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Articles

Indirect rule redux: the political economy of diamond mining and its relation to the Ebola outbreak in Kono District, Sierra Leone

Le retour de la « règle indirecte » : la politique économique de l'extraction de diamants et sa relation avec l'épidémie d'Ebola dans le district de Kono, au Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak and the political economy of diamond mining in Kono District, Sierra Leone. The authors argue that foreign companies have recycled colonial strategies of indirect rule to facilitate the

illicit flow of resources out of Sierra Leone. Drawing on field research conducted during the outbreak and in its aftermath, they show how this ‘indirect rule redux’ undermines democratic governance and the development of revenue-generation institutions. Finally, they consider the linkages between indirect rule and the Ebola outbreak, vis-à-vis the consequences of the region’s intentionally underdeveloped health care infrastructure and the scaffolding of outbreak containment onto the paramount chieftaincy system.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore la relation entre l’épidémie d’Ebola de 2014-2016 et la politique économique de l’extraction de diamants dans le district de Kono, au Sierra Leone. Les auteurs avancent que des entreprises étrangères ont recyclé les stratégies coloniales de la « règle indirecte » afin de faciliter le flux de ressources hors du Sierra Leone. S’appuyant sur de la recherche de terrain conduite pendant l’épidémie et après, il est démontré comment ce retour de la « règle indirecte » sape la gouvernance démocratique et le développement d’institutions qui génèrent du revenu. Enfin, cet article s’intéresse aux liens entre la « règle indirecte » et l’épidémie d’Ebola, vis-à-vis des conséquences de l’infrastructure de soins de santé intentionnellement sous-développée dans la région et les tentatives de confinement de l’épidémie pour le système essentiel de chefferie.

KEYWORDS:

Ebola | Sierra Leone | diamonds | neocolonialism | indirect rule | illicit financial flows

MOTS-CLÉS:

Ebola | Sierra Leone | diamants | néocolonialisme | règle indirecte | flux financiers illicites

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Notes

1 For a discussion of possible 'indigenous' pre-colonial governing institutions connected with the poro society (the male 'secret society' for many West African Mande ethnic groups that may have served as a check on the unilateral power of local chiefs), see Little 1965. The colonial authorities sought to suppress the influence of the poro and formally banned it in 1897. In certain ways, secret societies have now been subsumed into the paramount chieftaincy system and do bolster the power of paramount chiefs by endowing them with trappings of what might be termed a Weberian traditional authority (Weber 1964). However, secret societies also serve as semi-independent blocs that may balance the unilateral authority of paramount chiefs, and may be involved in the (exceedingly rare) cases in which paramount chiefs are deposed.

2 Note that the creation of the chieftaincy system in Krio-dominated Freetown followed a different history and, given that Freetown is not diamondiferous, is not the focus of our study.

3 To estimate the cost of a fully functional health system, we multiplied the population of Sierra Leone by the recommended minimum government health expenditure of US$86 per person (McIntyre and Meheus 2014).

Additional information

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