CHAPTER 5

Women Chiefs in Building the Independent State

So hinda gbi le guamenti wa la ina we ndue gbekpe va le, ti waa le mu gama muse ma ke a mu ma gbé, mu lo ko hëi bu. Na ta ye kpalaa bla, tia be kaa.

So anytime the government intends to improve or bring any project in the area, then we, the chiefs, have to make it a point of duty to ensure that it happens.

—Paramount Chief Mamawa Benya, October 19, 1981

We drove up the road to the large compound on the other side of Blama’s town center in Attorney David Quee’s old blue Mercedes. Quee, a well-known Mende-speaking lawyer based in Freetown, had been assisting me by introducing me to people and helping me make contacts for my research. He had told me that we would be meeting the paramount chief of Small Bo Chiefdom, Madam Mamawa Benya (1935–96), a dynamic woman chief who might be interested in my work. We stopped in the driveway between the main house and the chief’s barri (roofed, open-sided courtyard) and someone went to call the chief. She came out—a heavyset woman of medium height wearing a traditional lappa (wrap skirt), half-length gown and head tie—and leaned over the concrete railing on her veranda. As Lawyer Quee explained in Mende who I was and what my purpose was, she and I regarded each other curiously. She listened attentively to Quee while looking at me closely, but warmly, with an amused smile on her face and a twinkle in her clear, knowing eyes. She spoke neither English nor Krio, so we could not talk to each other directly, and I could only imagine what she thought of this young, American woman so far from home on a mission to write a book about Mende women chiefs. She told Quee in Mende that she gave her permission for me to stay in the town for the next few months, and told us to buy a bag of rice, come back in a week’s time, and everything would be arranged. I was overjoyed that I would be staying with a woman chief and getting immersed in the Mende language. However, when I

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returned the next week, I was disappointed to learn that I would not be residing at her compound, but in another house in the town. She explained to the Mende friends accompanying me that I would be more comfortable staying in a home that was English-speaking, and indeed she was right. As I came to realize, her agreement to host me now made me her stranger and she my landlord. I had been incorporated in the way that chiefs had always incorporated strangers, and I was now expected to defer to her authority and inform her of my comings and goings from Small Bo. For her part, she was now going to protect me, assist me in my mission, and take responsibility for my health and comfort. This initial meeting in 1981 was the first of many, and the beginning of a relationship that continued until her death in 1996.

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After Sierra Leone gained independence from Great Britain in 1962, numerous women in the Southern and Eastern provinces held the office of paramount chief. As it had during the colonial era, their selection as chief continued to rest on earlier patterns of women’s leadership: descent from kinship groups identified as owners of the land, their public role as mediators in political conflicts, position in and approval by the secret societies. The methods and criteria for their selection as chief replicated the methods and criteria for selection of male chiefs, which had been outlined in the modern colonial state and which were carried over into the legal codes of independent Sierra Leone. Like male chiefs, female chiefs were considered *natural* rulers, who enjoyed the traditional prerogatives normally associated with chieftaincy; they also fulfilled the customary duties associated with the office. At the same time, the new era of competitive party politics brought both advantages and risks to women who were incumbent paramount chiefs. On one hand, some female chiefs adapted to the political opportunities of the 1960s and 1970s, took advantage of new sources of power available in modern electoral politics, and gained national and even international prominence. At other times, their party affiliations and party loyalties made them targets of state-sanctioned violence. In general, their strategies for gaining and retaining power in the independence and postindependence periods demonstrated the articulation of the prestate ritual authority wielded by women, the proto–state lineage hierarchy of the nineteenth century, and the control mechanisms of the modern nation-state.

One such leader was Paramount Chief Madam Mamawa Benya who came to office in 1961 as a young woman. During her reign as chief, she engaged with both the traditional challenges of the office and the newer challenges brought by post-independence politics and the economic pressures of the postcolonial