

THE CONTROL OF SEASONAL BUSH FIRES IN SIERRA LEONE

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RESUMEN

Desde hace mucho tiempo, los incendios durante la estación seca en las regiones más áridas de Sierra Leone, forman parte integral de los sistemas agropecuarios y ecológicos de las sabanas. Sin embargo, en la actualidad, los incendios alcanzan una intensidad y una frecuencia alarmante. Debido a las grandes superficies cubiertas por los incendios y el tiempo transcurrido antes de que sean detectados, a veces son muy difíciles de controlar. Este artículo examina las reglas locales desarrolladas en el pasado por las comunidades rurales para controlar el uso del fuego. Muestra que dichas reglas están perdiendo su efectividad debido a la erosión del poder de los gobernadores tradicionales, y sugiere soluciones posibles para este problema.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans les régions les plus sèches de la Sierra Leone, les feux de brousse de la saison sèche font intégralement partie depuis longtemps des systèmes de culture et de l'écologie des savanes. Cependant, l'intensité et la fréquence des feux sont aujourd'hui une cause d'inquiétude. A cause des grandes distances couvertes par ces feux et des délais de détection, il est souvent difficile de les maîtriser. Ce document examine les réglementations locales développées dans le passé par les communautés rurales pour contrôler l'utilisation du feu. Il montre comment ceux-ci deviennent de moins en moins efficaces à mesure que le pouvoir des souverains traditionnels s'érode. Des solutions possibles pour répondre à ce problème sont présentées.

INTRODUCTION

In the drier regions of Sierra Leone, dry season bush fires have long been an integral part of the farming systems and ecology of the savannas. However, the intensity and frequency of fires today is a cause for concern. Due to the extensive distances covered by these fires and the time lapse in detection they are sometimes very difficult to bring under control. This paper looks at local rules developed by rural communities to control the use of fire in the past. It shows how these are becoming less effective as the power of the traditional rulers is being eroded. Possible solutions to this problem are suggested.

Chieftdom By-Laws Concerning the Use of Fire

Contrary to some opinion, rural communities in areas of high fire risk express serious concern over the deleterious effects of uncontrolled fires. In the past, this concern was translated into positive action through the formulation of local by-laws governing such matters as cooking times and the use of fire in land clearance and honey gathering.

These regulations over the use of fire are most stringent in high risk periods, that is, during the dry season months of November to April and at certain times of the day when dry season winds are at their strongest. In some villages where a majority of houses carry thatch roofs cooking is prohibited in the period between 12 noon and 5 pm. The town crier or local police normally check from house to house relying on the sighting of smoke as an indicator.

Burning regulations extend to the clearance of land for cultivation purposes. For instance, chieftdom records from Peje Bongre Chieftdom reveal that nobody is allowed to burn an upland rice farm alone. The farmer concerned should employ the services of at least five other men. The verbal regulation is silent on whether they should be adults or children. However, close friends and people cultivating adjoining parcels of land often come voluntarily or on purpose to protect their property. Also, there is often enough child labour to assist with pre-burning arrangements such as the preparation of lighting material (commonly bundles of thin strips of raffia palm — *Raphia vinefera*). Eating and drinking ceremonies which may follow such farm burning operations attract more than the ascribed number of assistants.

Similarly, honey gathering operations take place under the auspices of the family head who, as custodian of the family bushland, is often conversant with the location of the hives and of contiguous properties.

Penalties for the Misuse of Fire

Failing to raise an immediate alarm about a fire which cannot be handled alone potentially carries a heavier penalty than setting a fire and failing to control it. This is because if reported immediately, the responsibility for the fire is shared.

Penalties may include monetary fines. In the case of damage to plantations and property these are theoretically commensurate with the value of the property damaged. The limits of such fines are, however, influenced more by the Paramount Chief's limitation in terms of official mandate and above all by the relationship between the offender and offended in an extended family system. Generally such fines take the offenders earning power into consideration as well. Only

very serious cases get as far as the Paramount Chief. Otherwise the Section or Town Chiefs and the Elders are able to handle the case adequately. In the absence of formal written regulations, considerable flexibility and variation from chieftom to chieftom exists.

Other penalties may entail the provision of free labour by the offender to assist the offended in re-establishing the burnt plantation or rebuilding the burnt mud-and-wattle house. Thus a complex situation exists but the basic point is that most members of the community are involved in formulation and implementation of these by-laws so they are accepted by the majority. The imposition of penalties aside, since most members of the community possess permanent crop plots of one kind or other which are not insured against any kind of risk, personal interest often actually outweighs the existence of by-laws in controlling fires.

The Bush Fire Prevention Act

Formal legislation over the use and misuse of fire is embodied in an Act passed in 1920s. Sections of this Act which are relevant to this discussion run as follows:

7.(1) Any person whether in the areas prescribed as aforesaid¹ or elsewhere:

- (a) cutting, or causing to be cut, bush or timber or otherwise damaging any protective belt; or
- (b) carelessly setting fire to grass or bush; or
- (c) setting fire to grass or bush except for agriculture or other legitimate purpose; or
- (d) setting fire to grass or bush without first clearing the ground for a space of 12 feet round the area intended to be burnt; or
- (e) setting fire to grass or bush when a strong wind is blowing;

shall be guilty of an offence, and liable on summary conviction thereof to a fine not exceeding ten pounds or to imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for a period not exceeding three months.

This act, which was entrusted on the then Provincial Commissioners, empowered the police and local leaders to arrest persons transgressing the law. However, this has hardly ever happened in practice for a number of reasons. Regular police officers (employed and paid from central government funds) concentrate on assault, accident and theft cases, while chieftom police take responsibility for what happens within the Chieftom. As already indicated, at this level, control over the use of fire was dealt with through other means.

The Forest Department was not originally involved in the implementation of these Acts which fall

¹ Protected belts. These were actually demarcated in most of the twelve districts of the former colony.

within the purview of the Ministry of Interior. Since the 1940s, the Forest Department has concentrated instead on fire control measures in plantations, through the use of early burning techniques and the clearing of fire breaks. Another important reason why the Bush Fire Prevention Act has not been effective is because it has never been effectively communicated or translated for the benefit of society.

Ways Forward

In many rural areas of Sierra Leone a situation exists today whereby the chiefdom by-laws are much less effective than they used to be. In addition, there are no means to implement the Bush Fire Prevention Act.

The power of the traditional rulers to enforce chiefdom by-laws seem to have been seriously eroded in the current political structure. This tends to give local members of parliament more authority in chiefdom matters than the Paramount Chiefs. The Chiefs thus have difficulty in implementing by-laws without intervention from above, and cases which were originally settled by them have been taken over by the police, thereby further eroding their powers. Chiefs also feel strongly that their subjects tend to be less loyal to them than in the past. Some youths in particular refuse to pay fines and abscond. Visitors and people passing through the area in vehicles, over whom they have little control, may be also responsible for starting fires.

In order to resolve this problem, central government needs to cooperate and collaborate with local government in fostering grassroot level legislation. In effect, this means that District Officers should be instructed to assist the Paramount Chiefs in implementing fire prevention by-laws appropriate to their chiefdom. Some recognition may need to be given in government law to the traditional by-laws if only by mentioning the important role of the Chiefs, but the most important aspect is the implementation of their regulations without fear or favour. In support of this, the Ministries of Education and Information should publicize such innovations through appropriate media.

It is especially important to involve young people in this. Village youth leagues, where they exist, could be given the mandate to tackle fires, or other groups comprising mostly young people and a few elders could be set up. Members of such brigades may be exempted from local tax or communal work as an incentive to take this responsibility seriously.

These matters also need to be addressed in the Forestry Action Plan which is currently being drawn up in Sierra Leone. A specific project proposal which has been put forward in the inter-agency forestry sector review document is titled 'Development of Fire Control in Northern Region' which is aimed at assessing the extent of and main reasons for uncontrolled burning in the savanna regions and how to solve the problem through education, by application of law through local authorities, and physical protection measures.

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