 1982: 84–85). The state expanded its sphere of influence as far as the Northern Rivers, with successive Almamys receiving tribute in exchange for granting their protection over various chiefs of the Atlantic Ocean coast or for acting as mediators in disputes (Suret-Canale, 1970: 82).

What can we say about the political situation of the Northern Rivers, and the Matacong Island region in particular, in the early 19th century? Map 2 illustrates the political divisions of the 19th-century Matacong Island region. As noted above, the Matacong Island region was originally the home of peoples of the Atlantic languages subgroup such as the Bullom. However, in due course, the Susu people of the Mande languages group moved into the region from the Fouta Djallon Highlands because of pressure from the Fula. As a result, in the early 19th century, the coastal region facing Matacong Island comprised a complex mixture of chiefdoms, with the Susu and Bullom peoples forming the core.

First, in the northern region of the coast by Matacong Island, the Sumbuyah Chiefdom was established by a subgroup of the Susus known as the “Sumbuyah.” Thomas George Lawson, who held the post of interpreter for the Sierra Leone colonial government in the second half of the 19th century, gave a contemporary description of the Sumbuyah. In a document he prepared on July 14, 1875, Lawson refers to the Sumbuyah as a “mixture of people.” It would seem that the Sumbuyah or Sumbuyah-Susu developed through the Susu mixing with other ethnic groups, such as the Bullom (cited in Skinner, 1980: 87). The capital of the Sumbuyah Chiefdom was located in Wankafong (Wonkapong).

To the south of the Sumbuyah Chiefdom was another chiefdom that controlled the towns of Bereira, Fourikariah, and Maligia. This was the Chiefdom of Moriah (Kissi Kissi, Moribia), whose population primarily spoke Mandingo, a subgroup of the Mande languages. The capital of the Moriah Chiefdom was located in Fourikariah. Islam had also made significant inroads within Moriah. Another important point with respect to Moriah was its geographical location: it was situated along a long-distance trade route between the interior of the continent and the coastline, which was referred to as the “Fouta Scarcies Corridor.” The towns of Fourikariah and Maligia, in particular, flourished as stopping points along this trade route. Yet, conversely, because of its stake in regional trade, the Moriah Chiefdom was continuously wracked by internal trouble between different chiefs. In the 19th century, this domestic strife would frequently develop into conflicts that involved neighboring chiefdoms.

Further south again, below the Moriah Chiefdom and south of the Melakori River in particular, was a chiefdom called the Samo (Samu, Samoo). The Samo Chiefdom was created by a number of ethnic groups, including the Bullom, and was split into northern and southern regions. The northern region was known as “Moricania” and had been mainly Islamified. By contrast, the people of the southern region were predominantly non-Muslim.

The earliest group to permanently settle on Matacong Island was a Bullom group or a group closely related to the Bullom. They would later come to be referred to as the Samo Bullom.⁴ In a journal entry by the previously mentioned British Captain Bright (dated October 27, 1802), we find the following comments about this group:

Finda Moodoo [Fendan Modu], I am informed, claims a right to Matacong [Mata-kong] by purchase, having bought it of Mauricanou [Mori Kanu] and the Bullom people. He has not however taken possession of it as yet, and it still remains in the hands of the latter (Bright, 1979: 96).

If we put aside the question of the veracity of the Sumbuyah-Susu chief Fendan Modu’s claim that he had purchased Matacong Island, this document does tell us something concrete, namely, that by 1802 at the latest, a Bullom group (or the Bullom along with other ethnic groups that spoke Atlantic languages such as the Temne) was able to claim traditional possession or settlement of the island (Skinner, 1980: 120–121). Incidentally, as I shall outline further below, by the 1820s, ownership of Matacong Island would be contested by chiefs from groups speaking Mande languages, such as the Sumbuyah and the Moriah.

2.3 The Colony of Sierra Leone

The present-day Freetown Peninsula and its vicinity were named *Serra Leoa* (*Lioness Mountains*) by Portuguese mariners who visited in the middle of the 15th century. However, until at least the early 16th century, the place name of *Serra Leoa* meant not only the peninsula; it was also widely used to refer to an extensive stretch of coast-

line, from the Îles de Los to Cape Mount within present-day Liberia (Donelha, 1977: 239). It is from the perspective of this second meaning that Portuguese mariners and merchants at that time considered Matacong Island to be little more than a “small island in *Serra Leoa*.”

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to come to *Serra Leoa* and engage in trade. They were also the first to carry out Christian missionary work, albeit to a limited extent. However, the British would go on to establish the initial settlement on this coastline that went by the name of *Sierra Leone*.

While still extremely small in scale, an African community began to take shape within London at the end of the 18th century. Some members of this community had been brought to England from Africa or the colonies as slaves, to serve as domestic workers, and had gone on to become free citizens. Some were ex-slaves who had arrived via British Nova Scotia (present-day southeastern Canada), having been granted freedom in exchange for serving under the British in the American War of Independence. Yet others were ex-mariners from the West Coast of Africa, who had once served on trade ships that plied the African routes but had now settled in Britain. However, the majority of these people with African backgrounds belonged to the underclass of British society. What is more, as they were not even eligible for aid under the so-called “Poor Laws,” many individuals lived lives of extreme deprivation.

In response to this situation, British philanthropists and politicians who were strongly committed to the abolition of slavery and the slave trade moved to assist those of African backgrounds who were impoverished. They established a committee to support destitute African diaspora members, gathered donations, and engaged in actions such as the distribution of food. However, before long, these individuals concluded that such actions alone were insufficient for a fundamental resolution of the problem. They began to search for suitable land in the broader Atlantic where the Black Poor in England could be resettled. It was then that their attention was drawn to a proposal by an amateur botanist named Henry Smeathman. In 1771, Smeathman had visited the Banana Islands (now part of Sierra Leone) to collect new plant species. Later, he had spent several years living in the same region. After returning to England, he suggested that the region of the Sierra Leone River would be suitable land for the resettlement of the Black Poor. The committee was initially quite wary of this proposal, yet it ultimately agreed to move ahead with a plan to induce people of African background to resettle. In April 1787, it secured the support of the British government and was able to place 411 individuals (including members of the African diaspora, European women, carpenters, and mariners) on a ship departing for Sierra Leone from the port of Plymouth in southwest England (Fyfe, 1962: 13–19).

An abolitionist named Granville Sharp played a guiding role in helping to advance the resettlement plan. It was Sharp who gave the new colony of resettled African diaspora, established near the Sierra Leone River, the name “Province of Freedom.” It was his hope that this colony would be an idyllic place, unpoisoned by the money-worship of Western civilization, where African colonists would have the

chance to create their own autonomous community. When the settlers themselves arrived at Sierra Leone in May 1787, receiving permission from the Temne chief to use land near their point of arrival, they named their new settlement “Granville Town,” in honor of Sharp.

The colonists had set out for their new lives with a turbulent mixture of both hope and trepidation. Yet what was waiting for them on the continent was a life that was far more cruel and wretched than they could have imagined. In fact, their travails actually preceded their reaching land, with one in five colonists perishing over the course of the month-long voyage from Plymouth. Unfortunately, the time of their arrival in Sierra Leone also overlapped with the rainy season, such that over the following four months, almost as many colonists again died from infectious diseases such as malaria or dysentery. As the colonists were initially unable to harvest grains, the food reserves that they had brought with them soon ran low, forcing them to trade what belongings they had with the local peoples in order to secure food. After Sharp and the other committee members learned of the terrible conditions the colonists faced, they dispatched a further 39 (predominantly white) colonists to Sierra Leone to lend assistance. This new group departed in June 1788. However, this effort was also entirely inadequate. Eventually, in December 1789, Granville Town was completely destroyed as a result of an attack by the local chiefs, who had come into conflict with the colonists.

In the above manner, this early attempt at colonizing the area met with failure. Yet the abolitionists were not dissuaded. In 1790, they established the St. George’s Bay Company, for the purposes of re-establishing a colony. Then, as previously noted, in the following year, they received permission from the British government and founded the Sierra Leone Company. In 1791, this company would dispatch an agent to construct a new Granville Town in a different location from the first. Later, in January 1792, it succeeded in securing more colonists for this new attempt. One thousand one hundred and ninety African ex-slaves from the United States, along with their families, were shipped to Sierra Leone from their place of settlement in Nova Scotia. After their arrival in Sierra Leone, the town constructed by these primarily Nova Scotian colonists became known as Freetown. A further 500 or so ex-slaves known as “Maroons,” who had fled from plantations in Jamaica, were

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also later shipped to Sierra Leone in August 1800. In 1807, a law banning the slave trade was passed in the British Parliament, and the British Navy began to seize slave ships on the West Coast of Africa. Following this development, Sierra Leone was transformed into a base for dropping off slaves who had been freed from slave ships, referred to as “recaptives” (or as the “re-captured,” or “Captured Negroes”). As a result, a large number of ex-slaves began to flow into the settlement. The recaptives would form a number of villages and towns in the vicinity of Freetown, on the basis of their original ethnic origins.

And so it came to pass that the Sierra Leone Settlement expanded with several waves of new colonists, with the bulk of the population composed of four main groups: (1) the initial colonists from England (1787); (2) the Nova Scotians from North America (1792); (3) the Maroons from Jamaica (1800); and (4) the recaptives, who were from various parts of the West Coast of Africa (from 1807 onward). These four groups differed significantly with respect to cultural background and political consciousness, and there was often friction between them. However, by around the 1870s, each group had effectively transitioned from its first generation to its second, and these differences began to fade somewhat. It was then that a Creole identity and culture unique to Sierra Leone began to take shape, born of a fusion of peoples from various parts of the West Coast of Africa, Europe, America, and the islands of the West Indies.⁵

Meanwhile, it was not long before the Sierra Leone Company, which managed the settlement, ran into financial difficulties. On January 1, 1808, Sierra Leone would become a Crown Colony of the British government.

3. Various Rights Relating to Matacong Island and the Moriah Conflict: 1802–1826

In 1802, a leader known as Amura (Amara), from the Touré (Tura) family, was selected by the chiefs of the Moriah Chiefdom as the paramount chief. However, Amura would go on to order caravans from the interior of the continent to conduct their trade at Fourikariah. He even went further in forbidding them entrance to the coastal region. This special treatment given to the Fourikariah region generated a strong backlash within coastal society. In response, the coastal chiefs selected their own chief called Senesi from Maligia to be their leader, who could help them in confronting Amura.

As it happened, at the outset of the 19th century, French merchants had still not advanced into the Northern Rivers (they would not arrive in the region until the end of the 1830s). Until then, coastal trade was carried out by the Americans; by Nova Scotians and Maroons from Freetown; and, above all, by British merchants. These British merchants frequently tried their hand at the slave trade in the Northern Rivers. This meant that when it came to the confrontation within the Moriah Chiefdom between Amura of Fourikariah (in the interior) and Senesi of Maligia (on the coast), they lent their support to Amura, who tolerated the slave trade. By contrast, merchants based in Freetown tended to back Senesi, who was supportive of so-called “legal trade,” in other words, trade that was separate from the slave trade. Although

the colonial government of Sierra Leone strongly opposed the slave trade, it also wished to develop a trade route from Timbo in Fouta Djallon to Freetown, passing through the Moriah Chiefdom. For this reason, it attempted to approach Amura and win him over. However, Amura viewed the merchants of Sierra Leone as supporters of the opposing Senesi side and showed little indication of responding positively to the moves of the Sierra Leone government.

Then, in 1820, Amura finally launched an attack on Maligia. Senesi fought back, gathering supporting forces from the nearby chiefdoms of Sumbuyah and Moricania. The outbreak of this conflict effectively paralyzed coastal trade in the Northern Rivers. Before long, however, the Fula state of the Fouta Djallon Hinterlands intervened, acting as a mediator between the two sides. This dispute that had entangled Moriah, Sumbuyah, and Moricania thereby came to a temporary close in 1822.

However, not long after this conflict was resolved, a new confrontation developed: rather than Senesi, it was now the supreme chief Fendan Modu of the above-mentioned Sumbuyah Chiefdom who came to the fore, challenging the Amura of the Moriah Chiefdom. Modu's faction controlled a stretch of coast running from Pongas River to the Bullom Shore opposite Freetown. Amura's faction, meanwhile, was composed of the various Moriah chiefs of the interior. Open conflict between the two factions broke out in 1823. In order to avoid the fighting, almost all of the merchants of Sierra Leone shifted their base of operations further south, from the Great and Little Scarcies Rivers to the Sierra Leone River. Yet some individuals actually took this state of conflict as a business opportunity and attempted to expand their activities into the Northern Rivers. Here, I refer to two merchants of Sierra Leone, Stephen Gabbidon and William Henry Savage, who had formed a business partnership at the time (Mouser, 1979: 18–24).

Gabbidon was one of the most successful of the Maroons in the Freetown business world at that time, acting as a leader within this group. In 1825, he had even been nominated for mayor (although he refused the post out of the desire to focus on business) (Foray, 1977: 77; Fyfe, 1962: 123, 178–179). Savage, meanwhile, had been born in London to an African father and a British mother and had come to Sierra Leone in 1808 to take on a posting as a school master. Before long, he shifted to trading as a merchant and at one time even involved himself in the slave trade. In 1821, Savage headed to London to study law. When he later returned to Sierra Leone, he opened a law firm in Freetown and began practicing as a lawyer. At the same time, he began to collaborate with Gabbidon in business ventures (Foray, 1977: 188–189; Blyden, 2000: 16).

When almost all the merchants in Sierra Leone pulled out of the Northern Rivers region because of the Moriah Conflict, Gabbidon and Savage decided to brave the dangers and take the situation as an opportunity to expand into the region. On December 30, 1825, in Fourikariah, they signed a lease agreement regarding Matacong Island with Amura. They were granted permission to use the island for their own purposes provided that every year they compensated Amura or his successors in goods equivalent in value to 100 iron bars.⁶

According to the agreement that Gabbidon and Savage reached with Amura at this time, the mixed-race people who lived in the nearby coastal region had traditionally asserted their ownership of Matacong Island. Later, the island had been purchased from them by Amura's grandfather, Bocarré Manga, in exchange for payment in goods.⁷ With respect to how the island was to be used after it was leased, the agreement simply states, "they said Stephen Gabbidon and William Henry Savage should be enabled to carry on a joint business in commerce trade and agriculture on the said Island as they may think proper."⁸ It would seem that Gabbidon and Savage intended to create a structure to hold cows on Matacong Island, with the goal of selling beef to the troops garrisoned in Freetown.

Yet their plans were not to unfold as they had hoped. Upon receiving word of the signing of the lease agreement, the acting Governor of the Sierra Leone government, Kenneth Macaulay, ordered that Gabbidon and Savage be removed from Matacong Island (Fyfe, 1962: 159; Foray, 1977: 77). When Macaulay was officially installed as Governor in 1826, the participants in the Moriah Conflict petitioned the colonial government of Sierra Leone to step in and help broker a peace. In response, Macaulay set about mediating the conflict, enlisting the assistance of an influential figure by the name of Dala Modu, a member of the Sumbuyah-Susu people who was broadly active in trade activities conducted around the environs of Freetown. On April 18, 1826, Governor Macaulay met with the Sumbuyah-Susu chiefs and representatives of the Touré family of Moriah, securing the ratification of a comprehensive peace treaty. This treaty not only brought an end to the Moriah Conflict. As we can see in the quotation below, under its terms, the chiefs of the Sumbuyah-Susu and the Touré family of the Moriah recognized British sovereignty over the coastline and rivers from Conta (Contah) on the Melakori River in the south to Ferighna (Faringhia) on the Pongas River in the north, to a depth of one mile inland. At the same time, the parties recognized Britain's sovereignty over Matacong Island and agreed that, under Britain, the island would be treated as a neutral place that surrounding ethnic groups could freely use.

His Honour the said Kenneth Macaulay, for himself and his successors, Governors of the said colony, on the part and on behalf of His Majesty's the King of Great Britain and Ireland, his heirs and successors, agrees to accept the sovereignty of one mile inland from the seaboard, and of all the seas, rivers, harbours, creeks, inlets, and waters of the Mandingo and Soumbuya countries from Conta in the south to Ferighna in the north, for the more effectual performance of the obligations of this Treaty, Island of Matacong, and also to accept the sovereignty and possession of the island of Matacong, and to preserve the same as a neutral and free resting-place for the craft and canoes of all the surrounding tribes whilst in amity and friendship with His Britannic Majesty (Hertslet, 1895[1967]: 34–35).

What we can see taking shape here, in the background of the Moriah Conflict, is the original form of Matacong Island's complex dynamics relating to usage,

property, and territorial possession. That is to say, first, by signing an agreement to lease Matacong Island with Amura of the Moriah Chiefdom, in December 1825, Gabbidon and Savage established that the island could be used as a leasehold that could be profited from, or that somebody could have usage rights over. Although they were temporarily ordered by Governor Macaulay to leave Matacong, Gabbidon and Savage continued to claim that their lease agreement with Amura was valid. After the initial leaseholders (Gabbidon and Savage) died, third parties (descendants and traders) would go on to inherit, resell, and transfer use of the island as an independent right, regardless of the desires of the lessor (the local chief). In the above manner, Matacong Island's leasehold became completely detached from the original owner. Once the island's leasehold began to be consecutively transferred between third parties (the traders), these same leasers naturally began to think that so long as they were paying their lease fees to the lessor (the local chief), they should be free to use the land for profit, or subleasing (this was because they understood themselves to have purchased or inherited the lease itself, separate from the lease fees that they were paying). They began to develop a strong sense of entitlement as those with rights over the land, or even as its effective owners. If you were to here pose the question "To whom did Matacong Island belong?" then at least from the perspective of "usage," these merchants with usage rights now somewhat removed from the original leasehold agreement increasingly viewed the island as their own possession, or as practically theirs.

Meanwhile, the 1826 treaty also served to establish new concepts of rights with respect to the island, such as sovereignty or territorial rights. However, as noted above, although the peace treaty decreed that Britain had sovereignty over Matacong Island, the concept of "sovereignty and possession of the island of Matacong" that appeared in the provisions did not necessarily possess the same meaning as we would grant such words in the present day. Although it is not entirely certain how local chiefs understood the agreement, at the very least, the Sierra Leone colonial government did not understand the acceptance of Britain's "sovereignty and possession of the island of Matacong" as conferring official possession as a territory. Certainly, in 1877, the Sierra Leone government would claim territorial rights over Matacong Island on the basis of the 1826 treaty.⁹ Yet we can understand this step as simply flowing from the necessity of opposing France's imperialistic advances into the Northern Rivers from the 1860s onwards. In the 1820s, when the threat of France was not yet on the horizon, the colonial government of Sierra Leone did not understand the acquisition of sovereignty over the island as meaning the same as its colonization. Indeed, although a degree of political influence accompanied the acquisition of "sovereignty," this meant the incorporation of the island into a category of territory that could be thought of more as a "sphere of influence" or an "informal empire"; it did not necessarily confer governing responsibilities or financial burdens. Incidentally, the 1826 treaty was signed by Governor Macaulay under his own authority, without his having first secured permission from the British government. It is said that it was never even formally ratified by the British govern-

ment (Fyfe, 1962: 409; Hargreaves, 1957: 4). In truth, the British government did not consider Matacong Island as part of its own official territory for many years after the signing of the 1826 treaty.

Let us then return to the above question, “To whom does Matacong Island belong?” This time let us consider it from the angle of “territorial possession.” As noted above, while the island effectively came under Britain’s sphere of influence as a result of the 1826 treaty, it was not a part of its “formal empire.” In this sense, we may say that at this point in time, the territorial possession of Matacong Island was not necessarily a clear-cut matter.

The peace treaty also included within its terms the agreement that Matacong Island would serve as a neutral location that all surrounding ethnic groups were free to use as a place to moor their boats. Before long, this provision ceased to be treated as an active measure. To the contrary, it gradually morphed into a passive *laissez-faire* policy, with the Sierra Leone government permitting trade to be pursued freely on the island, with no levying of tariffs.

A further subtle change with respect to ownership of Matacong Island occurred from 1825 to 1826. As previously noted, Matacong Island originally belonged to various ethnic groups who spoke Atlantic languages. In due course, the island was either purchased or seized by Sumbuyah or Mande chiefs of Moriah. Nevertheless, prior to 1825, problems surrounding ownership over Matacong Island effectively boiled down to the question of who the rightful owner was: did it belong to the Sumbuyah chief? Or the Moriah chief? Or to the chief of an Atlantic languages group, such as the Bullom? As it happened, Amura’s signing of the Matacong Island lease agreement with the Sierra Leone merchants effectively created a new kind of “rights holder,” in other words, the “holder of the original lease agreement.” This served to render the question of ownership even more complex. In the beginning, the original lease agreement was kept in safekeeping by Amura and his successors, who claimed to be the rightful owners of Matacong Island. However, this document would later come to be passed to other chiefs. It was not long before possessors of the contract would themselves claim that they were the owners of Matacong Island. From here, the state of affairs became even more entangled, with one such individual eventually transferring sovereignty of the island to France.

4. Trading Activities by Nathaniel Isaacs: 1844–1854

Although Gabbidon and Savage had temporarily been ordered to leave Matacong Island, it appears that they later returned and engaged in trading there. Yet it was not long before the partnership between the two was dissolved, and Savage himself would pass away in 1837. Matacong Island subsequently continued to be used by Gabbidon. Gabbidon owed 8,000 pounds to a financier in London and later traveled there in order to try and scrape together the funds to pay it back. He appears to have visited the Colonial Office with the intent of having the British government buy his property and rights on Matacong Island, yet he was turned down (Fyfe, 1962: 211). When Gabbidon later died in 1839, his son William Gabbidon inherited his

usage rights over Matacong Island and developed his own business there. Moreover, while the specific details are not certain, in March 1842, William signed a similar lease agreement to the one his father had concluded with Amura. For some reason, however, he signed the agreement with four Bullom chiefs.¹⁰ Later, in March 1844, William would use Matacong Island as collateral in order to borrow 280 pounds, 1 shilling, and 9 pence from John Dawson and George Alexander Kidd. However, William eventually fell into arrears when he failed to make a repayment on his debt of 25 pounds, 9 shillings, and 3 pence, which had been due by July 1844. As a result, Dawson, who was now the only creditor following the death of his partner Kidd, quickly sold the mortgaged island usage rights to a third party in August of that same year. The individual who purchased these rights from Dawson at that time was a Jewish British merchant by the name of Nathaniel Isaacs. Isaacs was then based in Sierra Leone and was extensively involved in trading within regions such as the Northern Rivers.¹¹

Isaacs was born in 1808, in the city of Canterbury, in southeastern England. He would later go to live with his uncle in Saint Helena, before moving to Port Natal (Durban) in South Africa in 1825, at the age of 17. At Natal, Isaacs engaged in enterprises such as trade with the Zulu Kingdom and even developed a personal connection with the great Zulu king Shaka. In 1826, the wife of a chief under the rule of Shaka was raped by two Khoisan employees of an acquaintance of Isaacs. Isaacs was held responsible for this incident by Shaka, who ordered him to complete a period of military service. He would subsequently participate in battle against the Kumalo army led by Mzilikazi. Though only 18 years old, Isaacs was positioned at the forefront of 5,000 Zulu soldiers, and it is reported that he fought well. However, he would be injured during the battle when an arrow struck his back. In 1830, Isaacs departed South Africa. He later returned to Britain, and from 1834 on, he began to try his hand at trading in West Africa. In the early 1840s, he established his base of operations in Freetown. Then, as noted previously, he acquired the usage rights for Matacong Island in 1844. Isaacs subsequently sold off his assets in Freetown and moved to the island, which he began to develop into a foothold from which he could conduct extensive trade activities in the region (Fyfe, 1962: 240; Deveneaux, 1987: 572–575; Roberts, 1974).

As previously mentioned, a correspondent from *The Illustrated London News* visited Matacong Island in 1854. According to the correspondent, approximately 300 individuals lived on the island at that time. However, these were all members of the local population, such as the Susu and the Baga. Isaacs was the only European resident. The island had a number of buildings upon it. Apart from structures such as a pier and warehouse owned by Isaacs, there was also his dwelling-house, located on top of the highest hill, with a chapel right next to it. The chapel held Sunday service each week, conducted by a Catechist appointed by the Wesleyan mission at Sierra Leone. A Sunday school was also run for the local children. The island itself was thickly covered in silk cotton trees. These trees reportedly served as a marker for arrivals by ship, who used it to determine that they had indeed reached Matacong Island.¹²

It seems that Isaacs's commercial ventures on Matacong Island were extremely successful. When conducting trade at Freetown, merchants and ship owners were forced to pay a variety of fees, including vessel anchorage fees, import and export duties (particularly on high-priced goods suitable for import such as tobacco or spirits), license fees for canoes and boats, and so on. However, as previously noted, Matacong Island had been designated by the Sierra Leone government as a neutral and free place of anchorage. Because neither anchorage fees nor tariffs were collected, many merchant vessels would make a stop at the island. Over the course of 1853, as many as 80 vessels would visit Matacong, primarily British, French, and American merchant vessels.¹³ American merchant vessels, in particular, would stop by the island before visiting Freetown, conducting as much buying and selling as possible.

Because Matacong Island was located near multiple estuaries, it was also an extremely convenient location for local merchants bringing trade goods on small boats from further upriver. The island was particularly convenient during the rainy season or times of strong wind. Under very windy or rainy conditions, it was not possible for local merchants to bring their trade goods all the way to Freetown in their small boats. However, Matacong was close to the shoreline, allowing for easy transportation of goods.¹⁴ Isaacs also did not neglect to win the trust of the local chiefs, by employing their kinsfolk as ship's carpenters and clerks, by granting them generous loans, and so forth. The trade goods that local merchants brought to Matacong Island – such as gold, ivory, palm oil, and groundnuts – would be purchased by Isaacs by way of exchange for products such as tobacco, spirits, cotton fabric, and metal products. He would then store these goods temporarily in his warehouse, before selling them to Western merchant vessels when they visited, or directly exporting them himself. At that time, groundnuts were a particularly important export good for Matacong Island. They were widely grown for export in the Northern Rivers region from the mid-19th century onward. Groundnuts were in particularly high demand in France and were used as a plant-based source of oils and fats that was needed for creating various soaps, lubricating oils, and so forth. By exporting large volumes of groundnuts to France, Isaacs was able to bring in a significant profit.

It would seem that Isaacs's business dealings on Matacong were truly moving forward in a very smooth and promising

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manner. Yet his activities on the island would actually reach a sudden end in August 1854. At that time, the Governor of Sierra Leone, Arthur Edward Kennedy, learned that Isaacs was holding slaves on Matacong Island. As noted previously, Britain had already banned the slave trade in 1807. Then, in 1833, it had put in place a six-year transition period leading to the complete abolition of slavery. For this reason, when Governor Kennedy learned that Isaacs was in possession of slaves, he quickly ordered his arrest. However, Isaacs succeeded in escaping from the island before being arrested, and later returned to Britain. It is said that after he fled, slaves were found on the island, after all, as reported (Fyfe, 1962: 275).

After Isaacs fled, his business partner, Thomas Reader, handled trade on Matacong Island. Yet Isaacs and Reader's partnership would be dissolved around 1860. From 1869, a Manchester company by the name of Randall & Fisher would lease the use of the island from Isaacs for a yearly sum of 300 pounds. Like Isaacs himself, this company used the island primarily as a base of operations for accumulating and exporting groundnuts. When Isaacs eventually passed away in Britain, in June 1872, the usage rights over Matacong were inherited in accordance with his will by three people: his daughter, her husband, Peter Manning, and an individual named Walter Lewis. However, Lewis would die on the West Coast of Africa in June 1874. As a result, usage rights over the island fell to the Mannings alone. At least on paper as per the contract, Randall & Fisher Co. would continue using the island until December 31, 1881, paying their fees to the pair.¹⁵

5. The Resolution of the West African Committee and the Advance of France: 1865–1867

In the 1860s, when the colonial partition of Africa was not yet seriously underway, Britain's formal territory on the West Coast of Africa amounted to only four small colonies: Sierra Leone, the Gambia, the Gold Coast, and Lagos. Although some in Britain called for these colonies to be supported, or to be scaled down, almost none argued for their expansion. Merchants engaged in West African trade welcomed the potential of receiving government protection as a result of British colonial expansion. Yet, conversely, they were concerned about the prospect of being forced to pay new fees such as tariffs or anchorage charges or be subjected to various government regulations. The British government was also not particularly enthusiastic about expanding its West African colonies. The Foreign Office and Admiralty were relatively positively inclined toward West African expansion, viewing it as an opportunity to further clamp down on the slave trade. However, the Treasury and Colonial Office were much more cautious, out of concern with the attendant new financial burdens and political responsibilities (Hargreaves, 1963: 26–64).

In June 1865, a special committee of the British Parliament adopted a resolution relating to the future course of Britain's West African colonial policy. The report of the 1865 West African Committee would become "the most quoted document in the history of West African Settlements" (McIntyre, 1967: 100). In fact, it has also come to be viewed as an extremely important document within the history of the British

Empire as a whole, frequently referenced by later researchers who have viewed it as symbolic of the “Little England” era of the 1860s.

The immediate genesis for the adoption of the 1865 resolution was the Ashanti War, which unfolded on the Gold Coast over the course of 1863–1864. This was a conflict between the Ashanti Kingdom, which ruled the interior of the Gold Coast region, and Britain, which considered the coastland to be within its sphere of influence. Casualties included 13 British officers. These losses spurred the British Parliament to thoroughly re-examine its West African colonial policy to date and establish a special committee for the purposes of deliberating upon a future course.

Thus established, the Select Committee on Africa (Western Coast) comprised 17 members, including Colonial Secretary Edward Cardwell. A Member of Parliament named Charles Bowyer Adderley served as chairman. The committee commenced its deliberations in March 1865. Following three months of intensive hearings and discussion, it adopted a resolution that primarily comprised the seven articles below:

1. That it is not possible to withdraw the British Government, wholly or immediately, from any settlements or engagements on the West African Coast.
2. That the settlement on the Gambia may be reduced, by M’Carthy’s Island, which is 150 miles up the river, being no longer occupied; and that the settlement should be confined as much as possible to the mouth of the river.
3. That all further extension of territory or assumption of Government, or new treaties offering any protection to native tribes, would be inexpedient; and that the object of our policy should be to encourage in natives the exercise of those qualities which may render it possible for us more and more to transfer to them the administration of all the Governments, with a view to our ultimate withdrawal from all, except, probably, Sierra Leone.
4. That this policy of non-extension admits of no exception, as regards new settlements, but cannot amount to an absolute prohibition of measures which, in peculiar cases, may be necessary for the more efficient and economical administration of the settlements we already possess.
5. That the reasons for the separation of West African Governments in 1842 having ceased to exist, it is desirable that a Central Government over all the four settlements should be re-established at Sierra Leone, with steam communication with each Lieutenant Government.
6. That the evidence leads to the hope that such a central control may be established with considerable retrenchment of expenditure, and at the same time with a general increase of efficiency.
7. That in the newly acquired territory of Lagos the native practice of domestic slavery still, to a certain degree, exists, although it is at variance with British law; and that it appears to your Committee that this state of things, surrounded as it is by many local difficulties, demands the serious attention of the Government, with a view to its termination as soon as possible.¹⁶

As we can see above, the report of the 1865 Committee recommended that Britain adopt a policy of “non-extension” with respect to the West Coast of Africa and that it work toward “ultimate withdrawal” from all of its West African colonies with the exception of Sierra Leone. On the other hand, as can be seen in Article 1, the resolution does take a cautious view with respect to immediate withdrawal. Article 4 also leaves room for some partial territorial expansion of existing British colonies. The 1865 Resolution thus contained a certain intermixing of views, with representation given both to those who called for a withdrawal from the West African colonies, as well as to those who argued for maintaining Britain’s presence. In this sense, it can be regarded as a product of compromise. I note that by the early 1870s at the latest, it became clear that the non-extension policy promoted within the resolution was not suitable, given the realities of West African colonial policy. It would be entirely abandoned by the middle of that decade. Britain would subsequently proceed down the path of imperialistic territorial expansion within West Africa (McIntyre, 1967: 99–103). Be that as it may, if we restrict our purview to our subject of examination, namely, to Matacong Island and its vicinity, then we may say that the 1865 Resolution had an impact upon Britain’s policy that was by no means insignificant.

Then, during May 1865, just as the West African Committee in Westminster was discussing whether or not Britain should withdraw from West Africa, a conflict erupted in the Melakori River basin of the Northern Rivers region. The conflict was sparked by the death of the Moriah Chiefdom’s paramount chief, with a resultant struggle over the succession between two individuals, known as Maligy and Bokkari (Hargreaves, 1957: 3–8).

Incidentally, the area within the broader Northern Rivers region that had seen the most trade activity in the past was the Nunez River basin. Yet, by the 1860s, the volume of trade taking place in the southern Melakori River basin grew to be much larger. In part, this was thanks to the flourishing of groundnut cultivation, as well as the basin’s location on the trade route linking Fouta Djallon. Alongside this development, French merchant vessels began to travel to the Melakori River or the vicinity of Matacong Island with some frequency (there was high demand for groundnuts in France). A French merchant by the name of Gaspard Devès, who operated out of Gorée (an island off the coast of Dakar known for the role it played in the slave trade), also began to make inroads into this region.¹⁷

With the outbreak of a new conflict within the Moriah Chiefdom, the Europeans (including the French) and the Creole merchants who had begun to advance into the Melakori River basin initially hoped that Britain would intervene as a mediator, given that the region was effectively within its sphere of influence. In fact, in July 1865, the Sierra Leone government sounded out the British on a possible way that they could bring an end to the conflict. Their idea was for the British to annex the coastline of the Moriah Chiefdom and dispatch a revenue officer and resident official, on the basis of the 1826 treaty. However, the West African Committee had only just issued its recommendation of a policy of “non-extension.” The proposal was, therefore, given the cold shoulder by the Colonial Office. In seeing Britain’s wariness of involvement

in the conflict, Senegal's Governor, Jean-Marie-Émile Pinet-Laprade, saw an opportunity. In July 1865, he responded by dispatching a French warship to the Melakori River basin, pressuring one of the conflict's participants, Bokkari, and having him promise to make reparations for the damage that his forces had inflicted upon the French merchant Devès. In November of that same year, Governor Pinet-Laprade would send a representative to the other participant in the conflict, Maligy. He succeeded in having Maligy sign a document acknowledging that the Moriah Chieftdom was under the protection of France, in exchange for recognition that Maligy was the one rightful supreme chief (Arcin, 1911: 337–338). After Maligy was killed in 1866, the governor himself took the step of heading to Freetown in December. At that time, the Governor of Sierra Leone, Samuel Wensley Blackall, was bound by the Resolution of the West African Committee. Governor Pinet-Laprade convinced Blackall of the need to accept France's basic position, which was to bring an end to the Moriah Chieftdom conflict by subsuming the Melakori River basin within France's sphere of influence. He then continued to the Northern Rivers, to deal with Bokkari, who distrusted France. Governor Pinet-Laprade half blackmailed Bokkari to accept the terms of France's protection, stating that unless the Moriah Chieftdom entered under France's protection, he could not rule out war (Arcin, 1911: 338). In 1867, the governor would proceed to establish a military post at Binty (Benty), on the southern bank of the Melakori River (Hargreaves, 1957: 8–14).

Thus, while Britain enjoyed a dominant commercial and political position within the Northern Rivers region up until the mid-19th century, this same region would subsequently be rapidly incorporated within France's economic and military spheres of influence. As noted previously, French merchants began to move into the coastal region in search of sources of groundnuts. At the same time, the French government was aware that Britain had effectively decided to restrain itself with the 1865 Resolution of the West African Committee. France took this state of affairs as an opening to secure a number of treaties with the various chiefs of the Northern Rivers. Lastly, France also took steps to increase its military strength in the region. Along with the outpost at Binty, in 1866, it built an outpost at Boké, on the southern bank of the Nunez River, and at Boffa, at the mouth of the Pongas River.

Yet the above is not to say that France was necessarily aiming for colonization of the Northern Rivers as of the 1860s. The part of the West Coast of Africa that France desired to colonize more than anything at that point in time was actually the British Gambia.

6. Territorial Exchange Negotiations between Britain and France: 1866–1876

Calls within the British government for an early withdrawal from the Gambia Colony grew stronger during the 1860s. This colony was extremely modest in size, forming a long, narrow strip along the edge of the Gambia River. Since the 17th century, it had served as a place of commerce for British chartered companies and merchants. The Gambia had formally become a colony of Britain in 1821, when it was incorporated within Sierra Leone. It would separate from Sierra Leone in 1843, becoming an inde-

pendent colony, but its finances were almost chronically in the red (Newbury, 1971b: 621). This state of affairs meant that Britain found itself funneling supplementary funds into the Gambia Colony on practically a yearly basis. Nevertheless, until the first half of the 19th century, trade in the colony was dominated more by merchants from France than by those from Britain. For example, roughly three-quarters of all exported groundnuts were destined for France, and groundnuts accounted for as much as 90% of the colony's exports. In other words, Britain was shouldering the financial cost of governing the Gambia Colony, while watching as the profits went not to its own merchants but to the merchants of France. In short, Britain was effectively protecting the stable supply of groundnuts to France. This state of affairs led to the Gambia being repeatedly mentioned in the 1865 West African Committee Resolution, which also recommended that it be immediately reduced in size.

It should not come as a surprise, given the above situation, that Britain viewed the Gambia as worthless. But France considered the same land to be valuable territory, to the extent that it was even willing to pay a significant price in order to acquire it. Yet this was not simply because France possessed commercial concessions and interests in the Gambia. It was drawn to this position as a result of political considerations. At that time, France was considering a push into the interior of West Africa from Senegal. Clashes repeatedly took place throughout the region, as local forces sought to resist France's advance. France believed that it was necessary to place the Gambia Colony under its control (or, more strictly speaking, the Gambia River and its basin), in order to cut off the route supplying weapons to anti-French forces and to make it easier to access the interior (Hargreaves, 1963: 126).

The idea of a territorial exchange between Britain and France regarding the Gambia seems to have been unofficially raised by people connected to both governments by around 1861 at the latest (Hargreaves, 1963: 136). In 1866, France would officially issue a request for territorial exchange following the adoption of the West African Committee's Resolution. In March of that year, the French government conveyed to Britain that it was willing to trade three of its settlements on the Ivory Coast (Grand Bassam, Dabou, and Assinie) in exchange for the Gambia Colony. Then, in August 1867, it further notified Britain that it was prepared to also hand over Gabon (Gaboon) on top of its three settlements on the Ivory Coast.

Given that the British government was already considering a withdrawal from the Gambia, it initially welcomed France's proposal. This was particularly true with respect to the Colonial Office. Yet, before long, Britain would shift to taking a cautious

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stance toward territorial exchange, seeming hesitant to offer France an official reply. Following the above developments, Governor Kennedy of Sierra Leone offered his own proposal to the Colonial Office. Kennedy (who had been wary of France advancing into the Northern Rivers for quite some time) proposed that the territory north of the Dembia River in the region, including the Gambia, be assigned to France's sphere of influence. In exchange, the territory to the south of the Dembia River, including the Ivory Coast, would be assigned to Britain's sphere of influence. In February 1870, the British government formally offered a proposal to France that was in line with Kennedy's plan.

France welcomed this counteroffer by Britain. Yet certain other factors mitigated against a deal moving forward. For one, there was strong opposition to a transfer of the Gambia to France by British merchants and missionaries associated with the colony, along with Britain's national Board of Trade. In addition, July 1870 saw the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, plunging France into conflict. In the end, negotiations on a territorial exchange between Britain and France were temporarily halted that same year.

In April 1874, the French formally petitioned the British to re-open territorial exchange negotiations. Britain responded with its own exchange proposal in July 1875: France would take as its sphere of influence the land stretching from the Pongas River in the south, up to its current territory in the north. Britain, meanwhile, would take the Pongas River as the northern end of its own sphere of influence, with Gabon marking its southern end. This proposal was extremely favorable to Britain, effectively granting it all of the West Coast of Africa south of the Pongas River in the Northern Rivers region, including the Niger River entrance. In exchange, all France really stood to gain was the small colony of the Gambia. France was perplexed by Britain's audacious proposal, yet it did not seek to call off the negotiations. However, in March 1876, Britain ultimately took France's hesitancy toward its proposal as an excuse to unilaterally announce that it was pulling out of the talks.

What would have happened if the territorial exchange negotiations between Britain and France had reached some form of agreement? It would have surely had a significant impact upon the subsequent colonial partitioning of West Africa, as well as upon the manner in which West African states took shape after independence. Above all, Matacong Island would have surely not become French territory, instead being incorporated into Britain's "formal empire."

7. The Matacong Island Incident: 1879

Following the failure of the territorial exchange negotiations between the governments of Britain and France, the hostility between the Sierra Leone side and the Senegal side became immediately more apparent. First, in June 1876, Britain's Colonial Office granted Governor Samuel Rowe of Sierra Leone permission to establish administrative authority on Matacong Island on the basis of the 1826 treaty. Having received this approval, in March 1877, the Sierra Leone government announced that the island was now British territory. Preparations also began for the collection of

tariffs from the island. In May 1877, the Sierra Leone government also concluded a number of treaties with parties such as the chiefs of the Samo Chiefdom, securing sovereignty over the coastline stretching from the Melakori River to the Great Scarcies River, including Binty, where France had its outpost. Governor Rowe further took the step of secretly visiting the Melakori River, the Great Scarcies River, and the Fourikariah River between 1877 and 1878, meeting with the chiefs of each region in order to discuss a further expansion of Britain's influence. Then, at the end of February 1879, Governor Rowe formally announced that from May of that year, the Sierra Leone government would begin to collect tariffs from the Scarcies Rivers region under Britain's control (Hargreaves, 1963: 214–222).

Why was the government of Sierra Leone in such a hurry to begin collecting tariffs in the Northern Rivers in the second half of the 1870s, following the collapse of territorial exchange negotiations between the governments of Britain and France? One major reason was the so-called “Great Depression” of that era, which began in 1873. The Great Depression caused a precipitous drop in the value of palm oil, a primary commodity for the region. This had serious repercussions for the amount of trade being conducted in Sierra Leone. It should also be noted that when the tariff rate on daily necessities used in the continental interior was raised in 1872, there was a significant trend toward importing goods subject to such tariffs via the tariff-free Northern Rivers region. This caused a serious drop in Sierra Leone's income from customs. As the Sierra Leone government relied upon income from tariffs as a major source of its revenue, the above situation served as serious motivation for expanding the scope of its tax gathering to include the Northern Rivers. This, it hoped, would help to reinforce its financial base (Hargreaves, 1963: 214–215).

Sierra Leone's efforts at recovering from its setback in the Northern Rivers through expanding its tariff-collection activities alarmed Senegal, prodding it to react. At that time, almost all trade in the Northern Rivers had become the domain of French merchants, with the exception of a small number of Sierra Leone merchants, as well as the Randall & Fisher company (which was active on Matacong Island and elsewhere). This meant that the efforts at expanded tariff collection by the Sierra Leone government effectively amounted to a tax on French merchants. Furthermore, from Senegal's perspective, permitting Sierra Leone's tariff collection would have practically meant a recognition of Britain's sovereignty over the Northern Rivers. It is therefore not surprising that Senegal's governor, Louis-Alexandre-Esprit-Gaston Brière de l'Isle, subsequently took a number of steps in response. In June 1877, he signed a treaty with Bokkari of the Moriah Chiefdom, re-confirming France's rule. That same year, he dispatched a unit of soldiers to a small town on the opposite side of Binty, to help prevent the Binty outpost in the Melakori River basin from being encircled by Sierra Leone. As a demonstration of France's sovereignty over the region, he also ordered the commencement of tariff collection. Then, in March 1879, Governor Brière de l'Isle took a further countermeasure in response to the Sierra Leone government's advanced notice on tariff collection of the previous month. He

dispatched soldiers to Matacong Island and occupied it, raising the French flag. This is the so-called “Matacong Island Incident.”

Governor Rowe was visiting the Gambia Colony when he received word of the occupation by the French troops of Matacong Island. In fury, he quickly headed to Gorée, where he dispatched a telegram of protest to Governor Brière de l’Isle, demanding that the French troops immediately leave Matacong. As it happened, Governor Rowe would later be informed that the Bereira chief had handed over the sovereignty of Matacong Island to France several years earlier.

The circumstances surrounding the transfer of Matacong Island’s sovereignty to France are quite complex. According to one account, events unfolded as follows. In the 1850s, Matacong’s original copy of the lease agreement was still held by the paramount chief of the Moriah Chiefdom. However, after the death of a particular paramount chief, a dispute over the inheritance of the agreement took place between two individuals by the names of Foday Harfee and Foday Wise. Harfee’s mother was a freewoman, which helped him in securing the support of many free people within the Moriah Chiefdom. By contrast, Wise’s mother was a domestic slave, and so he received the support of the slaves. Domestic slaves had asserted that they were prepared to die alongside Wise if he was not selected as paramount chief, despite being older than Harfee. For this reason, some free people who feared a slave revolt began to lean toward supporting Wise. In the town of Bereira, in particular, where the household slave population was larger than in other towns, a potential uprising was a serious problem. Upon observing this situation, Wise moved to gain the support of the people of Bereira by handing the Matacong Island lease agreement to the chief there, promising that, in the future, the Bereira chief would be able to collect rent from the island. In this manner, the original copy of the Matacong Island lease agreement shifted from being held by the Moriah Chiefdom’s paramount chief to the chief of Bereira. It was thus that Bereira’s chief, Sorie Feekeh, was in a position to hand over the sovereignty of the island to France in 1878, the year before its occupation (Skinner, 1980: 120–121).

According to another account, a chief who was a member of the Moriah Chiefdom once visited a Maligia chief about a conflict between relatives. On that occasion, he lent the Maligia chief the lease agreement for Matacong Island on a purely temporary basis, which was then handed to Bereira via Fourikariah. Bereira’s chief, Feekeh, then used his possession of the lease agreement as justification for claiming that he himself was the owner of Matacong, before handing sovereignty over the island to France (Skinner, 1980: 122–125).

What is common to these two accounts is that the original copy of the lease agreement for Matacong Island, which was originally held by the Moriah paramount chief, found its way into the hands of the Bereira chief for some reason. The chief in question, Feekeh, then gave sovereignty over the island to France, despite not actually having the authority to do so. The French in Senegal subsequently used the consent of the Bereira chief as grounds for their 1879 occupation of Matacong.

The Matacong Island Incident had the effect of immediately ratcheting up the level of tension between Sierra Leone and Senegal. Immediately after the incident, on April 9, 1879, Governor Rowe dispatched a letter to Colonial Secretary Michael Edward Hicks Beach. In the letter, he wrote as follows:

7. The occupation by the French of the Matacong is a much graver matter, and has caused me an amount of anxiety and trouble that I cannot describe.

8. It happened that the morning of my arrival at Freetown there had arrived messengers from Wonkafong, the chief town of the Sumbuyah district situated on the Sanky Brimah, Signatory of Treaty of 1826, by which Matacong was ceded to the British Government, and the first question asked by this Chief was, "Has the English Government given Matacong to the French? I wish to know because in coming from Wonkafong we stopped at Matacong as we always do, and as I found the French flag flying there, I immediately left and came on to Freetown. I wish to know if the English Government has given the island to the French, because when Matacong was given to the British, my grandfather was sent by the King and Chiefs of the Sumbuyah country with the Alimamy Dallu Mahomados to represent them and to give up the British their right in Matacong, while Amurat (as the head of the Tura family) equally gave up all his rights." I very respectfully ask what answer I am to give these people?¹⁸

As we can see in this letter, the 1879 Matacong Island Incident shook the Sierra Leone government. From its perspective, it was France's first serious challenge to Britain's power in West Africa. The Sierra Leone government became extremely alarmed over Senegal's uncompromising tendency toward territorial expansion (Uzoigwe, 1978: 74). That being said, the governments of Britain and France were comparatively calm with respect to the incident. The French Foreign Minister, William Henry Waddington, who valued a cooperative relationship between Britain and France in Europe, attempted to placate the British government by explaining that the occupation of Matacong Island had been conducted without permission from France itself. The French Foreign Minister also obtained a promise from Britain that it would support the status quo in the region until negotiations between both countries had been concluded. He then ordered Governor Brière de l'Isle in Senegal to withdraw his troops from Matacong Island. Similarly, the British Foreign Secretary, Robert Arthur Gascoyne-Cecil, also wished to prioritize good relations with France. He retained a calm attitude in response to the incident and showed understanding toward his French counterpart Waddington's explanation (Hargreaves, 1963: 226).

The governments of Britain and France would subsequently conduct intermittent

The Matacong Island Incident had the effect of immediately ratcheting up the level of tension between Sierra Leone and Senegal.

exchanges of opinion with respect to the territorial partition of the West Coast of Africa, including the Northern Rivers. During the course of this process, they negotiated ideas such as the Salisbury proposal. According to this proposal, Britain would renounce its territory north of the Scarcies Rivers, including Matacong Island. In exchange, France was to give Britain its territory south of the same rivers, along with Cotonou. However, this proposal to exchange territory between the two nations would eventually be set aside once the Liberal Party took office in Britain in 1880 and in the face of opposition from French merchants (Hargreaves, 1963: 234–237).

8. Boundary Demarcation: 1881–1889

A resolution to the Matacong Island Incident was eventually reached through diplomatic negotiations between the governments of Britain and France. According to the agreement that was struck, France would remove its troops from the island in exchange for preservation of the status quo in the Northern Rivers. However, the colonial governments in Sierra Leone and Senegal continued to come into conflict over the signing of new treaties with local chiefs or moves to collect tariffs. The governments of Britain and France, therefore, established a committee to deliberate upon territorial problems in the Northern Rivers, with the aim of avoiding unnecessary friction and clashes between the two nations. In June 1882, Britain and France would sign a convention based upon items of agreement reached by the committee.

The arrangement of lines of demarcation between Britain and France's territories within the Northern Rivers, as well as the jurisdiction of Matacong Island, was spelled out in this 1882 Convention in the following manner:

Article I: The line of demarcation between the territories occupied or claimed by Great Britain and France respectively to the north of Sierra Leone, on the West Coast of Africa, shall be drawn between the basins of the Rivers Scarcies and Mellicourie...

Article II: The Island of Yelboyah, and all islands claimed or possessed by Great Britain on the West Coast of Africa lying to the south of the said line of demarcation as far as the southern limit of the British Colony of Sierra Leone, shall be recognised by France as belonging to Great Britain, and the Island of Matacong, and all islands claimed or possessed by France on the West Coast of Africa to the north of the said line of demarcation as far as the Rio Nunez, shall be recognised by Great Britain as belonging to France...¹⁹

Thus, the line of demarcation between the British and French territories in the Northern Rivers was established so that it ran through the basins between the Melakori River and the Scarcies Rivers. This was the location of the Samo Chiefdom, which was thereby split into northern and southern sections. Along with this agreement, Matacong Island was also officially granted to France.

As it happened, France's National Assembly would later refuse to ratify the 1882 Convention. One of the reasons given by those within the assembly who were opposed to the convention was that the treaty did not clearly specify the northern limits of France's sphere of influence in the West Coast of Africa. In their view, this meant that its ratification could potentially lead to the sanctioning of Britain's further northward advance up the coastline (Newbury, 1971a: 234). However, although France did not formally ratify the convention, in reality, the 1882 Convention would, for all intents and purposes, still be respected by both nations as accepted terms of agreement. Later, in August 1889, they would reach a new agreement on the lines of demarcation between various regions of the West Coast of Africa, including the Gambia and Sierra Leone. With respect to the northern part of Sierra Leone, there was no specific mention of Matacong Island. However, this new agreement effectively meant the reaffirmation of the original terms of agreement reached in the 1882 Anglo–French Convention.

9. The French Occupation of Matacong Island: 1891

From 1869 on, Isaacs subleased Matacong Island to the Randall & Fisher company. With his death in 1872, the same company signed a new sublease agreement with his heirs, the Mannings. However, from around 1879 to 1880, the Randall & Fisher company effectively withdrew from conducting business on Matacong Island. In December 1881, it formally dissolved its contract with the Mannings. The reason for the company's withdrawal from Matacong is not certain. However, as noted earlier, in the second half of the 1870s, the Sierra Leone government began to levy tariffs on the island. Later, in 1879, the Senegalese colonial government caused the above-mentioned incident when it temporarily occupied the island. It is not difficult to imagine that such changes in business conditions would have contributed to the company's decision to pull out.

Once it was clear that the Randall & Fisher company was leaving Matacong Island, the Mannings consulted with a merchant in Liverpool by the name of Richard Philpott about how to dispose of the island. Philpott proposed that he establish a new company, named the Matacong and Northwest African Company. This company could purchase the usage rights of Matacong Island and engage in commercial activities therein. Following this proposal, the Mannings first sold the rights to the island to Philpott in November 1881, for 4,100 pounds. Next, Philpott formally sold the island to the new company in April 1883 for 10,000 pounds. However, at this time, the company already owed 4,000 pounds to the three partners of James Bowden & Company in Liverpool. As a result, that same month, the Matacong and Northwest African Company agreed to transfer the island usage rights to Bowden Co. until the debt was repaid. Eventually, in March 1887, Matacong would become entirely the possession of Bowden Co.²⁰

In December 1884, Bowden Co. was shocked to learn from the French government that because of the 1882 treaty, Matacong Island was now French territory. That same month, the company employed a solicitor to send a letter to the British

Foreign Office, seeking confirmation of this fact. In response, the Colonial Office sent a reply to Bowden Co.'s solicitor in January 1885. It stated that although the 1882 Anglo–French Convention had yet to be ratified, both nations were treating it as accepted terms of agreement. Moreover, according to that treaty, Matacong Island had indeed been specified as part of French territory. Later, Bowden Co. would issue a complaint to the British government that Matacong's sovereignty was transferred to France without prior discussion with the possessor of the island's usage rights. It also asked that the British pressure the French government to allow the island to continue to be used as a tax-free zone. Ultimately, however, the company was unable to secure a favorable response from the British government.²¹

In 1891, Bowden Co. began to lease out Matacong Island on a ten-year contract to a company from Glasgow, Taylor, Laughland & Company, which was engaged in trade activities in the Oil Rivers of present-day southern Nigeria. Taylor, Laughland & Company then signed a three-year agent contract with an individual by the name of M. H. Smith, sending him to the island in June of that year to conduct trade on its behalf.

Upon his arrival at Matacong in July 1891, Smith expressed admiration at the size of the island and the fertility of the croplands and pastures. He also wrote the following with respect to the prospects for the trade activities he intended to engage in:

Trading Prospects—I really cannot understand how it is that the place has been so long left without a factory in full swing. Have arrived here at a most opportune time for the future interests of the venture. Have had most of the principal people from the neighbouring district at Matacong to see me, the news of white man's arrival having gone far and wide. Every day brings deputations, and all promise to bring trade. Every day since I arrived, numbers of large three-mastered canoes have come laden with produce to sell. They all make Matacong a place of call for the night whatever place they are bound for, and would only be too glad, they say, to sell their produce here. Rubber appears plentiful. Hides, skins, nuts, kernels, and oil have been offered me. The island is centrally situated, and must become an important centre of trade.²²

As we can see from the above observations, Smith had an initially optimistic outlook on the potential for trade at Matacong Island. As it happened, the situation would change quite suddenly in September 1891, two months after his arrival. First, on the 11th of that month, a group of armed locals arrived at the island from Fourikariah. They captured island residents and behaved violently, looting their belongings. When Smith protested their actions, they simply responded, before leaving, that they had the permission of France. Then, on the 16th of the same month, five French soldiers visited Matacong. Upon confirming that Smith was white, they informed him that their commanding officer wished to have a meeting with him. On the 19th of that month, Smith left the island to visit the Sierra Leone Colony. Immediately afterwards, a French military unit arrived on the island, lowered the

British flag that had been raised there, and tore it apart. They then arrested a young African man by the name of Charles MacFoy, who had been staying on the island as Smith's guest. Having come across the French unit's ship directly after departing from Matacong, Smith quickly turned back. Upon discovering that the British flag had been removed, he raised another one. Smith was then arrested on the spot by the French unit in the same manner as MacFoy and transferred to Conakry. Although he was released after a few days, MacFoy would be detained for fifteen days.²³

Smith sent word of France's occupation of Matacong Island via telegram, initially reaching Taylor, Laughland & Company in Britain. The company then quickly informed Bowden Co., which in turn sent a letter to the British government petitioning it for assistance. In this letter, Bowden Co. requested that Britain pressure the French to apologize for the soldiers occupying the island and to pay reparations for harm inflicted upon Smith and MacFoy. However, as the Colonial Office already viewed Matacong Island as French territory, it was entirely uninterested in the rights of British individuals therein, which it regarded as falling under the purview of the Foreign Office.²⁴ Meanwhile, although the Foreign Office did at least negotiate with the French side, it was determined that the incident occurred because Smith ignored the fact that Matacong was French territory and that there was insufficient evidence to establish that the soldiers had caused Smith and MacFoy any harm. In the end, the claims made by Bowden Co. were almost entirely rejected.²⁵

The above incident would be briefly reported in *The Times* newspaper, on October 24, 1891. The article made a few errors, including the claim that Smith was the "landowner" of Matacong, rather than simply the agent of Taylor, Laughland & Company. It also stated that the island was handed over to France in 1879. It is nevertheless worth examining the original text. It reads as follows:

THE REPORTED OUTRAGE ON A BRITISH SUBJECT—It is stated officially that Matacong, an island on the West Coast of Africa, is not in any way under the protection of England. The reported insult to Mr. Smith, a British landowner on the island, who hoisted the British flag there, is not seriously regarded, as Mr. Smith had no authority to hoist the flag. The island was ceded to France in 1879, and in 1882, although the treaty was not then ratified, it came under French control. In 1889 an agreement was signed with France handing over the island to that country. Major Crooks, Acting Governor of Sierra Leone, has not yet reported the occurrence to the Foreign Office.²⁶

10. Conclusion

Following the French unit's occupation of Matacong in 1891, Bowden Co. continued to pressure the British Foreign Office to have France recognize the company's right of ownership over the island. However, Bowden Co. did not have much success in its appeals for arbitration or for the recognition of the scope of its rights. We do know that as of August 1898, at the latest, Bowden Co. had rejected the personal arbitration granted by France, leaving the dispute between both parties unresolved.²⁷

It is unclear what kind of conclusion was eventually reached with respect to the dispute between Bowden Co. and the French government over Matacong Island. However, what needs to be pointed out here is that by the end of the 19th century, the island was already losing its competitiveness and importance as a trading post. Up until the 1880s at the latest, primary commodities from the Northern Rivers, such as groundnuts, were being directly exported by small merchant ships on an irregular basis to Western countries such as France. However, this state of affairs would gradually change as the number of regular steamship lines to West Africa increased, along with the size of the vessels. By the 1890s, many of the primary commodities of the Northern Rivers were being temporarily stockpiled in places such as Freetown, which possessed relatively extensive port facilities. They would then be loaded onto large-scale cargo vessels for export (Howard, 1968: 41).

As noted earlier, when Smith had arrived on Matacong in 1891, he had initially been quite optimistic about future opportunities for trade on the island. However, by that stage, the “age of factories” in the Northern Rivers was already beginning to come to a close, along with the end of the 19th century. ☀

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Notes

- ¹ Facts Regarding Lease of the Island of Matacong, West Coast of Africa, December 1891, The Matacong Island (West Africa) Papers (MIP) 230.
- ² “Matacong, West Coast of Africa,” *The Illustrated London News*, December 2, 1854, p. 551.
- ³ “Matacong, West Coast of Africa,” *The Illustrated London News*, December 2, 1854, p. 551.
- ⁴ Copy of Part of Despatch from Administrator-in-Chief, Sierra Leone, to Colonial Office, November 19, 1891, MIP 108.
- ⁵ The Creoles are called the “Krio” today. An English-based creole language, Krio, is lingua franca and a *de facto* national language spoken throughout Sierra Leone. For more detail on the Krio, see, for example, Fyfe (1987), Spitzer (1975), and Wyse (1989).
- ⁶ Agreement between Allimamie Amura and S. Gabbidon & W. H. Savage for the Island of Matacong, December 30, 1825, MIP 197c. Iron bars made by smiths in the form of long rods were widely used as currency in the region of today’s Sierra Leone and Liberia.
- ⁷ Agreement between Allimamie Amura and S. Gabbidon & W. H. Savage for the Island of Matacong, MIP 197c.
- ⁸ Agreement between Allimamie Amura and S. Gabbidon & W. H. Savage for the Island of Matacong, MIP 197c.
- ⁹ Facts Regarding Lease of the Island of Matacong, West Coast of Africa, MIP 230.
- ¹⁰ Typed Copy of Document Transferring Matacong from the Chiefs of the Bullam Country to William Gabbidon, 1842, MIP 199a.
- ¹¹ Release and Bargain Sale of the Island of Matacong, August 24, 1844, MIP 200b.
- ¹² “Matacong, West Coast of Africa,” *The Illustrated London News*, December 2, 1854, pp. 551–552.
- ¹³ “Matacong, West Coast of Africa,” *The Illustrated London News*, December 2, 1854, p. 552.
- ¹⁴ Autograph Description of Matacong, n.d., MIP 178.
- ¹⁵ Declaration of Mr. Peter Manning, April 16, 1883, MIP 208.
- ¹⁶ *Report from the Select Committee on Africa (Western Coast); Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix*, iii, British Parliamentary Papers, 1865 (412) V, (412-I).
- ¹⁷ For more detail on the production and trade of groundnuts in the 19th-century West Africa, see Brooks (1975).
- ¹⁸ “Governor Rowe to Sir M. Hicks Beach,” April 5, 1879, Doc. 45, in Partridge and Gillard (Eds) (1996: 69).
- ¹⁹ “Anglo-French Convention,” June 28, 1882, in Newbury (1971b: 175).
- ²⁰ Copy of Statement by P. Manning about Matacong, n.d., MIP 177; Mr. & Mrs. Manning to Mr. Richard Philpott: Conveyance of the Island of Matacong, May 23, 1882, MIP 203b; Mr. Richard Philpott to the Matacong and North West African Company Ltd.: Conveyance of the Island of Matacong, April 3, 1883, MIP 207a; The Matacong and North West African Company Limited with Messrs. Jas. Bowden & Company: Mortgage of the Island of Matacong to Secure Balance of Account and Interest, April 14, 1883, MIP 209a.
- ²¹ Written Statement of Facts by Norris & Sons, March 10, 1892, MIP 219.
- ²² Facts Regarding Lease of the Island of Matacong, West Coast of Africa, December 1891, MIP 230.
- ²³ Facts Regarding Lease of the Island of Matacong, West Coast of Africa, December 1891, MIP 230.
- ²⁴ Letter from R. H. Meade on behalf of Henry Thurstan Holland, 1st Viscount Knutsford, to Norris & Sons, December 31, 1891, MIP 19.
- ²⁵ Letter from T. V. Lister on behalf of Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, to Norris & Sons, January 22, 1892, MIP 22.
- ²⁶ “The Reported Outrage on a British Subject,” *The Times*, October 24, 1891, p. 9.
- ²⁷ Letter from Francis Bertie on behalf of Salisbury to Norris & Sons, August 11, 1898, MIP 94.

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