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Establishing Control: Education and Artisan Trade Unionism in Sierra Leone, 1875-1895.

Panel A02

Abstract:

This paper provides a brief overview of the various ways in which contestations over government-funded technical education were part of artisan trade union organisation in Sierra Leone between 1875 and 1895. Education shaped the aspirations of artisan organisers, and debates over the educational curriculum reflected economic and cultural concerns. Education reform was pursued alongside attempts to form artisan trade unions in order to reaffirm the ability of master artisans to control the labour of their apprentices and journeymen.

Key Words: Sierra Leone, artisans, trade unionism, education

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Biography

I have pursued a Bachelor's Degree in history from Leiden University with a focus on contemporary and African history. The present paper is based on my masters' thesis in African Studies (Research) from Leiden University titled *Whatsoever Thy Hand Findeth to Do, Do It With Thy Might*: S.H.A. Case and J.T. Ojukutu-Macauley and Artisan Trade Unions in Sierra Leone, 1875-1900, for which I conducted archival and field research in Freetown, London, and Cambridge.¹ I am currently pursuing a master's degree in Global Political Economy at Leiden University.

¹ For those interested, the full thesis is available through the repository: <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/123126> (last accessed 5/10/2020).

By the final quarter of the nineteenth century the social and economic position of Freetown's artisans had declined to such an extent that the formation of trade unions was advocated for. Education played a crucial role in this project. This paper traces the complex and multi-faceted role of education and proposed education reforms in this project.

By this time the term artisan, used interchangeably with the term mechanic, denoted a skilled manual worker. The term was used in contrast to labourer, which denoted an unskilled worker. Artisan trade union organisers envisioned the ideal artisan as well-educated and consequently well-versed in his respective trade.² The education of artisans consisted of apprenticeships in which young aspiring artisans lived with a master over a number of years to acquire the requisite skills to eventually open their own workshops. During Charles McCarthy's tenure as governor of the colony, between 1816 and 1824, the so-called parish system had been established, in which newly arrived Liberated Africans were settled in villages around the Freetown settlement and received education in various crafts by the Church Missionary Society (CMS).³

Formal primary and secondary education was provided by the various churches. The Anglican CMS established a grammar school in the 1840s. The Wesleyan Methodists established their own high school for boys in 1874 under the direction of Reverend J.C. May. In the colony's complex social hierarchy educational, economic, and social attainment were strongly linked to church membership. The Anglican church was the most prominent denomination, followed in descending order by the Wesleyan Methodist and the United Free Methodist Churches and smaller non-conforming denominations.⁴ Particularly people of Liberated African, that it is of slave descent, aimed to advance their own social status and that of their children in this way.⁵ These values were shared by the colony's artisans and informed their activities as trade union organisers. In the process artisan trade union organisers adapted established beliefs about the importance of education to their own position.

Education also laid the groundwork for a complex network of interpersonal relations, which provided some avenues for advocacy for government intervention in the colony's education system. As will be demonstrated by this paper's discussion of the life of artisan

² E. Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, rebellion and Jazz* (London, 1998), 76-81.

³ B. Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave MacMillan, 2013), 21.

⁴ A. Porter, 'Religious Affiliation in Freetown, Sierra Leone', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 23:1 (1953), 3-14, 13.

⁵ A. Wyse, *The Krio of Sierra Leone: An Interpretive History* (Freetown, 1989), 6. A. Wyse, 'On Misunderstanding Arising from the Use of the term 'Creole' in the Literature on Sierra Leone: a Rejoinder', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 49:4 (1979), 408-417, 408-410.

trade union organiser S.H.A. Case (1845-1901), these networks were expanded and cultivated in the course of the struggle over educational reform.

Attempts to form an artisan trade union were undertaken by the mid-1870s. The evidence suggests that Case was involved in the budding artisan movement from the beginning. Case had been born in Freetown in 1845 to Wesleyan Liberated Africans of Popo, that is, of Dahomeyan descent.⁶ Case received his primary education at the government school and then attended the CMS grammar school for about eighteen months.⁷ As recorded in the obituary of his contemporary and fellow artisan unionist J.T. Ojukutu-Macaulay, this would have exposed Case to the future political social elite of Sierra Leone, including future mayor of Freetown Samuel Lewis and his brother Alfred, who became a distinguished civil servant, and Richard Beale Blaize, who was to become a wealthy businessman.⁸

Case's own career presents a sort of microcosm of the precarity and changeability of artisan careers. Case himself worked as a clerk, apprentice stonemason, bookkeeper, and assistant jailkeeper throughout the 1860s before taking a clerkship in the Royal Engineers department in Gambia in 1869 and spending some time between 1872 and the end of the Anglo-Asante war of 1874 in Cape Coast in the Gold Coast colony. From 1874 Case worked for the imperial government in various construction-related occupations.⁹

Shortly after his return to Freetown Case anonymously contributed a letter to the local Sierra Leone newspaper *Independent* in which he outlined his views on the plight of the colony's artisans. He pointed out the scarcity of competent and qualified workmen in the colony. Case contrasted this to a prior situation in which skilled workers trained by European craftsmen were readily available. Moreover, he outlined the precarity of the artisans' livelihoods, many of whom turned to petty trading due to the low wages paid to artisans. These low wages were caused, in Case's view, by an abundance of former apprentices who left their masters' establishments to hire themselves out. This abundant supply of labour of usually low quality contributed to low wages and a low social standing for artisans. Additionally, an emphasis on so-called literary education in preparation for a white-collar career prevented a thorough technical education through the official school system.¹⁰

Around the same time, the death of the prominent local contractor Charles Hazleborg

⁶ More accurately: the term Popo was used for people who had been taken as slaves from the Dahomeyan port of Grand Popo see: C. Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London, 1962), 170.

⁷ 'Death of Mr. S.H.A. Case, *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, 4 May 1901, 6.

⁸ 'Death of Mr. J.T. Ojukutu-Macauley, *SLWN*, 15 October 1904, 2. Fyfe, *A History*, 491 and 537.

⁹ 'Local', *Independent* March 11, 1875, 3.

¹⁰ 'To the Editor of the Independent', *Independent*, 8 July 1875, 3.

prompted four, again anonymous, master artisans to propose the formation of a “mechanics’ alliance” to improve the condition of the colony’s artisans.¹¹ It is unclear whether this initiative is the same as the one recalled by Case’s cousin William Glouster and prominent stonemason J.A. Douglas in 1884 during the first meeting of Case’s Mechanics’ Alliance. That initiative had been prompted after Glouster and Douglas were approached by the eminent colonial official Algernon Montagu.¹² The continuity between the aims of the initiatives of the mid-1870s and Case’s Mechanics’ Alliance in the 1880s as well as the close association between Case, Glouster, and Douglas certainly suggest that Case was involved in, or at least aware of, the proposed mechanics alliance of 1875.

Yet, the ultimate failure of these initiatives prompted Case to pursue an alternative strategy in addition to the founding of an artisan trade union. In his 1875 letter to the *Independent* Case had argued that:

“Now in the absence of a mechanic’s alliance or some such institution to protect the trades, it would be profitable to the community who would participate in the general good arising from it, if the Government in view of the system of compulsory education in England and elsewhere, would adopt some such measures as would remove this growing disgrace and crying evil. If an industrial school were established here under proper management, the youths turned from it should possess certificates according to their respective efficiency, this would largely increase the desire to learn, and will become an inducement to others to fully serve their time and hold their certificates when so much must depend on it.”¹³

Clearly, Case envisioned government-sponsored education as an important complimentary action to the trade unions. Indeed, as long as a viable trade union did not exist such a government school could substitute for it. It would take until the 1880s for such an initiative to be undertaken by the colonial government, and, as is discussed below, it incurred significant delays.

Meanwhile, the economic situation of the colony rapidly deteriorated in the 1870s and the 1880s. Falling prices of the colony’s mainly agricultural exports reduced government revenue, which depended on import and export duties on the value of the taxed

¹¹ *Independent*, 25 February 1875, 2.

¹² ‘Meeting of Mechanics’, *The Artisan*, 30 July 1884.

¹³ To the Editor of the *Independent*, *Independent*, 8 July 1875, 3.

commodities.¹⁴ At the same time, the quality of workmanship in Freetown declined to such an extent that the quality of construction began to suffer, prompting some wealthy inhabitants to construct their homes themselves without employing a (sub)contractor.¹⁵ It is in this context that Case launched a monthly periodical called *The Artisan* in 1884.

The short and troubled history of *The Artisan* is beyond the scope of this paper, but the paper provides an important insight into the development of the initiatives of the 1870s. In the Prospectus for the paper Case outlined the objectives of his venture: “to encourage native industry, and to impart such instructions as may serve to advance a class hitherto much downtrodden and neglected.”¹⁶ Case used the paper to promote the Mechanics’ Alliance formed in August 1884. The colony’s dismal economic condition prompted other initiatives besides Case’s. In 1885 the German merchant and consul Ernst Vohsen spearheaded the formation of the Sierra Leone Association to promote agriculture, trade, and industry in the colony.¹⁷ Case had hoped to integrate the Mechanics’ Alliance into the Sierra Leone Association.¹⁸ Despite the shared concerns over the colony’s economic situation and the declining quality of skilled labour, both the Mechanics’ Alliance and the Sierra Leone Association were largely moribund by late 1885. After amassing 190 paying members by late 1884, the union had only 51 members by the time of its first anniversary in August 1885.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Sierra Leone Association had fallen apart due to internal dissent.²⁰

Case’s attempted collaboration with the middle-class mercantile Sierra Leone Association once more highlights the great practical importance of his connection to that class. As discussed above, these associations began during his childhood education. After his return to Sierra Leone in 1874 Case had steadily worked to become a notable figure in the colony. A brief overview of his activities outside of his job and the *The Artisan* highlight this point. In 1875 Case helped found a small temperance society as part of the International Order of Good Templars, for which organisation he worked with the Wesleyan Reverend J.C.

¹⁴ P. Wickins, *Africa 1880-1980: An Economic History* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1986), 16-17.

O. Goerg, *Pouvoir Colonial, Municipalités et Espaces Urbains: Conakry-Freetown des années 1880 à 1914 Vol 1* (l’Harmattan : Paris, Montreal, 1997), 60. ; N.A. Cox-George, *Finance and Development in West Africa: The Sierra Leone Experience* (London, 1961), 79.

¹⁵ E. Davies, ‘The Architecture of Freetown’, in: C. Fyfe and E. Jones, eds., *Freetown: A Symposium* (Freetown 1968), 118-136, 122.

¹⁶ ‘Prospectus, *The Artisan*, 24 May 1884.

¹⁷ ‘Variety Basket’, *The Artisan*, 28 January 1885.

¹⁸ ‘Our Letter-Box, *The Artisan*, 25 February 1885.

¹⁹ ‘The Mechanics’ Alliance’, *The Artisan*, 29 July 1885.

²⁰ This episode is documented in Hargreaves’ biography of Samuel Lewis, whose speech had provoked the split. See: J.D. Hargreaves, *A life of Sir Samuel Lewis* (London, 1958), 50-51.

May.²¹ Within his religious community, the U.M.F.C., Case contributed in various ways. He was involved in the construction of several churches in the 1870s and the 1880s.²² Case had also become a lay preacher in the U.M.F.C.²³ In 1886 and 1887 Case was a member of the committee tasked with organising the celebration in connection with the centenary of the founding of the first colony in Sierra Leone in 1787. In this committee, which again included many important Sierra Leoneans such as Samuel Lewis, Case again worked together with Vohsen.²⁴

In a practical sense these connections contributed to Case's work through the financial contributions to the ailing *The Artisan* provided by notable private persons and clergy.²⁵ After the failure of *The Artisan* and the Mechanics' Alliance by 1888, avenues were opened through which Case could advocate for the educational reforms he desired. In *The Artisan* Case had continued to deplore the general distaste for manual work among the colony's middle class and its reluctance to support artisan education or to encourage their children to pursue such an occupation.²⁶ Support for such a scheme from the colonial government appeared to be materialising by 1887. In 1886 the new governor James Hay Shaw had encouraged the board of education to consider the establishment of a technical school, while the centenary committee had proposed the establishment of a technical school.²⁷ Case's commentary on these developments highlight the way in which he connected the economic well-being of the colony to the elevation of the social and economic position of the colony's artisans.

“Taking it for granted that the large number of working-men must remain to the end working-men, and that only, there is still nothing incompatible with their happiness and dignity, if such means offered for the elevation of their class as such, without any alteration of the basis of the existing organisation of industry. Under such conditions and advantages the working-men will become instruments of progress; and rejoicing in the spirit of independence and self-respect, infused

²¹ *Independent*, 13 September 1877, 2. May would also be one of the founders of the influential *Sierra Leone Weekly News* newspaper.

²² “Local”, *Independent* March 11, 1875, 3. ‘Tabernacle Church’, *The Artisan*, 8 October 1884.

²³ ‘Death of Mr. S.H.A. Case’, *SLWN*, 4 May 1901, 6.

²⁴ ‘General News’, *SLWN*, 13 March 1886, 3. ‘Centennial Committee’ *SLWN*, 9 October 1886.

²⁵ ‘Our First Volume’, *The Artisan*, 25 February 1885

²⁶ ‘Practical Education’, *The Artisan*, 24 May 1884.

²⁷ ‘Technical Education’, *SLWN*, 14 August 1886, 2. ‘An Industrial School’, *The Artisan*, 2 February 1887.

into them, the whole class -improved by association- would rise in material comfort and security, and still more intellectual and moral attainments.”²⁸

Case was himself involved in another scheme to promote technical education. Together with John Augustus Cole, a Sierra Leonean Wesleyan minister who had grown up in Nigeria before receiving his education in Freetown, Case reportedly worked on the foundation of an Industrial and Scientific Institute around 1887/1888. Case was to become the secretary of the institution.²⁹ The institute fails to appear in the evidence and it is most probable that institute never got off the ground. Nevertheless, it is clear that reforms of the technical education of the colony were steadily gaining momentum by the late 1880s.

In 1889 this momentum in favour of educational reform finally coalesced into a concerted attempt to establish a technical school. The long delay can be explained by the constrained government resources, which would ultimately undo this attempt as well, but also by the administrative structure of the colony. Formally, the colony was administered by two councils, the Legislative and the Executive council. The latter was made up off the principal colonial administrators of the colony chaired by the governor. The legislative council consisted of the executive council supplemented by two or three unofficial members drawn from the population of the colony, usually from the wealthy mercantile elites.³⁰ Until the establishment of the Freetown municipality in the 1890s the colonial population could exercise little direct influence over the administration. However, in educational matters the importance of the churches on the board of education afforded an opportunity to wield influence over the policy making process.

Case as well as the aforementioned Ojukutu-Macauley spoke during the meeting of the board convened in September 1889 to discuss the technical school. Both men had acquired a substantial reputation as prominent artisans and leading men in the community. Ojukutu-Macauley restated the need to value skilled manual labour and deprecated the lack of appreciation for the crafts as follows:

“Now we must first understand what is meant by Technical Education. It is the manner of preparing the knowledge [...] or discipline of character in an individual.[...] The present state of our mechanics, demands the sympathy of the

²⁸ ‘An Industrial School’, *The Artisan*, 2 February 1887.

²⁹ ‘Professor J. Augustus Cole in America’, *The Artisan*, 16 July 1887.; A. Wyse, ‘Abayomi-Cole, J.A.’, in: L.H. Ofosu-Appiah, ed., *Dictionary of African Biography Volume 2* (Algonac, Michigan, 1979), 35-36

³⁰ Fyfe, *A History*, 318-322.

intelligent portion of our community[...] But it is a circumstance much to be lamented that on the contrary their labour and ability is being deprecated (hear hear). The only vocation that an intelligent boy could be placed to by his parents or guardians is either a Lawyer, doctor or minister or being apprentices in a mercantile establishment or in Her Majesty's Customs (loud cheers). The bad effect of which leads them in a few years to be unfit for positions of trust or usefulness."³¹

During the meeting the board resolved to form a committee to put forward a proposal towards a technical school. It was hoped that increasing the technical skill available in the colony would lead to economic development and the formation of local industry engaged in the processing of raw materials.³² An agreement was reached with the colonial government whereby the government would contribute £300 towards the project on the condition that £600 would be raised privately in support of the venture. The latter condition proved an insurmountable obstacle to the community, and the project once again foundered.³³

The continued absence of a strong trade union or a education system capable of effectively enforcing a licensing scheme for artisan occupations meant that master artisans continued to have a rather loose grip on the labour of their apprentices and journeymen. Discussion on the forming of an artisan trade union began again in the aftermath of a large strike of labourers in November and early December 1892. Ojukutu-Macaulay presided over a meeting of artisans, which adopted "important Resolutions relative to the prices at which payment for labour rendered should be obtained."³⁴ By 1896 there were unions for blacksmiths, shipwrights and carpenters. The unions came into conflict with the colonial government, when the colonial government began recruiting local apprentices and journeymen to work for the railway. Throughout the year the unions posted adjusted wage rates for the journeymen of their respective trades in a bid to regain control over their labour.³⁵

³¹ 'Industrial Education', *SLWN*, 5 October 1889, 6.

³² 'Technical and Industrial Education', *SLWN*, 5 October 1889, 6-7.

³³ Fyfe, *A History*, 526.

³⁴ 'The Labour Strike', *Sierra Leone Times*, 3 December 1892, 3.

³⁵ 'Carpenters Defensive Union', *Sierra Leone Times* 24 October 1896, 3.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the importance of education in early artisan trade union organisation in Sierra Leone between 1875 and 1895. Early artisan organisers such as Case proposed that the government take charge over the education and licensing of artisans in the colony in order to improve the quality of skilled work in the colony and restrict the supply of labour. These reforms were to have the effect of raising the social standing and economic conditions of the colony's artisans. While discussing the importance of education, artisans like Case and Ojukutu-Macauley critiqued elite conceptions of education. They had absorbed the focus on education omnipresent in their social environment, but then subverted it to support the artisans they sought to organise. Despite his critiques of elite education, Case also depended on, and sought, the support of the mercantile classes of Freetown. This project was aided by his participation in elite social circles.

Contestations over technical education served a dual function of raising the social standing of artisans, particularly master artisans, and to subjugate apprentices and journeymen to the authority of their masters. Shared concerns over the quality of the supply of skilled labour and the economic situation of the colony encouraged cooperation between the nascent trade union movement and mercantile organisations. This cooperation was aided by close personal ties cultivated between some prominent artisans and mercantile elites, as exemplified by Case's life. Yet, these organisations failed due to their lack of coherence. As a result, attempts to regulate the supply of labour through educational reforms largely failed in the two decades discussed in this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the central role education played in the early artisan trade union movement in Sierra Leone.

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