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# Brokers of citizenship. Justices of the peace as intermediaries in Sierra Leone's digital identification project

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## ABSTRACT

Like many countries in the Global South, Sierra Leone has recently embarked on the biometric identification of its citizens and residents in the aim to achieve 'legal identity for all' (Sustainable Development Goal 16.9). Given their limited access to documentation, many people rely on self-reporting or recommendations in the registration process. Based on ethnographic research, this article examines the work of Justices of the Peace to deliver affidavits (documented oaths) as a central avenue for the biometric enrollment of undocumented, often-marginalized citizens in Sierra Leone's civil register. Their case suggests that intermediaries between the digitizing state and citizens indeed work as 'brokers of citizenship', because beyond only certifying citizenship, their intermediation brings citizenship in four different meanings into being. They provide crucial orientation on the meaning of citizenship, fix citizens' identities, perform their own understandings of citizenship with potentially exclusionary effects and distribute responsibility for citizenship claims along a wider citizenship infrastructure.

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## 1. Introduction

'Go get an affidavit!', registration officers frequently ordered people who wanted to enroll as citizens in Sierra Leone's recently established digital civil register and had no documents to show. A puzzled look on the client's face was usually followed by a further explanation 'Go see a Justice of the Peace!' and the mentioning of an urban landmark where to find one. Justices of the Peace (JP) delivered 'affidavits' (documented oaths) to Sierra Leoneans if they had insufficient documents to prove their identity. Over five months, I joined nine JPs in their 'street-level' offices. Most worked from a small table with benches on the curb, stacked with forms, pens and stamps and only protected from the elements by a plastic-enforced umbrella.

While we were settling in one morning, a middle-aged woman, accompanied by another woman, addressed the JP and his clerks. She asked for an affidavit to enroll in the civil register and obtain the recently introduced digital identity (ID) card. The clerk kindly asked her: 'You got ID?' She declined. He took out a form and continued in the

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lingua franca Krio: ‘Watin na you name?’ He wrote down her response and continued: ‘Where do you live?’ She gave the name of a village in the Western Area. He prompted: ‘Where exactly?’ Hesitatingly, the woman added ‘maize field’. He wrote it down in the address field. Her indicated date and place of birth prompted no further questioning. Upon completing the writing, the clerk dipped her right thumb in ink to fingerprint the signature field of the declarant. He then handed the form over to the JP who pressed his stamp, fiercely safeguarded by himself, on it and signed it. In exchange for 20 Leones, about 1 Euro, the clerk gave her the form and calmly oriented her to the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) office to register. He added: ‘Tell them the same details you gave me here’ (F13)<sup>1</sup>.

This rather smooth transaction made the client ‘legible’ (Scott 1998) to the state by turning social markers like the maize field into an official address and identity. But beyond producing legibility, such interactions are indeed ‘interfaces’ (Dalberto and Banégas 2021, 13) between the digitizing state and underdocumented, often-marginalized citizens where identities and their social and political uses are negotiated along a ‘long chain of intermediaries’ (ibid.). Alongside traditional and local authorities, JPs have played a crucial role in facilitating the inclusion of over six million underdocumented citizens into Sierra Leone’s civil register. As a legacy from British colonialism, JPs are appointed by the President of the Republic to preside over people’s oaths. Chosen for their good character and authority in their community, they are usually legal laypeople and charge informal fees for their services. Beyond Sierra Leone, affidavits by JPs or similar authorities are used in other postcolonial civil registration systems in Nigeria (Makannah 1981, 10), Rwanda (Harbitz and Hubbard 2021, 50), South Africa (ibid., 64) and Myanmar (Rhoads et al. 2025, 8). Their role in preparing digital identification procedures, despite its prominence in Sierra Leone, has not yet been explored.

Based on the case of JPs, this article examines such intermediaries for their role in performing citizenship. Research has so far centered on their role in facilitating the service delivery of digital identification (Chaudhuri 2019; cf.; Dalberto and Banégas 2021; Singh 2024) and only recently started exploring how their work ‘touches on the very foundations of citizenship’ (Banégas and Cutolo 2024, 236). Building on the concept of performative citizenship (Isin 2017, 2019), this article frames such intermediaries at the interface between the digitizing state and underdocumented people as ‘brokers of citizenship’. Beyond merely formalizing citizenship claims, they bring citizenship into being by establishing an understanding of who is a citizen and what it means to be a citizen in terms of rights, duties and one’s performance.

This article identifies four ways how JPs and other brokers of citizenship enact citizenship. First, they offer consultation on the meaning of citizenship and the often-unspoken expectations, rights and duties that clients need to conform to. Second, by materially backing identity claims, brokers of citizenship engage in fixing citizens’ identities in a context of often-fluid social identities. Third, they perform their own understanding of who is a citizen with potentially exclusionary effects. Fourth, brokers of citizenship attribute responsibility for citizenship claims along a wider citizenship infrastructure.

Following an anthropological interest in the negotiations of digital identification from above and below (Dalberto and Banégas 2021), the research draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Sierra Leone in 2024–2025. The data consists of participant observation with

JP teams and inside NCRA offices as well as interviews with different stakeholders in the capital Freetown and the district capitals Bo and Koidu.

The article first introduces the concept of brokers of citizenship (2.) and situates JPs in Sierra Leone's digital identification project (3.). The empirical analysis then spells out the four dimensions of brokering citizenship (3.1–3.4). The discussion draws conclusions for future conceptual work on brokers of citizenship (4.).

## 2. Materials and methods

The JPs are an example of the 'invisible yet inevitable' (Chaudhuri 2019, 572) human intermediation in digital identity systems, despite their promise to directly link people, their bodies and official identities and thus eliminate intermediaries and their possibly corrupt or discriminatory practices.

Intermediaries remain an important 'interface' (Dalberto and Banégas 2021) where digital identification practices 'from above' and those 'from below', the manifold social performances of identity, get aligned (Banégas and Cutolo 2024). When marginalized people do not possess the documentary proofs needed, brokers can – usually against informal fees – take the additional efforts needed and bridge different social positions and practices to facilitate their enrolment (Singh 2024). Straddling an ethically fraught terrain, they make the technology work during the last-mile delivery and help users navigate issues of updating or verifying their identities (Chaudhuri 2019). While they thereby buffer, and thus protect, clients from the often-distant and feared postcolonial African state (Banégas and Cutolo 2024), brokers also risk further entrenching inequalities (Pommerolle 2021; Chambers 2025). Once the registration is completed, their work gets invisibilized (Singh 2024).

The research on intermediaries in digital identification technologies has only started addressing the citizenship dimension of their work. When people draw on self-reported documents like affidavits, they may claim their citizen rights for accessing state services when the state does not provide them with papers upon birth (Cooper 2012). In their seminal study on Côte d'Ivoire, Banégas and Cutolo (2024, 252f.) showed how informal document brokers (the *margouillats*) were 'ambiguous "gatekeepers" of national citizenship', because they demarcated the moral boundaries of citizenship. They might refrain from backing foreigners' citizenship claims or extort money from them with impunity.

Taking this citizenship perspective on intermediaries as a starting point, this article conceptualizes how their brokerage contributes to defining who is a citizen and what it means to be a citizen. As 'brokers of citizenship', they interface between the digitizing state and (non-)citizens and thus mediate different data practices (biometric enrolment, data updating, certification) that enact people as citizens. Far beyond merely facilitating the service delivery or formalizing citizenship, such brokers bring citizenship into being in – as I detail below – at least four different ways.

This argument follows a perspective of 'performative citizenship' (Isin 2017, 2019) that nuances a legalistic reading of citizenship as the formal rights and obligations a person holds in a polity (Isin 2017, 511). Both paper citizens and non-citizens engage in acts of claiming and contesting rights and thereby bring citizenship in its multiple meanings into being (ibid., 505). These acts are rarely spectacular protests, but rather everyday mumblings of 'I am a citizen' (Isin and Ruppert 2020, x) in spaces like the JP tables. Here,

people attach meaning to rights and thus enact the ‘right to claim rights’ (Isin 2017, 505) and a future ‘citizenship-yet-to-come’ (Isin 2019, 52). In such acts, people transform the meaning of citizenship, the rights and duties they claim and the relational subject positions of citizens and non-citizens (Isin 2017, 507f.).

A performative citizenship approach to brokerage shifts the attention to the practices of contesting and claiming rights that brokers engage in when they mediate between (non-)citizens and the digitizing state. While Isin’s theory has largely been used to examine people’s own claims-making, its underlying relational understanding of citizenship always includes those processing others’ citizenship claims. They may devalue the other as ‘outsider’, ‘stranger’ or ‘alien’ and thus maintain citizenship as a differentiating institution that grants them certain resources while excluding the other (ibid., 504, 508). Intermediaries decide whether to take up people’s citizenship claims, materially transform them into the official language of the state (Isin 2019, 52) and feed them into the administration. But they also make their own claims about how citizens should act, how they should carry their identity and who is responsible for recognizing them as citizens.

The performative citizenship approach grants flexibility for analyzing (postcolonial) polities like Sierra Leone, because it does not presuppose democracy and the existence of the ‘Euro-American institution’ of citizenship (Isin 2017, 512). Rather than deriving the rights and obligations of citizenship from the black letter text of laws, it examines empirically how multiple actors practice and imagine citizenship. In ‘partly free’ polities like Sierra Leone (Freedom House 2025), people might rarely take to the streets. Instead, they may claim rights inside associations and solidarity networks, by re-assembling traditions or strategically using the law (Isin 2017, 512–517).

Nevertheless, Sierra Leone has seen important citizenship controversies. Its laws limit birthright citizenship to those with a parent or grandparent of ‘negro African descent’ born in the country or holding its paper citizenship (Khan 2021, 11). Those excluded, notably the powerful ‘Lebanese’ minority, have mobilized against this clause for decades (Manby 2018, 164–176). Citizenship is further differentiated in practice along notions of indigeneity and ethnicity. This particularly targets ethnic Fulani (Jalloh 2018), Creole descendants of freed slaves (Manby 2018, 172), borderland ethnicities and descendants of Black African immigrants (Hale and M’Cormack-Hale 2018). These exclusions despite the formal citizenship law hint at the privileges tied to citizenship in this resource-rich country, notably access to land, business ownership and political office (ibid.).

Based on my research, I identify four ways in which brokers enact citizenship in this contested context. First, they offer consultation on the meaning of citizenship, its rights and duties. When clients approach them with insecurities on interacting with the administration, they share their interpretation of statist imaginaries of the ‘model citizen’ (Dubois 2010) and how they should perform in the registration office.

Second, brokers of citizenship may back people’s rights claims by ‘doing rights with things’ (Isin 2019) and thereby fix their often-fluid identities into an official identity. Document brokers like JPs upgrade people’s self-reported identities into official identities through the ‘magic’ (Das 2004) of their paperwork. Brokers’ material practices transform people’s assertions into (more or less) authoritative citizen identities that digital identification compels them to use permanently and consistently thereafter.

Third, brokers of citizenship may engage in ‘acts of closing’ that reduce someone’s ‘possibilities of becoming citizen’ (Isin and Ruppert 2020, 57). In a relational

understanding of citizenship, JPs and other brokers may relegate clients to the positions of aliens, outsiders or strangers and refute their citizenship claims.

Fourth, brokers of citizenship navigate their often-contested authority in processing citizenship claims by distributing responsibility along the ‘food chain’ (Banégas and Cutolo 2024, 236) of identification. For migration brokers, Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh (2012, 8) suggested that their work destabilizes preconceived notions of ‘state and market, formal and informal, regular and irregular’. While many brokers are associated with informality (Berenschot and van Klinken 2018), they can work inside the administration (Pommerolle 2021) and, like the president-appointed JPs, be bestowed with much formal authority. With their (in-)formal power, brokers ‘facilitate the negotiation and circumvention of the state’, rule through opacity and are subject to little control (Blundo 2006, 803). This exposes them to skepticism that they can mitigate through performing integrity or holding (non-)citizens and officials along the chain of intermediation responsible.

As a ‘sensitizing concept’ (Blumer 1954), brokers of citizenship can sensitize researchers for the different meanings of citizenship that are mediated during civil registration, but it does not pretend offering a definitive theorization. The four features of their brokerage stem from my ethnographic research on digital identification in Sierra Leone. Over five months in 2024–2025, I conducted participant observation with JP teams and inside NCRA offices in Freetown and the district capitals Bo and Koidu and interviewed over 80 JPs, civil servants, (non-)citizens, civil society members and cooperation staff. Ethical approval has been granted by the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (017/01/2024), the ERC Ethics Advisor and the Ethics Committee at Leuphana University. Written research authorization for participant observation and interviews was granted by JPs and NCRA. Informed vocal consent was obtained by all research participants during ethnographic observation. Individual interviewees signed an informed consent form. All research participants have been anonymized.

The following section provides background on the JPs in Sierra Leone’s digital identification project.

### 3. Results

In 2016, Sierra Leone embarked on the creation of a biometric civil register ‘of all citizens and non-citizens resident in Sierra Leone’ (Government of Sierra Leone 2016, §15(1)e). This donor-backed undertaking aligns with global initiatives to provide ‘legal identity for all’ (Sustainable Development Goal 16.9). Before, only seven per cent owned an ID card. Through biometric mass registration events and following walk-in registration in its district offices, NCRA (2025) claims having enrolled over 90% of the population.

Despite the aforementioned citizenship controversies in Sierra Leone, NCRA opted for a relatively inclusive approach. Alongside JP affidavits, NCRA accepted ‘recommendations’ by local authorities and ‘supporting documents’ as limited proof of citizenship. These could be under-five health cards, local tax receipts, social security cards, school certificates or former refugee cards. According to an NCRA official, this approach aimed to prevent statelessness and to guarantee the rights as ‘a citizen of the country’ in the face of missing documentation (F12). In this set-up, a senior NCRA official explained, the JPs were ‘contributing to the NCRA system’ by helping with the

initial registration of citizens (F19). Affidavits were allowed in some situations to not ‘disenfranchise people’ (F31). Similar affidavits could be produced by Commissioners of Oaths or Public Notaries. Likewise, a JP saw the use of affidavits for NCRA registration as an issue of justice: ‘This person is a citizen of the country. This is not possible that they are not included’ (F12).

JPs in Sierra Leone originate from colonial rule. In British colonial ordinances that ruled present-day Sierra Leone even after its independence in 1961, JPs find mention as authorities for the swearing of oaths and affidavits for delayed registration and identity changes (Sierra Leone 1960, 839, 1060f.). ‘Eventually, everything is from the British’, a legal practitioner drily commented this (F31). Similar institutions exist in Nigeria (Makannah 1981, 10) and, according to a JP, in Ghana and the Gambia (F11), thus inviting comparative perspectives on these colonial legacies and their role in digital identification.

In Sierra Leone’s jurisdiction that combines common and customary law (Kabbah 2023), JPs are respected elders ‘with distinguished records of serving their different communities’ who – usually without legal training background – settle disputes in local courts or preside over oaths (State House 2022). This article focuses on the latter role to document oaths with affidavits in the context of the first-time (‘late’) civil registration of adults. Legally, ‘any fit and proper person’ can be JP (Sierra Leone 1965, §13(1)). However, seniority, informal power networks around ‘big men’ (Utas 2012) and political cleavages strongly shape the administration in Sierra Leone (Højbjerg, Knörr, and Murphy 2017). A JP explained: ‘You need to be an elder. And either civil servant, a pastor, some kind of clergy or a paramount chief’ (F12). Among the thousands of applicants for the positions, JPs were selected for their vast work experience and the powerful connections they mobilized in support (I-JP5, JP9). Upon proposal by the Attorney-General, the President of the Republic took the final decision and swore in the approved candidates at a ceremony at State House (*ibid.*; State House 2022).

As a flipside of this gerontocratic selection, JPs only stayed in office for a few years before they retired. A JP assessed that their informal assistants, the clerks, were ‘more versed in this work than the JPs’ (I-JP5). His clerk had two decades of experience and had seen multiple JPs retire. He ensured the continuity and quality of the operation. In his words, the JPs were ‘not enough, because they are elderly people’ (F12). One usually became a clerk at a young age upon introduction by a ‘big man’ or by slowly befriending a JP team in the street and offering their services step by step. ‘You grow into a job’, a clerk reflected on his learning by doing in the face of lacking formal professional training on administering oaths (F11). With the street-level work usually in their hands, the clerks accumulated professional knowledge and thus informal authority. Yet, they depended on the goodwill of their boss, the JP. Only rarely, clerks made sufficient connections to become JPs themselves (I-JP6; F11).

The following sections detail the four ways how the JP teams bring citizenship into being in their daily brokerage.

### **3.1. Citizen orientation**

Current justice reforms in Sierra Leone see JPs as an important actor to ‘support local justice delivery’ to citizens (Justice Sector Coordination Office 2024, 21f.). By producing

affidavits in a relatively simple and accessible procedure, JPs paved the way to a legal identity and offered consultation on the meaning of citizenship and the often-unspoken expectations, rights and duties that clients needed to conform to.

Paradoxically, JPs were both accessible and held authority. Like other brokers (Banéguas and Cutolo 2024; Chaudhuri 2019; Pommerolle 2021), they outperformed the administration with its strict queue management and red tape of the postcolonial state in terms of accessibility. Many JPs were easily reachable at their tables in the bustle of urban informality. They synced with state office hours and remained in proximity to government offices, thus facilitating clients' to-and-fro movements when they needed affidavits. This user convenience conflicted with their status as elders and authorities. For JP4, the dust, heat and noise of the street made it to a 'low-class job'. 'I would like not to come here, but I cannot', he told me. He needed the negotiated informal fees (Chaudhuri 2019) of the JP work to top up the meager pension from his life-long civil service career (F12). Other JPs preferred their street-level offices over 'sitting bored at home' as elders (F13, F21). JPs in district capitals often worked from the comfort of their homes but struggled with low demand and income (I-JP7, JP9). The status paradox between their formal authority and seniority and the rough street-level working conditions and negotiable fees helped in being accessible to marginalized clients.

In our conversations, JP teams stressed their user orientation in their work ethics in contrast to the administration. A clerk told me: 'The facilitators are good, because they go down to the level of the applicants. They take their time. Not everyone is educated. At NCRA, they will not have the time to do it. It is bad for people' (F12). The clerk saw himself as filling a gap left by a time-pressured and class-biased administration that presumed the literacy and self-reliance of its clientele who struggled to live up to these pressures. 'The government cannot get the infos from the citizens. This is what we are here for', he continued (ibid.). 'Going down to the level' of the citizens meant an understanding of the fears that interacting with the administration could incite in marginalized people (Pommerolle 2021) and taking the time to make their citizenship claims legible for the state.

Orienting citizens also implied mobilizing diverse local knowledge that crossed the ethnoregional divisions cutting across Sierra Leone. 'I know how to deal with illiterate people. I talk Mende, Loko, also some Sherbro', JP6 told me. 'I know the provinces. [...] Often, people do not know the district they come from. There are many places with the same names' (I-JP6). Sometimes, a JP team discussed the possible different spellings of a town where a client was from (F09). NCRA staff appreciated this work and sent clients there for spelling corrections (F30). As an interface between citizens and the state, the JP teams mobilized linguistic and geographical knowledge of the whole country, which went beyond their own origin and domicile in a fragmented society.

Furthermore, the JP teams informed clients about the following civil registration process. In the introductory vignette, the clerk calmly oriented the client to the next steps in the procedure. Clerks frequently described the document copies needed and checked the sufficiency of the paperwork prior to the bureaucratic encounter (Singh 2024). And they cautioned that biometric registration required the physical presence of a child: 'Bring the copy of your ID and the affidavit and don't forget to go with your daughter. She needs to give her fingerprints' (F09).

This helped smoothening processes in an overcrowded administration and spared clients frustrating bureaucratic encounters and resources. Yet, JP teams had to tread cautiously how to counsel educated clients: ‘Don’t start explaining, Mr. I am not illiterate’, a woman scolded a clerk (F14).

Beyond procedural knowledge, the JPs also shared information on the social and informal norms of performing as a citizen vis-à-vis NCRA:

When a man asked for an affidavit to reduce his registered age at NCRA by ten years, JP1 refused. The man, who wanted to fit into a visa program he had already paid for, had no other supporting document for this date of birth. A clerk laughed about the suggested change, which was far beyond the one to two years NCRA easily accepted. The other clerk counseled the man in Krio to go to NCRA, ‘talk nicely’ to them, and ask them if they can change it. Someone else chipped in that he could pay the staff 40, 50 Leones (2 €), ‘a little bit to make it work’. After the client had left, JP1 laughed incredulously that he had already seen someone change their age by 11 years. When I asked about the case, the clerk mentioned sending the man to NCRA for further enquiries but remained silent about the suggested bribe. (F13)

Here, the JP team refused delivering an unsupported affidavit that overstepped the moral threshold of age modification (Eyenga 2024). Nevertheless, it provided insider orientation to the client on performing the obedient ‘model citizen’ (Dubois 2010) by talking nicely and on the informal norm of bribing his way to a wanted identity, a tacit advice they did not mean for the ears of the *white* outsider-anthropologist at the table.

Despite their often-friendly manner, some JPs reproduced the bureaucratic rigor of the postcolonial command administration (Olivier de Sardan 2014) that could frighten marginalized clients:

A middle-aged man without documents from the provinces asked for an affidavit. JP2 requested his date of birth. The man gave the year. In a shrill voice, JP2 shouted: ‘Date of birth!’ The man hesitated. Another man jumped in and gave a date. JP2 then asked the intervener for his documents as proof, but to no avail. (F13)

In such tense interactions, further intermediaries stepped in. The anonymous accompanier, other clients and also clerks intervened. They mastered the meaning of administrative categories like date of birth that were mobilized by the JP and the docility such figures of authority expected. These intermediaries thus helped the client to perform the model citizen expected at the JP table and confirmed the JP as a moral authority, thereby bridging the social positions, orientations and ethics of client and broker. Such chains of intermediation needed to make digital identification work expose the highly interpretive character of citizenship at play in its brokerage.

In much of their everyday work, JP teams mobilized empathy, procedural, geographic, linguistic, ethical and informal knowledge to counsel and support their clients in navigating the NCRA registration. As brokers of citizenship, they oriented clients on the meaning and performance of citizenship vis-à-vis the administration. Repeatedly, this orientation became a tense negotiation on the often-unspoken expectations, rights and duties citizens needed to conform to in the office and at the JP tables. These negotiations drew in other intermediaries and potentially failed in the face of the JPs’ authority.

### 3.2. Fixing citizens' identities

Brokers of citizenship may back people's rights claims by 'doing rights with things' (Isin 2019, 51). By materially producing documents, they transform people's self-reported identities into official identities and, in turn, impose these on them.

This happened in the introductory vignette when the JP team transformed the client's citizenship claim into an official identity on the affidavit. In contrast to traditional authorities in rural settings, JPs usually did not know their clients and the families they came from (F12). Their work mostly lay in scrutinizing someone's identity claims before they would accept to 'stand proxy' for them (F19). JP1 explained to me: 'I am a state man. It is different if I recommend someone or someone else does it' (F11). At NCRA, the affidavit became the basis for the biometric enrolment. An NCRA official explained: 'What you put on it is what we now believe in. It is all based on what you say: "I have declared that information". This is the information we enter now in the system for you' (F19). This multi-actor and material production process of the affidavit created the 'magic' (Das 2004) of the paperwork that transformed a client's identity claim under oath into an officially trusted, authoritative claim.

Affidavits had different degrees of authority, depending on the resources that clients mobilized to obtain them. The more expensive sealed affidavit was typed by staff in a nearby copy shop on computers and color-printed on thick mint-green paper, adorned with a seal. Petty traders ensured the flow of such ruby stickers to the JP tables. To avoid the outsourcing of services and increase own profit margins, more tech-savvy JP teams produced these color copies with their own equipment (F11). At NCRA, a senior official told me, the 'sealed affidavit is taken more seriously by us' (F19). An undocumented citizen who came with it had 'to be interviewed' (F17). The interviewer would then decide whether someone was biometrically enrolled as citizen. Most cases were Sierra Leoneans 'who have lived outside the country' (F19). Mobilizing the more resource-intensive sealed affidavit thus bestowed someone's citizenship claim with more authority and compensated for a perceived foreignness associated with international migration experiences, a reality for many Sierra Leoneans.

By establishing an official identity, the affidavits disciplined the client into a fixed citizen identity. As in the introductory vignette, the clerks advised clients to 'tell the same details' about themselves at different encounters. A senior NCRA officer explained: 'We want you to be consistent with whatever information you move around with. We want that consistency. You should have a strict name'. This meant limiting the 'house name' to its use in the family or otherwise adding it to the official names in a difficult updating procedure (F19). The affidavit thus disciplined citizens into sustained consistency with the official identity they had settled on at the JP tables.

Fixing these identities in preparation for their statist identification was particularly relevant in a context of fluid, situational identities (Hale and M'Cormack-Hale 2018). Like in Côte d'Ivoire (Banégas and Cutolo 2024, 256–271), many Sierra Leoneans had multiple names for different social uses. They carried traditional 'tribal names' that indicated them as first-born, second-born etc. (Sia, Kumba etc.) alongside a Muslim or Christian first name. Furthermore, chiefs (Pa, Mama) and religious leaders (Pastor, Sheikh, Hajja) aimed adding the acquired honorary title to their name to denote their authority, but often failed at NCRA. After the enrolment, people frequently struggled to

align their identity on the ID card with those on school certificates or social security cards. Others failed finding their digital record when they had forgotten the name they uttered in the fleeting instance of affidavit production (F20-F42).

The situational uses of names to do or undo belonging and authority in Sierra Leone clashed with the fixing of these social identities into a permanent official identity, which had often severe consequences on people's lives and their later interactions with the administration. This formalization of identities at the JP tables as a way of privileging certain citizenship claims over others got largely invisibilized once enrolment was completed. Traces of the JP's magic remained sedimented in the digital database where a 'proof of citizenship' specified the JP affidavit and stored its photo.

### 3.3. *Enacting outsiders*

As an interface between (non-)citizens and the digitizing state, brokers of citizenship perform their own understanding of who is a citizen, which might conflict with citizenship law.

According to the Immigration Department, the naturalization procedure to acquire paper citizenship has not been operational since 2017 (F72). Given such procedural gaps in an under-resourced administration, another avenue to Sierra Leonean citizenship was via the JP tables. NCRA (2023) alerted that 'some foreign residents have indulged in fraudulent means to obtain Sierra Leonean citizenship by hiring Sierra Leoneans to pose as their parent(s)'. This could also be done with affidavits. According to an NCRA official, 'some people were trying to beat the system and pretended to be Sierra Leoneans' (F33). As node in the civil registration chain, the JP teams I engaged with were aware of their role in preparing people's biometric enrolment as citizens. JP5 explained: 'Many foreigners want to get affidavits. If you don't take the time, you might attest them citizenship. People claim to be citizens of the country, but they might actually be Nigerians or Ghanaians' (I-JP5).

For the JP teams, verifying citizenship claims was limited to someone's self-presentation. Accordingly, a central component of their work was to 'screen the person in the process' (F12). This assessment largely relied on an ethnic understanding of citizenship. JP2 explained that his team was looking for a non-local name (*ibid.*). JP5 said he knew that someone was 'not a Sierra Leonean by the way this man speaks' (I-P5). JP6 gave a list of 'different markers' in how he knew that 'someone is from Sierra Leone': '1) accent. The way words are pronounced may tell people apart. We speak softly. 2) name. 3) appearance. This would be not only facial appearance but also tribal marks in the face. We don't have them much here, but in Nigeria people do' (I-JP6). In departure from the citizenship law, the use of names, accent, appearance and scarifications mobilized a narrow ethnic understanding of citizenship. Despite their monetary interest in a successful transaction, JPs could classify people as 'outsider' and deny them the right to claim rights by refusing to deliver an affidavit.

However, JPs rarely excluded people during my presence at the JP tables. In any case, their power to deny citizenship rights was also limited by their many competitors. In a brokerage economy, rejected clients might engage in forum shopping and move to another JP table, chief or traditional authority to test the waters for support of their

citizenship claims. Chiefs and tribal unions were particularly relevant intermediaries in borderlands where African second-generation immigrants and ethnic minorities like Fulani and Susu were repeatedly scrutinized at NCRA for their belonging (F50-F69).

As gatekeepers of citizenship (Banégas and Cutolo 2024), such brokers delimit and defend the moral boundaries of who is seen as a citizen.

### 3.4. *Distributing responsibility*

This section explores how JPs distribute the responsibility for citizenship claims along the chain of identification, namely by performing the responsible self and holding clients and NCRA accountable in a wider ‘infrastructure of citizenship’ (Dalberto and Banégas 2021, 11).

When he swore in a significant 261 new, predominantly male JPs in 2022, President Bio cautioned them ‘to be of good behaviour at all times in the discharge of their duties’, guided by independence, impartiality and anti-bias (State House 2022). Such ethics were performed at the JP tables. When JP6 noticed my sustained presence at the JP tables, he investigated among JPs about my purpose and later disclosed his scrutiny to me: ‘Our job is very secret. We are not allowed to expose it. I did not know you’ (F12). This performance of confidentiality, alluding to the political relevance of secrecy and the associated power (Ferme 1999), sat only uneasily with their processing of clients’ personal information under the public eye. For JP6, the accessibility of the JPs necessitated a selective approach: ‘Anyone can walk straight to the JP table or office, but not anyone can acquire an affidavit’. He selected his clients for their ‘manner’ and turned down those with psychological issues. Ultimately, the affidavit was ‘not cheap’ and ‘not for sale’, he said. ‘Even affidavits have ethics’. This required integrity: ‘People often come here and test the waters. They want to try us if they can bribe us to get Sierra Leonean papers or if we are lenient. We will never take the 1000 USD they may offer us’ (ibid.). As a gatekeeper of citizenship, the JP drew moral thresholds of citizenship regarding the recognition of foreigners as citizens (Banégas and Cutolo 2024) and its protection from corruption and economic calculus.

The JPs’ decision to sign an affidavit was then often a procedural one that assessed the form rather than the substance of citizenship claims:

A man arrived at the JP table, half-jokingly seized the stamp and attempted to stamp a green affidavit. Immediately, JP1 protested the rule-breaking and took his stamp back. Then, he looked at the affidavit. It listed 15 people and their passport numbers as employees of a company who ordered them to go to a cultural festival in Belarus. JP1 refused to sign it. I asked: ‘Is it fake?’ JP1 responded: ‘No, not necessarily fake. But there is no director of the company mentioned. It always needs a signing person to do it’. JP2 chipped in: ‘They should go to Foreign Affairs to confirm that they are Sierra Leoneans, not to the JP. How should the JP know this?’. (F13)

In this negotiation of the social life of papers from below (Dalberto and Banégas 2021), the client repurposed the affidavit as a national document into an international one that could broker visas to the Global North, here Belarus as a potential gateway to Poland. In response, the JPs bemoaned a lack of a natural person as a declarant and refused the responsibility for verifying the substance of the inherent citizenship claim, which they delegated to the passport authorities.

These arguments of the responsibility of clients and the administration were repeatedly brought up by JPs to exonerate themselves from recognizing unfounded citizenship claims. Many JPs and clerks stressed that, ultimately, the ‘responsibility’ was with the client and NCRA (F09; I-JP5, JP6). For instance, JP5 told me: ‘I don’t know you personally, you swear. I take it as good faith that all is true and correct. That is why you have to sign’. Then, it was the role of the administration to determine citizenship. His role as JP was to ‘find out and prepare that document’ (I-JP5). The crime of perjury, of swearing a false oath, could mean ‘7 years jail’, an NCRA officer told me. However, the overcharged NCRA staff lacked capacities to persecute them (F17). In a setting of limited state capacities, making unfounded citizenship claims effectively remained an under-enforced crime.

Despite these distributed responsibilities, JPs remained liable for attesting the oath. Stories of JPs summoned by the police and one having died in prison for having signed an affidavit used in a banking fraud loomed over the JP tables in Freetown. ‘Our position as JPs is very delicate’, JP5 admitted. ‘I pray that until now nothing has happened’. To reassert oneself, it was important to ask the client questions, including on the purpose of the affidavit (I-JP5). Thereby, JP2 caught ‘some liars in the process’ (F09), while JP6 also shared his contact with clients to clarify matters with NCRA staff (I-JP6).

Despite their ethics in handling affidavits, the integrity of JPs was disputed. An NCRA officer claimed that ‘everybody can do affidavit, sit at a corner and say he is JP’ (F20). Indeed, there had been ‘thousands of fake affidavits’ in the past election, a voter registration supervisor remembered. His staff had to check the authenticity of the signing JP against lists (F30). In their mundane street-level work, clerks often substituted for a sick, deceased or traveling JP by using pre-signed forms. When other JPs found out, they sometimes threatened to call the police (F10, F11). ‘You know, he is not a real JP?’, a concerned JP whispered twice to me about a clerk acting as JP (F11, F42). Only once, I observed a client checking the appointment letter of a JP (F12). Despite their pronounced formal authority in contrast to many other brokers, JPs maintained themselves as a ‘twilight institution’ (Lund 2006) between the public and private. This allowed limiting their own liability and making profits while policing the field to maintain moral thresholds and knock out competitors.

As brokers of citizenship, the JPs distributed the responsibility for citizenship claims along the food chain of intermediation, between citizens’ identity claims, officials’ screening and their own ethics and procedures. This made citizenship a relational achievement that extended beyond the idea of the state as formal ‘qualifier’ of citizenship (ibid.) to the social and street-level interfaces of identity.

#### 4. Discussion

One afternoon when few clients remained, JP2 and I discussed the consequences of having a digital identity in Sierra Leone. ‘It is fixed in the system. It will be difficult to change your name or date of birth’, he said. I challenged him: ‘Does that not mean that in some years your work as JP will be done? Because no one needs affidavits anymore?’ He declined: ‘People will still need a birth certificate’ (F11).

The JP's certainty that not everyone would receive a certified digital identity upon birth and stick with it throughout one's lifetime bespoke of the many infrastructural gaps of statist identification and the situational social uses of identity from below in Sierra Leone and other African polities (Banégas and Cutolo 2024). The infrastructural shortcomings may have exacerbated with the resource-intensive digital overhaul of African civil registration, as do the gaps between more rigid biometric official identities and fluid social identities to navigate them.

Despite these potentially widening gaps between the digitizing state and its marginalized citizens, Sierra Leone and other African states do not have chronically weak and underregulated identification bureaucracies per se (Dalberto and Banégas 2021, 2). Rather, these spaces are filled by a whole chain of intermediaries inside, around and far from the registration offices. Already the JP tables assembled JPs and their clerks, state officials, relatives and friends and other clients as potential intermediaries of NCRA registration. Beyond the tables, traditional and local authorities, nurses, teachers and employers testified to someone's identity and delivered supporting documents. Beyond facilitating the service delivery, these manifold actors indeed touch 'on the very foundations of citizenship' (Banégas and Cutolo 2024, 236).

These different intermediaries point to the multi-actor production of citizenship in Sierra Leone and its highly interpretive and relational character beyond the black letter text of citizenship law. One was – sometimes also, sometimes only – a citizen if others recognized one as such. Therefore, citizenship in its multiple meanings is a relational achievement that extends beyond the state as a primary 'qualifier' of citizenship (Lund 2006) to the social and street-level interfaces of identity. These sites are spaces for smoother or fiercer negotiations between claimants and intermediaries on the form, substance and monetary, political and moral economies of citizenship claims.

At such interfaces, brokers of citizenship enact – or bring into being – citizenship in its multiple meanings in the first place. JPs have played a crucial role in formalizing the citizenship of underdocumented Sierra Leoneans. But beyond such certification, brokers of citizenship transform the meaning of citizenship, the rights and duties people claim and the relational subject positions of citizens and non-citizens. They shape what it means to be a citizen in terms of holding a permanent identity and in one's performance. They draw moral boundaries of who is a citizen while attributing this boundary-work as a shared responsibility to the whole citizenship infrastructure.

Different brokers of citizenship cover a broad spectrum between 'state and market, formal and informal, regular and irregular' (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). As president-appointed authorities, the JPs stand for a more formalized and respected intermediary than the *margouillats* as often-policed, 'young informal professionals' of the documentary state (Banégas and Cutolo 2024, 240). In contrast to biometric enrolment and kiosk agents (Chaudhuri 2019), JPs are subject to little technological control by the digital identification infrastructure.

These differences invite a further exploration of different interfaces between digitizing states and (non-)citizens where brokerage and issues of citizenship interlink. This notably extends to the moral boundary-work at play in determining insiders and outsiders, the brokerage economy, the bureaucratic ethics of due process, integrity and responsibility and brokers' relative organizational and technological autonomy. These

aspects all shape the work of the JPs and other intermediaries and may uneasily align. Furthermore, brokers of citizenship may help identify the inherent brokering logics at play when witnesses or introducers, such as family members and traditional authorities, as well as formal state officials contribute to registering or updating an undocumented applicant's identity in many civil registration systems throughout the Global South. Lastly, comparative enquiries into JP practices worldwide may help to understand how local contexts shape this peculiar colonial legacy in the performance of citizenship.

## Note

1. These abbreviations indicate data sources (F- fieldnotes, I-interview).

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