

The Removal of 'Lunatics' from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s

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Introduction

Britain once held the four colonies of Nigeria, the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), Sierra Leone, and the Gambia in West Africa. Of these British West African colonies, Sierra Leone was the first to open a facility in which those who were officially certified as 'lunatics' were detained, also known as a lunatic asylum. In the mid-19th century, Sierra Leone opened a lunatic asylum in Kissy, located on the outskirts of the capital of Freetown, after which lunatics not only from Sierra Leone but the other British West African colonies were transferred to the Kissy Asylum. However, the transfer of lunatics from British West African colonies other than Sierra Leone to the Kissy Asylum almost completely stopped following the

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opening of lunatic asylums in the Gold Coast in the late 1880s and in Nigeria in the first decade of the 1900s. In contrast, the Gambia continued to send its lunatics to the Kissy Asylum until it finally established its own asylum just before the outbreak of the Second World War.

The objective of this paper is to examine the actual circumstances of the transfer of lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone during the colonial period, with a primary focus on the 1930s, just before the start of the Second World War. More specifically, in this paper, I will refer to government documents of the Colonial Office (CO) and colonial governments that I have collected at the National Archives (NA) in London, U.K., and in the National Archives of Sierra Leone (NASL) in Freetown, Sierra Leone, as appropriate to illuminate the reality of the scale and procedure of the transfer of lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s.

It should be noted that 'Elder Dempster and the Transport of Lunatics in British West Africa.' (Heaton 2016) has already discussed the transfer of lunatics in British West Africa. However, this paper analyses in detail the role played by Elder Dempster, which was a shipping company that operated ocean liners between the U.K. and British West Africa, in the 'transport' of lunatics. Meanwhile, in the present paper, I focus on the 'removal' of lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s, and I will investigate the legal systems in place for moving lunatics out of the colonies, the scale of transfer of lunatics, and specific cases.

1. Ordinances relating to lunatics and their removal

The Gambia was once a thin and narrow British colony along the Gambia River, officially known as the Colony and Protectorate of the Gambia. The estimated population of the colony in the mid-1930s was just under 200,000, and its capital of Bathurst had a population of just 14,000–15,000 (Brown 1938: 3). It was only in 1939, when the Second World War broke out, that a detention facility exclusively for lunatics called the Observation Home was built in the Gambia, and its operation actually commenced in 1940 (The Gambia 1940: 7). Prior to this, suspected lunatics in the Gambia were temporarily detained in prisons, hospitals, or the Home for the Infirm, and if their symptoms did not subsequently improve, they were officially certified as lunatics (i.e., certified lunatic). Since there were still no detention facilities exclusively for lunatics in the Gambia, such individuals were transferred to the U.K. if they were European, and to the Kissy Asylum in Sierra Leone by boat if they were of West African origin.

The Gambia during the colonial period had two major ordinances relating to the treatment of such lunatics. The first is the Lunatics' Detention Ordinance of 1917. In this 1917 Ordinance, Article 3 stipulated that suspected lunatics were officially recognized as lunatics by order of the Judge of the Supreme Court, Police Magistrate, or two Justices of the Peace, as well as by two certificates of lunacy by two doctors; and were to be detained in 'a place of detention' stipulated by the Governor. Furthermore, Article 4 stipulated that if a Senior Medical Officer or a substitute

determined the matter urgent, then their signed certificate of emergency alone would suffice for detaining the suspected lunatic for up to seven days without any court involvement. The maximum detention period of the suspected lunatic by this emergency certificate was stipulated by law as up to seven days, but in reality this period was easily extended at the doctor's discretion depending on the need and situation.

Incidentally, in other British West African colonies such as the Gold Coast, District Commissioners and Magistrates were given the authority to detain suspected lunatics for the purposes of observation for a period not exceeding one month without a doctor's certificate (Brown 1938b: 19-20). However, in the Gambia, although it was permitted to detain suspected lunatics for up to seven days with only a doctor's emergency certificate, conversely, it was not legally permitted to detain suspected lunatics for the purpose of observation at the discretion of the government or judiciary without a doctor's certificate.

The second is the Lunatics' Removal Ordinance of 1904. In this 1904 Ordinance, Article 4 gave the Governor the authority to transfer West African natives who were lunatics to the colony in Sierra Leone. It was stipulated that such transfers must be accompanied by the following: (1) a removal order of the Governor in the Gambia, (2) a medical certificate jointly signed by Medical Officers, and (3) a guarantee that the colonial government of the Gambia would undertake to cover the costs of transfer of the lunatic and their stay in the asylum (Brown 1938a: 5).

Incidentally, Article 2 of the 1904 Ordinance stipulated that non-

African lunatics such as Europeans could be ordered to be transferred to the U.K. by the Supreme Court instead of the Governor as necessary. In contrast, there were no clear rules regarding the transfer of African lunatics from other than West Africa. It was stipulated that non-African certified lunatics, mainly Europeans, were first to be transferred to the U.K. by order of the Supreme Court; and West African certified lunatics were to be transferred to Sierra Leone by order of the Governor. In contrast, the legal underpinnings of and procedures for the international transfer authority of African certified lunatics from other than West Africa were ambiguous, likely due to the extreme rarity of cases of African lunatics from other than West Africa in the Gambia at the time.

The 1917 and 1904 Ordinances of the Gambia thus relied upon the medical examinations of doctors – often colonial medical officers – to temporarily detain suspected lunatics based on only the medical judgment of the emergency certificate. Afterwards, when the suspected lunatic was officially recognized as a certified lunatic by the judiciary under another medical judgment of the certificate of lunacy, then the individual was transferred to the U.K. by order of the Supreme Court if they were European (i.e., non-African) and to the Kissy Asylum in Sierra Leone by order of the Governor if they were West African. In the Gambia in the 1930s, when there were still no lunatic asylums or observation homes, prisons located in the outskirts of Bathurst at the time were often used as detention sites for suspected lunatics. However, if the lunatic was significantly debilitated due to some other illness, then they were either directly

detained in a hospital or the Home for the Infirm instead of a prison, or temporarily detained in a prison and then transferred to a hospital or home for the infirm.

Next, I take a look at the scale of the transfer of West African certified lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s.

2. The scale of the removal of lunatics

In the approximately half-year period from April to October 1936, the British psychiatrist Robert Cunyngham Brown visited four British West African colonies, including the Gambia, at the request of the U.K. Colonial Office. The objective of this visit was to conduct a survey on the care and treatment of lunatics.

Table 1, drawn from the report of Brown’s survey in 1936, shows the treatment of lunatics in the Gambia.

Table 1 The Treatment of Lunatics in the Gambia (1932–1936)

Year	Admitted to Prison under Emergency Certificate	Discharged, no further action. Not certified	Transferred to Home for the Infirm	Transferred to Hospital	Died in Prison	Transferred to Kissy Asylum	Remaining in Kissy Asylum
1932	15	9	1	0	1	4	12
1933	6	2	1	0	1	2	10
1934	8	2	4	1	0	1	9
1935	13	11	0	0	0	2	11
1936	10	6	0	0	0	4	10
Total	52	30	6	1	2	13	

Note: Values in 1936 were up to 27 August.
Source: Brown (1938a: 6).

According to Table 1, in the Gambia, during the approximately 4-year-8-month period from 1 January 1932 to 27 August 1936, 52 suspected lunatics were temporarily detained in prison based on an emergency certificate. Of these, 30 (57.7%) were discharged without final certification as a lunatic, 6 (11.5%) were transferred to the Home for the Infirm due to the need for special care, 1 (1.9%) was transferred to a hospital for medical treatment, and 2 (3.8%) died in prison; in contrast, 13 (25%) were transferred to the Kissy Asylum in Sierra Leone as a certified lunatic. Even at the time of Brown's visit to the Gambia (October 1936), 10 certified lunatics who were transferred from the Gambia were detained in the Kissy Asylum (Brown 1938a: 3, 6).

The period during which such lunatics were detained in prisons due to emergency certificates until they were discharged, transferred to a hospital, or transferred to Sierra Leone ranged from a minimum of 2 days to a maximum of 15 weeks, though on average it was less than 3 weeks. However, among those who were officially certified as lunatics and transferred to Sierra Leone, the detention period in prisons ranged between 2 and 13 weeks due to the time required for transfer procedures, with an average of 8 weeks (Brown 1938a: 7).

Such data show that the annually, only a few suspected lunatics were detained in a prison based on an emergency certificate in the Gambia, a British colony with a small population – around 15 people. Furthermore, of these, about 60% on average were temporarily detained for approximately several weeks, after which their symptoms stabilized or improved and they were allowed to be

discharged. In contrast, those who were officially certified as lunatics based on the 1917 Ordinance and transferred to the Kissy Asylum in Sierra Leone based on the 1904 Ordinance only numbered one to four people each year. Even so, in the 1930s, the Kissy Asylum in Sierra Leone almost always detained an average of about 10 lunatics who had been transferred from the Gambia.

Such lunatics from the Gambia who were detained in the Kissy Asylum were forced to live a lonely life of detention in the closed-off facility of the asylum in Sierra Leone, a foreign land where the lunatic had almost no relatives or connection with the land, and while suffering from various symptoms of mental illness such as hallucinations (Brown 1938a: 9). In many cases, the Kissy Asylum in Sierra Leone became the so-called final resting place of such lunatics transferred from the Gambia, living out their lives there without remission or return to their homeland.

Next, I will look at specific cases of lunatics who were transferred to the Kissy Asylum in Sierra Leone from the Gambia in the 1930s.

3. Some Cases

The National Archives of Sierra Leone in Freetown contain many originals or copies of letters or telegrams between the colonial governments of the Gambia and Sierra Leone regarding the transfer of lunatics during the colonial period. Most of these fall under the category of CSO, referring to the 'Colonial Secretary's Office' of the colonial government of Sierra Leone.

According to the CSO documents of the National Archives of

Sierra Leone, the transfer of certified lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s usually began with a single telegram from the Colonial Secretary of the Gambia to the Colonial Secretary of Sierra Leone. For example, in the case of the male criminal lunatic DN,¹ on 19 July 1935, the Acting Colonial Secretary of the Gambian colonial government sent a telegram to the Colonial Secretary of the Sierra Leonean colonial government, which stated, 'Can you please accommodate one male criminal lunatic at Kissy if so he will leave by steamer July 25th.'² Then, on 23 July, the removal order by the Governor, one medical certificate, and two certificates of lunacy were prepared as stipulated by the 1917 and 1904 Ordinances of the Gambia, as well as a guarantee stating that the Gambian colonial government promised to cover all costs associated with the transferee in Sierra Leone.³ Afterwards, DN left Bathurst via steamer on 25 July, being detained at the Kissy Asylum on 27 July. However, DN died in Kissy just one month later on 27 August.⁴

Such cases as that of DN, in which a lunatic transferred from the Gambia to Sierra Leone died shortly after being detained at the Kissy Asylum, appears to have been a common occurrence in the 1930s. For example, the Gambian certified lunatic DB was detained in the Kissy Asylum on 21 July 1934 but died approximately one month later on 30 August.⁵ Additionally, the male lunatic KJ, who was transferred from the Gambia and detained in the Kissy Asylum on 7 January 1933, died half a year later on 15 July, 1933.⁶ Their individual causes of death were not clear. However, the mortality rate of individuals admitted in the Kissy Asylum in the 1930s was generally high, and a court that saw this as problematic reported in

a survey conducted in the late 1930s that 'pneumonia and pleurisy seemed to figure prominently.'⁷

Many lunatics who were transferred from the Gambia to Sierra Leone lost nearly all contact with their family and acquaintances in the Gambia. However, some of the family members remaining in the Gambia of those transferred to Sierra Leone made efforts to determine the status of their relatives detained at the Kissy Asylum through the Gambian colonial government.

For example, on 26 May 1934, the Colonial Secretary of the Gambia sent a public message to the Colonial Secretary of Sierra Leone that a relative of a Gambian male lunatic SN, who was detained in the Kissy Asylum, wanted to know the status of their relative.⁸ In response, on 14 June 1934, the Colonial Secretary of Sierra Leone responded in writing to the Gambian colonial government, while directly citing the following report from the Director of Medical and Sanitary Services.

I have to inform you that since his admission to the Kissy Asylum the patient SN has improved slightly. At first he was very troublesome and potentially dangerous; he is now more reasonable in obeying asylum routine and eats and sleeps well, and has not been violent.

At times he destroys his clothing and has delusions of people talking to him. He has not been ill since his admission and on the whole his general health is good; but his mental state does not yet warrant his discharge.⁹

However, on 26 June 1935, approximately one year after this document was written, SN died in the Kissy Asylum, like many other lunatics who were transferred from the Gambia, never reuniting with his Gambian family members, who held him in their thoughts. Ultimately, SN was detained in Kissy Asylum for two years and three days.¹⁰

As a general rule, the Gambian colonial government had to bear the full costs of the residence at the Kissy Asylum of lunatics who were transferred to Sierra Leone. It would not have been legally possible even to transfer the certified lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone without such a financial guarantee from the Gambian colonial government. However, there were frequently non-Gambian West Africans among the certified lunatics who were transferred from the Gambia to Sierra Leone. In the case of such non-Gambians, the Gambian colonial government covered the initial cost of residence in the Kissy Asylum but would ask either the colonial government of the lunatics' origin or the lunatics' families to cover the cost of residence.

For example, in January 1933, the male lunatic OD was transferred from the Gambia to Sierra Leone and detained in the Kissy Asylum. OD was a single man aged around 37 years at the time of detention, and he was diagnosed with mania. OD was originally from the town of Kano in northern Nigeria, where he was born to a Sierra Leonean father and Nigerian mother. When he was five, he was entrusted to his aunt RL, who lived in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Afterwards, his father died, and he lost contact with his mother. OD was involved in water transportation in inland Sierra

Leone and he immigrated to the Gambia in 1921, where he joined the Gambia Police Force, and after his discharge he was said to have been employed by the Public Works Department of the Gambian colonial government.¹¹

In the case of OD, who was originally born in northern Nigeria, lived in Sierra Leone from around the age of five, and immigrated to the Gambia once an adult, where he developed mental illness, the Gambian colonial government covered the initial costs of transferring OD to Sierra Leone. However, the Gambian colonial government first requested the Sierra Leonean colonial government to cover the financial cost on the basis that OD was not a Gambian but rather a Nigeria-born individual who grew up in Sierra Leone. In response, the Sierra Leonean colonial government contacted OD's aunt RL and requested her to pay for the cost of residence at Kissy Asylum, but she refused to pay. Therefore, the Sierra Leonean colonial government, on behalf of the Gambian colonial government, then contacted the Nigerian colonial government and requested that they agree to pay for the cost of residence at Kissy Asylum, and if not, asked whether they were prepared to detain OD in a lunatic asylum in Nigeria.¹² In response, the Nigerian colonial government refused either to cover the cost of residence at Kissy Asylum or to detain OD in a Nigerian asylum, on the basis that it could not be confirmed that OD was from Kano.¹³

This issue of the cost of residence of lunatics at the Kissy Asylum was of some importance to at least the Gambian colonial government, and the CSO documents of the National Archives of Sierra Leone included several other documents between the

Gambian and Sierra Leonean colonial governments over such issues of who was to bear the cost.

For example, there is the male lunatic AP, aged around 40 years, who was transferred from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in July 1932 and detained in the Kissy Asylum. He was born in Sierra Leone, immigrated to the Gambia as an adult, and temporarily enlisted in the Gambia Police Force, but was discharged due to health reasons, after which he worked as a baker. In a document to the Sierra Leonean colonial government in 1 August 1932, the Acting Colonial Secretary of the Gambia stated the following: 'Having regard to the fact that AP is a native of Sierra Leone and that he has lived the major portion of his life in his native country, I am to suggest that it would be reasonable and fair if, after the first six months of AP's detention, the liability for his maintenance thereafter be assumed by the Sierra Leone Government.'¹⁴ However, AP died while detained in the Kissy Asylum only five days after this document was written, on 6 August 1932. Therefore, the cost of his residence no longer was an issue between the two colonial governments.¹⁵

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided an overview of the transfer of lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s largely with reference to colonial administrative documents in the colonial era that were stored in the National Archives of the U.K. and Sierra Leone. In the Gambia in the 1930s, the annual number of suspected lunatics who were detained in prisons in the outskirts of Bathurst based on

doctor's emergency certificates ranged from several to around 15 people, but over half of these people saw their symptoms either stabilize or improve and were allowed to be discharged. However, suspected lunatics whose symptoms did not improve or who were at risk of harm to the self or others even after prison detention were ultimately officially certified as lunatics by a judicial decision based on certificates of lunacy, and if the lunatics were West African in origin, they were transferred to Sierra Leone by order of the Governor. The number of certified lunatics who were transferred to Sierra Leone was just a few people every year. Even so, throughout the 1930s, there were almost always around 10 lunatics from the Gambia who were detained at the Kissy Asylum in Sierra Leone. Many such lunatics from the Gambia were denied almost all opportunities for contact with family or acquaintances once transferred to Sierra Leone. It is thought that many such lunatics died in the Kissy Asylum after at most a few years of detention.

This paper's discussion of the transfer of lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s has one serious omission, or rather, an important flaw that cannot be overlooked. This is the omission of the voices of the lunatics transferred from the Gambia to Sierra Leone and their family members, and the fact that hardly any such voices are included in this paper's discussion is a serious flaw. Of course, such omissions and flaws derive from the fact that this paper's discussion relies exclusively on the administrative documents of the colonial authorities. The lunatics and their families are almost entirely objectified as subjects in the broad sense of the administrative measure of transfer in the administrative documents

housed in the National Archives that were used in this paper. Although it was not the case that the thoughts and desires of the lunatics and their families were completely ignored or not considered at all, as previously mentioned, neither were they prioritized. What was of major interest to the colonial authorities was which colonial government would cover the cost of residence of the lunatics in the Kissy Asylum, for example; of less interest were the issues faced by the transferred lunatics or their families.

However, any description and analysis of the transfer of lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone cannot be complete without discussing it from the perspectives of the lunatics or their families, such as how the transferred lunatic perceived and responded to their own transfer or how their family members felt about the transfer of their relative and how much they worried over their relative, or alternatively, how much relief they felt over their transfer. Needless to say, this is because the 'transferred' lunatic is a 'transfer stakeholder' in a similar vein as the 'transferring' colonial government, and because family members are strongly interested in this transfer and are important parties who are sometimes greatly impacted by such a transfer.

That being said, it is no easy task to find the voices of lunatics who were transferred from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s or of their families from the historical documents. Given the current historical constraints, such a task may be next to impossible. However, a discussion of the transfer of lunatics from the Gambia to Sierra Leone in the 1930s cannot be fully explored without such an attempt. For the time being, I would like to leave this important

work as a future task.

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Archives

The National Archives (NA), London, U.K.

The National Archives of Sierra Leone (NASL), Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Notes

- 1 In this paper, the names of lunatics and their families are given as

- initials, including in parts that are directly cited from historical documents, with a view to human rights protection.
- 2 Acting Colonial Secretary, The Gambia, to Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, 19 July 1935, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 3 Acting Colonial Secretary, The Gambia, to Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, 23 July 1935, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 4 Acting Director of Medical and Sanitary Services, Sierra Leone, to Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, 29 August 1935, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 5 Acting Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, to Colonial Secretary, The Gambia, 3 September 1934, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 6 Acting Director of Medical and Sanitary Services, Sierra Leone, to Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, 18 July 1933, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 7 Acting Chief Justice, Sierra Leone, to Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, 2 September 1939, NASL CSO M/83/39.
 - 8 Colonial Secretary, The Gambia, to Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, 26 May 1934, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 9 Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, to Colonial Secretary, The Gambia, 14 June 1934, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 10 Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, to Colonial Secretary, The Gambia, 29 June 1935, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 11 Acting Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, to Chief Secretary, Nigeria, 18 March 1933, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 12 Acting Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, to Chief Secretary to the Government, Nigeria, 18 March 1933, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 13 Chief Secretary to the Government, Nigeria, to Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, 4 May 1933, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 14 Acting Colonial Secretary, The Gambia, to Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, 1 August 1932, NASL CSO M/47/31.
 - 15 Colonial Secretary, Sierra Leone, to Colonial Secretary, The Gambia, 22 August 1932, NASL CSO M/47/31.