

# Elite persistence in Sierra Leone: what can names tell us?

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## ABSTRACT

A surge in interest in inequality dynamics around the world since the publication of Piketty's 'Capital in the twenty-first century' has brought questions of class and social mobility solidly back onto the academic research agenda. Sub-Saharan Africa has remained on the fringes of these inequality and social mobility debates, in part due to the dearth of data with which to measure these processes of social change. This data lacuna has also meant that the literature remains divided about whether or not African societies are comparatively mobile or sclerotic.

This study begins to chart some new ground by exploring whether and how name analysis research could be applied in African settings to enrich the study of social mobility. Name analysis has been used to powerful effect in countries as varied as the United Kingdom, Chile and India to study the level of overrepresentation of holders of historical elite names in contemporary elites (Clark, 2014). By studying the changing rate of at which the relative representation of these elite names converge with the mean, these authors estimate a rate of social mobility - or conversely - of elite persistence.

This study aims to adapt and apply the methods used by Clark (2014) and Clark and Cummins (2013) in one small West African country – Sierra Leone. Unlike many other African communities, Sierra Leoneans use family names that are passed down linearly from fathers to children. Names associated with chieftaincy and settlers allows us to examine how two elites empowered during the colonial era fared into the postcolonial period. Furthermore, a trove of easily accessible names lists allow us to explore how names of different character behave across different types of economic, social and political elites.

While Sierra Leone's history is unique in many ways, it combines a colonial history characterised by not atypical social cleavages (between the settlers and indigenous population, and between the Chiefly families and 'commoners'), with a succession of postcolonial shocks that might – hypothetically – have weakened the pre-existing social hierarchy. This makes it an interesting context in which to study elite reproduction.

Preliminary results suggest that people holding chiefly names are significantly overrepresented across both political, economic and professional elites, albeit declining over time. However, the overrepresentation is particularly marked in the political and 'rural' commercial sphere, and considerably weaker in the professions requiring high educational attainment. Krio names show the opposite pattern, with a rapidly decreasing foothold in politics after independence, but continued strong overrepresentation in the professions. This speaks to the enduring legacy of Sierra Leone's bifurcated colonial state, which merged a colony and protectorate with very different institutional structures and distinct and enduring elites.