CHAPTER 3

Women Chiefs During the Nineteenth-Century Wars of Trade, Expansion, and State Building

The Queen would not listen to this, and said that if Cobah’s people were not given up to them her people had sworn to bring war against the people who had them. I told her that this must not be, and that she would be held responsible if the fence was [not] broken . . . she would not listen, she turned her face away and appears determined to let her people fight. She said that “the governor had tied their hands and allowed Darwah to come and flog them.”

—Statement by Queen Nyarroh of Bandasuma in a letter from Edmund Peel to Governor Samuel Rowe, December 20, 1885

One beautiful day in November 1981, I climbed into the front passenger seat of a rickety truck in the Bo Town lorry park and headed south to the amalgamated chiefdom of Jaiama-Bangor. Several people had advised me that the paramount chief there, B. A. Foday Kai, was an expert on Mende history and culture and welcomed outside researchers to interview him. Sitting on his veranda that afternoon in Telu, his quiet chiefdom headquarters town, he told me that if I was interested in women chiefs, I should know that five women with the title of manyahwa (big woman) had ruled Jaiama Chiefdom before 1900, and that their graves were still visible in a remote part of the chiefdom. I could hardly believe my ears. He said that the most well known titleholder, Mammy Nyahwa, who went by the English name Betty, was based at the old towns of Largo and Juhun, and that she had been reduced to vassal status by a war leader named Makaía, who had conquered the region in the late nineteenth century.

Back in the United States the next year, surrounded by shelf after shelf of bound volumes of British Parliamentary Papers in the University of Wisconsin's
Memorial Library stacks, I had one of those moments researchers live for when deep in the tiny print of a British colonial officer’s letter about Makaia, the name “Mammy Ma Nyahwa” popped up, a welcome documentary confirmation of the remembered oral history of Jaiama-Bangor’s chief historian.

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By the middle of the nineteenth century, as the Mende militantly expanded beyond their eighteenth-century heartland and war leaders came to dominate Mende and Sherbro’s politics, many women who had been heads of lineages, towns, and secret cultural association chapters lost a measure of their authority in favor of these new leaders. By the late nineteenth century, a period of endemic warfare and frequent conflicts had largely undercut the power of women who ruled solely as a result of their ritual power. Political power came to be vested in those who retained military power through the allegiance of armed men to defend them and bring war to their enemies. At the same time, the wives, daughters, and sisters of war leaders, gained power as a result of the new hierarchy. They were themselves an integral part of the pattern of warfare and alliance, and thus were uniquely poised to take advantage of new political configurations. The female relatives of the war leaders, together with their men, formed a nascent chiefly class, which in turn shaped later developments in institutions of female leadership. While many new avenues to power had opened up, women leaders of this period leveraged the long-standing gendered cultural role as mediators, even as they tapped new sources of authority and influence. The imposition of the so-called Pax Britannica at the end of the nineteenth century reopened avenues for women’s authority that had been weakened during the warfare.

The nineteenth-century extension of trade routes from the interior to the coast triggered competition for resources and an impetus toward state building as the people of the region sought to protect themselves from external enemies and take advantage of opportunities for new and expanded markets. During this tumultuous period, a pattern of warfare and military alliances for mutual defense came to dominate social, economic, and political life. The predominance of warfare forced changes in the institutions of political leadership that evolved as the people of the region adapted to the new social system. Before this expansionist period, Mende people were primarily organized by town, lineage, and cultural association, not by country—a political entity that only began to take shape in this period. With the coming of the wars, tiny nascent states were formed by war leaders who brought together networks of towns under their overlordship. These changes caused a shift in the power relations between the