

# Paramount Chiefs: age, gender and cultural change in Salone

## PETER AND JANICE CLARK IN SIERRA LEONE

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Alex Maada Kainpum , who in his late 20s, is the youngest ever paramount chief in Sierra Leone is a member of the Grace Brethren Methodist Church, in the City Mission Circuit of Freetown. During the Covenant Service, the Rev Samuel Kanu asked that the paramount chief and his family receive the blessing of the church and its continuing prayers for this prestigious and crucial role in the cultural and political life of Sierra Leone.

Shortly before Christmas, there was a huge controversy when Elizabeth Simbiwa Sogbo-Tortu was barred from standing for election to become a Paramount Chief, because she is a woman. Both her father and grandfather had been paramount chiefs in the Niminyama chiefdom, close to the town of Kono, to which she was seeking election. With support from Women's groups and the Human Rights' Commission she has challenged this decision in court, claiming it is unconstitutional, as it discriminates against her on the grounds of gender. Female Paramount Chiefs have been elected in other parts of the country, but not, to date, in the Kono area, where the Poro Secret Society objects the possibility of a female paramount chief. The election has now been delayed until early 2010, in the hope that the "cultural" conflict can be resolved.

The position and role of paramount chiefs and their geographical chiefdoms were introduced under British colonial rule, and have gradually evolved over the centuries. Initially a chief was assisted by a chiefdom council and his responsibilities consisted of providing a safe environment in the chiefdom, resolving disputes, maintaining law and order, as well as patronizing secret societies in the chiefdom. The development continued with the coming of the indirect rule system of government by the British colonial administration with additional Titular Chiefs being used for local administration, collection of taxes and carrying out instructions from the governor general through the district commissioner. A recent report on chieftaincy, "Reform is Not against Tradition" \* is a vital contribution towards national re-construction . "Since the end of the civil war, there have been numerous changes in conception of development, governance, accountability, justice and human rights". The report acknowledges that failures in the chieftaincy system were among the roots causes of civil war, but that the message from the post war community is that ordinary people want to see the chieftaincy system reformed and not abolished.

Today, paramount chiefs are nonpartisan members of parliament, with 11 District Chiefs representing the districts excluding Freetown Districts. Unlike the 122 elected members of parliament (of which only 18 are women), the paramount chiefs are not governed by a term of office.

The tradition of national Government requires that the office of President and Vice President reflect the nation's religious plurality, with the offices being held by both Christian and a Muslim. The current

President, Ernest Bai Koroma, is a Christian, and the Vice President, Alhaji Samuel Sam-Sumana, is a Muslim. The continuing prayers of Grace Brethren Methodist Church for Paramount Chief, Alex Maada Kainpum, will undoubtedly be varied and may or not be influenced by the prayer used by Parliament. Almighty God, without whose help labour is useless, without whose light search is vain, we thy unworthy servants here gathered in thy name, do most humbly beseech thee to send down thy heavenly wisdom from above to direct and guide us in all our deliberations; and laying aside all private interests, prejudices and partial affection, the result of all counsels may be to the glory of thy Blessed Name.

In this inclusive prayer, it is acknowledged that invocation for light and enlightenment, is an aspirational symbol, a guiding light for the debates in plenary on matters of national importance. It will certainly be required in resolving the impasse on Elizabeth Simbiwa Sogbo-Tortu's rights as a legitimate candidate for the paramount chieftaincy of eastern Kono.#

\*Reform is not against Tradition: Making Chieftaincy Relevant in 21st Century Sierra Leone. Oct. 2009.

Co-commissioned by three national organisations, including the Methodist Church, and funded international aid agencies, including Christian Aid.

# <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8413266.stm>