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SIERRA LEONE: THE INFLUENCE OF THE SECRET SOCIETIES, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

A Writenet Report by Dr Richard Fanthorpe

**commissioned by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,
Status Determination and Protection Information Section (DIPS)**

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List of Acronyms

AIM	Amazonian Initiative Movement
APC	All People's Congress
CDF	Civil Defence Force
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KWDA	Katanya Women's Development Association
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Executive Summary

This paper focuses on two aspects of contemporary Sierra Leone:

- the organization, purpose, and political role of the cultural institutions known as “secret societies”
- the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), which is a central element of rites of passage into adulthood controlled by the “secret societies”.

Secret Societies

Secret societies are ancient cultural institutions in the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa and their primary purpose is to regulate sexual identity and social conduct. The women’s society, known as Sande in the south and Bondo in the north and Freetown, is general to Sierra Leone. There are several leading men’s societies (Poro, Wunde, Gbangbani, etc).

The secret societies remain a key, albeit unspoken, element in political relations between town and countryside in Sierra Leone.

Since the cessation of the recent civil war, the secret societies have become openly involved in disputes with a range of “non-local” agents:

- trans-local religionists;
- displaced and socially marginalized youth;
- Western Area urban poor;
- school teachers and other government workers on professional postings in provincial areas.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM is practised by all ethno-linguistic groups in Sierra Leone except the Christian Krio population of the Western Area. It is a central element in rites of passage into adulthood, yet exposes women to serious medical risks:

- acute pain due to lack of local anaesthesia;
- post operative haemorrhage;
- urinary infection;
- pelvic infection;
- septicaemia and tetanus due to the use of unsterilized equipment;
- dysmenorrhoea due to the growth of keloid scars that obstruct the vaginal orifice;
- painful intercourse due to scarring and infection;
- prolonged and obstructed childbirth due to unyielding scars;
- post-partum haemorrhage due to tearing of scar tissue or the uterine cervix.

Several of these conditions can result in serious trauma or death.

Anti-FGM campaigning has been on the increase in Sierra Leone since the cessation of the recent civil war, especially in urban areas. This campaign reflects changing social attitudes and family organization and has gained support from international agencies engaged in post-war reconstruction. However, the secret societies, and the practice of FGM, remain bound up with political ideas about African identity and sovereignty and continue to enjoy support from both the present government and many members of the national elite. While the Sierra Leone government has recently enacted laws giving greater protection to the rights of women and girls, a change in the law regarding FGM seems unlikely at present.

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on two aspects of contemporary Sierra Leone: firstly the organization, purpose, and political role of the cultural institutions known as “secret societies” and, secondly, the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), which is a central element of rites of passage into adulthood controlled by the “secret societies”. The paper has been commissioned with a view to providing background information to inform decision making on refugee claims based on enforced FGM and/or persecution perpetrated by the secret societies.

2 Secret Societies in Sierra Leone

2.1 Organization and Purpose

Secret societies are ancient cultural institutions in the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa. Their primary purpose is to canalize and control powers of the spirit world, many of which are captured in masks and other special artefacts (“medicines”, also known as “fetishes” in the early literature). All of these powers are considered morally discerning and thus amenable to control through socialization. As Kenneth Little noted in an account of the Poro society of southern Sierra Leone:

...the more powerful medicines might be compared to electric batteries of high voltage. They are charged with energy, and so it is risky for an inept or unauthorized person to tamper with them, even to go anywhere near them. A medicine has to be tended and nurtured as carefully as a child, and part of the technique consists of talking to it in a certain way every day. The more powerful the medicine, the more harm it is likely to cause, but it is also capable of greater benefits for all concerned, hence the need for properly qualified people to look after it.¹

Secret societies induct members by means of initiation, and both initiates and non-initiates must observe a range of laws and protocols if the cooperation of spirit powers is to be assured. The basic laws are, firstly, that initiates cannot speak of society affairs to non-initiates and, secondly, that non-initiates must not witness society rituals. Patches of forest, whether surrounding a settlement or simply left standing amid land cleared for farming, provide secluded locales for society rituals. The leading societies also have the authority to impose a ritual curfew on a settlement, and at these times all non-initiates must retreat indoors and shutter all windows. “Secret society” is therefore something of a misnomer, since initiates of the leading societies make no attempt to conceal the fact of their membership. Furthermore, secluded rituals often involve loud chanting and drumming, which serves as a signal to non-initiates that rites are taking place. Even non-initiates play a role in society rituals by observing the rule that they must not take part.² For these reasons, some scholars prefer to describe these institutions as “sodalities” or “cult associations”.³ However, in Sierra

¹ Little, K., The Political Function of the Poro, Part 1, *Africa*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 1965, pp. 349-65

² Jedrej, M.C., Medicine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture, *Africa*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 1976, pp.247-57

³ Richards, P., War as Smoke and Mirrors: Sierra Leone 1991-2, 1994-5, 1995-6, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 377-402; Jackson, M., *The Kuranko: Dimensions of Social Reality in a West African Society*, London: C.Hurst & Co, 1977

Leonean English and Krio (the local *lingua franca*) the term “society” specifically connotes an association in ritual and this report follows that local usage.

Some societies convene to harness spirit powers that have a specific and limited application. For example, a society controlling medicines allegedly conferring immunity to bullets was the core element of the Kamajor counterinsurgency militia that rose to prominence during Sierra Leone’s recent civil war. Allieu Kondewa, Kamajor High Priest Initiator and military commander, claimed credit for founding this society. Kamajor combatants were exclusively male and had to observe a number of laws in order to maintain the efficacy of their protections, most notably sexual abstinence.⁴ Another, much older, case in point is the Due society of the Kuranko-speaking area in northern Sierra Leone. According to Michael Jackson, Due accepts male and post-menopausal female members. Initiates learn a special language incomprehensible to non-initiates and various mind-reading techniques and verbal tricks for interrogating strangers. Jackson reports that “this knowledge was very important during [pre-colonial] warfare when it was imperative to ascertain whether a stranger was a spy or not”.⁵

Specialized societies like the Kamajors and Due are sub-sets of a general ritual division of the sexes. In every locality, there is a leading men’s and women’s society supervising rites of passage into adulthood. These rites constitute (or prepare individuals for) initiation into these societies. The women’s society, known as Sande in the south and Bondo in the north and Freetown, is general to Sierra Leone. There are several leading men’s societies, but in any given community the society that supervises boys’ rites of passage into manhood always takes the leading role in the religious and political life of that community. Membership of the main or leading societies is usually a prerequisite for entry into any of the specialized societies.

The primary purpose of the men’s and women’s societies is to produce fully socialized human beings. The basic idea here is that people are no less repositories of spiritual power than “medicines”, the dead ancestors and the wild creatures of the bush. These powers are sex-specific and so harnessing and controlling them necessitates the separation of the sexes. As Michael Jackson noted in respect of Kuranko initiations:

Many Kuranko remark that one of the main purposes of [initiation] is ‘to maintain respect and distance between men and women’. Initiations involve a separation of male and female domains and a differentiation of masculine and feminine attributes... During...initiations, several men commented that they feared women at this time ‘because they are doing things which we do not understand’. They acknowledged that should a man intrude during the secret rites of the girls’ initiation, then, not only would he himself suffer (by being afflicted with elephantiasis of the testicles), but it would mean a breakdown of the social order. Nonetheless, fear alone does not maintain the segregation of the sexes; it is also the result of a voluntary collusion, a decision on the part of men and women to feign total ignorance of the mysteries of the other sex.⁶

⁴ Muana, P.K., *The Kamajoi Militia: Civil War, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency*, *Africa Development*, Vol. 22, Nos. 3-4, 1997, pp.77-100; Human Rights Watch, *We’ll Kill You if You Cry: Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict*, New York, January 2003, p. 4

⁵ Jackson, p. 229

⁶ *Idem*, p. 211

Such feigning of ignorance is of course integral to the ritual performance that facilitates social control over sexual identity.⁷

Carol MacCormack has described the practical application of these cultural ideas in women's society (Sande) initiations in southern Sierra Leone:

Sande is a women's secret society that initiates girls into womanhood and makes them eligible for marriage. Since social grace, good health, fertility, successful childbirth and nurturance are not matters to be left to nature but are conditions and events caused by Sande wisdom, rites and practical experience, it is an institution that continues to assist women throughout their adult life. It is secret in the sense that it owns knowledge so valuable that it must be guarded against debasement and transmitted only in ritual situations to initiates properly prepared to receive it.⁸

During their initiation period, girls work cooperatively on a variety of tasks for female elders, e.g. weeding farms, washing clothes, cooking and repairing mud and wattle houses. While these tasks are familiar to the girls from early childhood, initiation teaches them to view them anew as indexes of female identity. Cooperative tasking also serves as preparation for the girls' future roles as wives and co-wives living and working together in their husbands' compounds.⁹ When Sande/Bondo initiates complete their secluded instruction and return to the village, they usually emerge as a group, their feminine allure emphasized by cosmetics, jewellery and fine clothes. Accompanied by drumming and singing, they take turns to greet the village patriarchy, their studied deference announcing their moral as well as physical preparedness for marriage. On these occasions, some of the younger members of the society, initiated in previous years, will dress as men and brandish imitation wooden guns. These women lead the initiates back to the village, elbowing aside onlookers to make way for the procession.¹⁰

While female initiates are trained to become dutiful wives and mothers, male initiates are trained to become leaders and patriarchs. As with the women, men's society ceremonial involves mimicry of the opposite sex. Prior to their initiation, boys may parade in their home neighbourhoods in sexually ambiguous attire, with elaborately coiffed hair and powdered faces. They may also be carried into the village on the backs of their elder initiated brothers in imitation of nursing mothers carrying their babies.¹¹ Once in seclusion, they undergo competitive tests of physical prowess and endurance during their initiation period, e.g. wrestling matches, acrobatic contests, swimming races and load carrying trials.¹² Boys are also made to participate in mock courts and debates, thereby learning the oratorical skills of chiefs and elders. They also receive instruction in farming and local crafts, e.g. basket and

⁷ Bellman, B.L., *The Language of Secrecy: Symbols and Metaphors in Poro Ritual*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984

⁸ MacCormack, C.P., Sande: The Public Face of a Secret Society, in B. Jules-Rosette (ed.), *The New Religions of Africa*, Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1979, p. 27

⁹ *Idem*, p. 34-5

¹⁰ Personal observation. Bumban, Bombali District, March 2003

¹¹ Banton, M., The Ethnography of the Protectorate: Review Article, *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Series, No. 4, June 1955, p. 247

¹² Butt-Thompson, F.W., *West African Secret Societies: Their Organisations, Officials and Teaching*, London: H.F and G. Witherby, 1929

cloth weaving, bridge building and fish net and animal trap making. Almost all of these activities take place in seclusion, which prompted Kenneth Little to observe that, during Poro society initiations, “boys learn their roles as men in a miniature world of their own”.¹³

The ritual indexing of apparently mundane and secular activities has led some Western observers (and some early West African converts to Christianity) to compare the Sierra Leonean secret societies to Freemasonry.¹⁴ However, the Sierra Leonean societies differ fundamentally from Freemasonry in that all members of a community are normally initiated during adolescence. Furthermore, the societies are not unitary organizations; they convene in every locale where men and women live together and perform rituals in seclusion from one another. Secluded rites of passage into adulthood are better understood as lessons in reflexivity: learning how to nurture powers contained in masks and medicines teaches initiates to recognize and regulate corresponding powers within themselves and thus adhere to culturally prescribed behavioural norms specific to their sex.

Yet there is a greater purpose to secret society initiation than mere education. Accounts of initiations, especially male initiations, describe how initiates are symbolically killed and “eaten” by the spirits of the society, later to emerge “reborn” as adults. Scarification of initiates’ bodies symbolizes the teeth and claw marks left by these spirits, but this is not the only manner in which initiates are marked for life.¹⁵ “Rebirth” into the adult world means that initiates embody the powers, controlled by the society, which facilitated their transformation. To break the laws and protocols that secure the cooperation of these powers is therefore to court death. The leading societies also play a central role in funeral ceremonies, facilitating initiates’ passage to the world of the ancestors. For the living, breaking society laws therefore risks the loss of an imaginable social life after death. For these reasons, society laws are taken extremely seriously. Some of these laws are esoteric (e.g. certain everyday words or phrases cannot be spoken in the vicinity of a medicine), but many are eminently practical. As Beryl Bellman noted in respect of the Liberia-Sierra Leone border area: “virtually all of the criminal laws are laws of the medicine. For instance, rape, murder, fighting in town and theft are all violations of the Poro and Sande medicines”.¹⁶ Bellman goes on to report that violations of these laws might be adjudicated by the masked spirit in the society bush and that those found guilty of the most serious violations might even be sacrificed to assuage this spirit.¹⁷ The societies thus play a major role in maintaining law and order in rural areas even when not in session.

2.2 History and Distribution

The Sierra Leonean societies feature prominently in the journals of the first European visitors to the Upper Guinea Coast. For example, early seventeenth century accounts of Poro and Sande ceremonial, published by Olfert Dapper in 1688, differ in no important detail from

¹³ Little, K., The Role of the Secret Society in Cultural Specialization, *American Anthropologist*, Vol.51, 1949, pp.199-212

¹⁴ See e.g. Cole, J.A., *A Revelation of the Secret Orders of Western Africa*, Dayton: United Brethren Publishing House, 1886

¹⁵ Butt-Thompson, pp. 116-20; Little, K., *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West African People in Transition*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951, pp. 117-26

¹⁶ Bellman, B.L., *Village of Curers and Assassins: On the Production of Fala Kpelle Cosmological Categories*, The Hague: Mouton, 1975, p.125

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

modern accounts of these societies.¹⁸ Indigenous African accounts of the origins of the societies tend towards the symbolic rather than the literal. A recurrent theme in these origin stories is that sources of spiritual power are discovered in dreams and that the dreamer is aided in either locating or channelling that power by the ghost of a recently deceased sibling or spouse.¹⁹

While the societies are undoubtedly ancient, scholars have long argued that they gained special prominence in religious, political and economic life on the Upper Guinea Coast as a result of early European contact. The region was already serving the Trans-Saharan trade when European traders arrived on the coast in the fifteenth century. The intersection of these two trans-continental trading networks created new economic opportunities for indigenous African populations and generated considerable population movement and social and cultural interaction. Some scholars have suggested that the secret societies came to prominence during this era as a means of protecting local interests and properties from powerful newcomers,²⁰ while others have persisted with the Freemasonry analogy to argue that an African “ruling class”, grown rich and powerful through the Atlantic slave trade, used the societies to consolidate their power over the indigenous populations.²¹

The pre-colonial sources indicate that, like today, the leading societies had many thousands of members distributed over wide areas. The societies were by no means the only available media for social regulation. Some of the more specialized trading groups, notably Mandingo and Fula, adhered to a strict interpretation of Islam that precluded society initiation. Initiation was nevertheless a major instrument for incorporating migrant settlers into local communities, and it would have been in the mutual economic and security interest of neighbouring groups to recognize each other’s medicine laws. Ritual techniques could therefore have spread from settlement to settlement and region to region without necessarily involving centralized coordination and control. As Bellman notes of the Poro society:

...any single structural description of the Poro is inappropriate and incomplete. Instead, the Poro should be considered a diversity of associations that differentially share some ritual practices. These associations differ from other societies in that they have the capacity to establish communicative and political alliances with each other that transcend ethnic and linguistic boundaries. This capacity is based on geographical proximity coupled with the recognition of shared ritual practices and the mutual constraint to practice *ifa mo*, or secrecy, regarding each other’s activities.²²

While scholarly arguments about the origins of the societies are unavoidably speculative, it is clear from the pre-colonial sources that they played a major role in regulating commerce and warfare. Foreign interest in the societies intensified after the founding of the original Sierra

¹⁸ Ogilby, J, *Africa, Being an Accurate Description of the Regions of Ægypt, Barbary, Lybia, and Billedulgerid*, London, 1696 (mainly a translation of Dapper’s original Dutch work); Fyfe, C., *Sierra Leone Inheritance*, London: Oxford University Press, 1964, pp.39-40

¹⁹ Muana, pp.87-8; Addison, W., The Wunde Society: Protectorate of Sierra Leone, British West Africa, *Man*, Vol. 36, December 1936, p. 207

²⁰ D’Azevedo, W., Some Historical Problems in the Delineation of a Central West Atlantic Region, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 96, 1962

²¹ Rodney, W., *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, pp. 67-70

²² Bellman, *Language of Secrecy*, p 42

Leone Colony at the end of the eighteenth century. Originally a private venture to return liberated slaves to their African homeland, the colony was taken over by the British Crown in 1808. Freetown, the colony's main settlement, went on to become a thriving port city and centre of missionary activity. An early account of Freetown's African hinterland, published in 1788, reported that Poro society laws were regularly invoked to put an end to disputes between communities and that those who refused to obey these laws risked having their lands placed under ritual curfew and ransacked.²³ Forty years later, a British explorer crossing the Temne-speaking area reported that large swathes of the countryside were closed to outsiders under Poro law,²⁴ and a decade after that another British visitor to the area reported that Poro law forbade the passage of Europeans inland of the heads of river navigation from Freetown.²⁵ Some Limba and Temne groups in the north of present-day Sierra Leone retained strong political and trading connections with African states and kingdoms further into the interior and were reported to use "fetish regulations" (i.e. medicine laws) as a means of exacting money and goods from African traders seeking passage through their territories to Freetown.²⁶

The Hut Tax war of 1898 provided a graphic demonstration of the societies' capacity to coordinate warfare on a large scale. In 1896, part of Freetown's historic hinterland was declared a British Protectorate. The British had already made treaties with local African rulers and believed that the formalization of colonial rule was a *fait accompli*. However, their attempts to introduce a poll tax in the new Protectorate soon provoked an armed uprising across much of the south and parts of the north. The Poro society was used to coordinate this uprising, which took the British completely by surprise.²⁷

Until 1951, the Colony and Protectorate of Sierra Leone remained separate entities, the latter administered under a system of "indirect rule". In the early twentieth century, a new class of Paramount Chiefs was granted considerable powers by the colonial authorities, and this office became the focus of intense political competition at the local level. Chiefs, some of whom owed their positions to British patronage rather than popular support, sought to consolidate their power by every means possible, which included the spiritual realm in general and the secret societies in particular. While the British outlawed the use of the societies to control trade, the imposition of colonial rule prompted an "arms race" in medicines and other means to spiritual power.²⁸ Persistent reports of an elite shape-shifting cult empowered by human sacrifice culminated in several murder trials in Sierra Leone in the early twentieth century.²⁹

Local struggles over chieftaincy continued throughout the colonial era and numerous popular grievances against chiefs were brought before the British authorities. Many of these grievances became the subjects of formal Commissions of Inquiry. Among the notable charges investigated by these Commissions in the later colonial era were that Paramount

²³ Matthews, J., *A Voyage to the River Sierra Leone*, London: B. White & J. Sewell, 1788, pp. 82-5

²⁴ Laing, A.G., *Travels in the Timmannee, Kooranko and Soolima Countries in Western Africa*, London: John Murray, 1825, pp. 91-9

²⁵ Rankin F.H., *The White Man's Grave: A Visit to Sierra Leone in 1834*, London: R. Bentley, 1836, pp.299-303

²⁶ Fanthorpe, R., Limba 'Deep Rural' Strategies, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 39, 1998, pp. 15-38

²⁷ Little, The Political Function of the Poro, p. 350

²⁸ Kalous, M., *Cannibals and Tongo Players of Sierra Leone*, Auckland, 1974 (privately printed)

²⁹ Beatty, K.J., *Human Leopards: An Account of the Trials of Human Leopards Before the Special Commission Court*, London: H. Rees, 1915

Chiefs were attempting to bring men's society initiations under central control rather than leaving their management to each village, that they were using the men's society to compel subjects to sell produce to trading enterprises in which they had controlling interests, and that they were destroying the secret society bush of their political opponents.³⁰ However, the men's societies were also used to coordinate resistance to such despotic acts. For example, the mid-1950s saw a widespread outbreak of rioting in protest against Paramount Chiefs' governance. The rioters targeted the houses and other property of chiefs and many chiefs were forced to flee for their lives. There were numerous reports that the rioters were using Poro chants and songs, and these led the subsequent Commission of Inquiry to conclude that "Poro played an important part in facilitating the disturbances and may well partly account for the extreme secrecy which shrouded the prevailing discontent".³¹

Decolonization and the development of modern state politics in Sierra Leone created a new role for the secret societies, albeit one shaped by their earlier history. The administrative unification of Colony and Protectorate gave the emerging modern elite of Protectorate origin its first chance to compete for power on even terms with the Krio elite of the old colony (descendants of liberated slaves). The former Protectorate's overwhelming advantage in terms of voter numbers made the outcome of this competition a foregone conclusion, but it also left an indelible mark on national politics. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), the first party of government, always drew its strongest support from the more prosperous, Mende-speaking south. In the 1960s the SLPP's main challenger was the All People's Congress (APC), which initially drew its support from miners, merchants and trade unionists of northern origin. In the 1970s, the APC consolidated power under a one-party constitution that succeeded in keeping the SLPP out of government for twenty years. While the leading parties provided opportunities for educational and professional high achievers, both were essentially coalitions of politicians with strong rural powerbases. Even today, men and women winning seats in Parliament and jobs in government are expected to remain loyal to their home communities and direct state resources towards those communities. The secret societies remain a fundamental, albeit unspoken, factor in these informal political pacts. Few politicians that were not initiated in the localities they wish to represent can expect to win elections and once in office they are expected to provide job opportunities for fellow initiates ("sons/daughters of the soil"). They are also expected to send their children back to rural areas for initiation and to serve as patrons of these and other local ceremonies in honour of their hereditary culture.

Recently, Sierra Leonean researcher Andrew Laval has revived Peter Ekeh's notion of "two publics" in modern Africa to note the continuing tension between the demands of "civic" governance and "primordial" political loyalties in post-war Sierra Leone:

The dividing line between [the two publics] is best captured in the common Mende words *puu hindae* (meaning Whiteman's business which approximates [to] the civil public) and *kondi hindae* (meaning our local affair which equates to [the] primordial public). The *puu hindae*... is seen by many people as corrupt and undeserving of

³⁰ Fanthorpe, R., Interpreting Chieftaincy Conflicts in Colonial Sierra Leone: Elite Competition, Popular Uprising and Ritual Control over Sociality, paper presented at the conference The Powerful Presence of the Past: Historical Dimensions of Integration and Conflict in the Upper Guinea Coast, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany, 19-21 October, 2006

³¹ *Sierra Leone: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Disturbances in the Provinces (November, 1955 to March, 1956)*, London: Crown Agents for Overseas Governments and Administrations, 1956, pp.11-12

support... By contrast the *kondi hindae*, which consists mainly of secret societies, ethnic and hometown development associations, belongs to the community and is claimed by most ordinary people as their own. Thus members of the *kondi hindae* feel obliged to it and are fiercely protective of its interest[s], and conduct within this realm is governed by traditions of sanctions, self-help, self-government and a high degree of accountability.³²

The point being made here is not that Sierra Leoneans remain bound to “tradition”, but that the failure of modern bureaucratic governance to capture the imagination and loyalty of the populace has prompted renewed investment in the notion of “local community”, in a secure moral base from which to engage with the agencies of the state.

The secret societies have inevitably become more “secret” as a result of this tension. Kenneth Little notes that “modern equipment” is specifically excluded from Poro training,³³ and I was told by a Limba chief in 1981 that no “Whiteman” goods were ever allowed in his town’s society bush. Bellman, reporting from the Liberia-Sierra Leone border area, notes that many modern items have become the subjects of prohibitive medicine laws. In one case, fears that such laws were in danger of becoming compromised prompted the transfer of Poro medicines from Sucromu, a rapidly developing market town, to the more isolated settlement of Malawu. Bellman quotes an informant’s testimony on this matter:

Sucromu used to be the big town in the [Poro society]. It was the place where the heads of the medicines were kept. But when the road business came here the people decided to move the medicines to Malawu in case that somebody travelling in a car should accidentally break one of the laws of those medicines. There are many such laws. You cannot say that the sun is hot on a warm day, you cannot throw rice water outside your house, you cannot wear eye glasses, hearing aids, or shoes. And women cannot wear [Western] dresses...³⁴

Political modernity in post-colonial Sierra Leone has thus tended to sustain the secret societies as repositories of local culture and political identification rather than threatening their continuing existence. The women’s society (Sande/Bondo) remains general to Sierra Leone and the distribution of the leading men’s societies has changed little since pre-colonial times. Poro is the leading men’s society among Mende speakers of central and southern Sierra Leone. Mende-speaking groups migrated into Sierra Leone during the early Atlantic trade era, but the language also spread through adoption. Today, Mende is the everyday language of many Sherbro, Gallinhas, Krim, Gola and Kissi neighbours of the Mende. However, Poro is not an exclusively Mende institution: it is also found in the Kono-speaking area and eastern parts of the Temne-speaking area (especially Yoni, Kholifa and Kunike). Among the Kpa-Mende people of central Sierra Leone, Poro has been superseded by Wunde, a society that specializes in martial training. Wunde was the organizational foundation of the nineteenth century confederate state of the Kpa-Mende.³⁵ Gbangbani is the leading men’s

³² Laval, A., The Reliable Route to Poverty Reduction in Sierra Leone: NGOs or Secret Societies? *Concord Times* [Freetown], 31 October 2005; see also Ekeh, P., Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 17, January 1975

³³ Little, K., The Role of the Secret Society, p. 201

³⁴ Bellman, B.L., Village of Curers and Assassins, p. 125-6

³⁵ Abraham, A., *Mende Government and Politics under Colonial Rule*, Freetown: Sierra Leone University Press, 1978, pp.253-4

society in north-eastern Sierra Leone. It predominates in the Kuranko, Limba and Loko speaking areas and, according to Vernon Dorjahn, began to “diffuse” into parts of the Temne speaking area in the twentieth century.³⁶

The pattern of societies across the Temne-speaking area is particularly complex. The western end of the area was traversed by a major coastal-interior trading corridor during the Atlantic trade era and became deeply Islamic. Since strict adherence to Islam tends to preclude secret society membership, the traditional men’s societies administering rites of passage into adulthood have long disappeared from this area.³⁷ However, Sande/Bondo is still used here and many (mostly male) inhabitants of the area now belong to the Odelay (Hunting) and Ojeh societies. These two societies were brought to Sierra Leone by liberated slaves of Nigerian (Yoruba) origin who settled in the original Sierra Leone Colony in the nineteenth century.³⁸ The Temne also have specialized societies for investing kings and chiefs with sacred powers. In the western half of the Temne-speaking area, rulers are installed with Islamic ceremonies; in the east these functions are performed by an ancient society called Ragbenle. In some eastern localities, however, Ragbenle has been superseded by another society called Ramena, or by Poro.³⁹

The Odelay and Ojeh societies have spread to urban, mining and river/sea port areas throughout Sierra Leone and count members from all of the major ethnic groups. In these areas, as in the Sucromu case described by Bellman, the clustering of people with different religious and cultural backgrounds militates against the operation of traditional medicine laws. Unlike the traditional societies, Odelay and Ojeh admit adults on application and initiation does not involve any form of genital cutting. While operating in some areas as elite social clubs, versions of these societies were also developed by underemployed urban youths for their own entertainment and political expression.⁴⁰ While the Odelay society frequently stages public masquerades during national holidays, Ojeh is considered “deeper” and seeks to inculcate in its members both moral discipline and powers to detect and punish criminals.⁴¹

2.3 Political Role

Aspects of the political role of the secret societies were noted in the previous section. A point emerging from that discussion was that the societies have sometimes served as instruments of hierarchical political control and sometimes as instruments of egalitarian resistance to such control. Since any number of activities can be placed under society rules and protocols, it is perfectly possible for different groups to harness the same societies to different, potentially competing political projects. Such projects are, of course, shaped and constrained by secular interests and power structures.

³⁶ Dorjahn, V., *The Organization and Function of the Ragbenle Society of the Temne*, *Africa*, Vol. 29, April 1959, p.159

³⁷ Wylie, K., *The Political Kingdoms of the Temne: Temne Government in Sierra Leone, 1825-1910*, New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1977

³⁸ Wyse, A., *The Krio of Sierra Leone: An Interpretative History*, Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1991, p. 53

³⁹ Dorjahn, V., pp. 155-8

⁴⁰ Nunley, J.W., *Moving with the Face of the Devil: Art and Politics in Urban West Africa*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987; Abdullah, I., *Youth Culture and Violence in Sierra Leone*, in A. Honwana and F. de Boeck (eds), *Makers and Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, Oxford: James Curry, 2005

⁴¹ Victor Kalie Kamara. Personal communication

For example, the compact, nucleated village serves as a basic social and administrative unit throughout Sierra Leone. The village chief and male elders, heads of the local land holding families, will normally organize boys' initiations. Bondo/Sande leaders organize girls' initiations and also tend to be drawn from local high-status families.⁴² Initiates and their families remain beholden to these patrons, since initiation guarantees community membership and its attendant social and property rights. Elders may use that moral indebtedness to secure compliance with their decision making or claim resources from lower status families.⁴³ Furthermore, young people perform most of the chanting, drumming, dancing, and masquerading that characterizes society rituals, leaving the elders to organize and supervise. Their capacity to conduct rituals independent of the elders is nevertheless constrained by the fact that the latter guard the medicines that represent the society's power; medicines that are surrounded by additional secrets and sanctions of their own.⁴⁴ Even so, initiation also provides individuals with a ready means to establish their social credentials in any community that performs initiation rites and may thus also serve as a passport to resettlement.

In the pre-colonial era, many chiefs and rulers were noted secret society leaders, surrounding themselves with a mesh of ritual sanctions and using that authority to convert settlers and war captives into loyal subjects.⁴⁵ Some women chiefs of that era followed a parallel strategy, using Sande to train girls to become rulers' wives and attracting high-status suitors (and political allies) from a wide area.⁴⁶ While some female Paramount Chiefs carried on this practice in the early twentieth century,⁴⁷ these strategies are now, for reasons already noted, ruled out of public politics. But opportunities still remain for ambitious politicians to secure the services of young initiates. In spite of the colonial origins of their office, and the conflicts that have long surrounded it, Paramount Chiefs remain leading political figures in rural areas. It remains their prerogative to authorize all initiation rites in their chiefdoms. Paramount and other high ranking chiefs (i.e. Speakers and Section Chiefs) are expected to serve as patrons of these rites, attending them in person if possible and making contributions to their cost and the public celebrations that accompany them. Senior politicians and bureaucrats often play a similar role, which helps to reinforce their credentials as "sons of the soil". Cultivating alliances with village chiefs and society leaders in this manner allows the politically ambitious to secure command over local youth, although the colonial-era chieftaincy conflicts mentioned in the previous section indicate the limitations of this strategy. Even today, senior chiefs and politicians who neglect their responsibilities as patrons of the societies or overstep their authority in the ritual sphere may find local youths turned against them.

Both of the major political parties have used this strategy for recruiting and disciplining political followers. The APC, a party with strong urban roots, was a noted patron of the Ojeh society during its years in power. Leading APC figures, including former President Siaka

⁴² Bledsoe, C., The Political Use of Sande Ideology and Symbolism, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 11, 1984

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Murphy, W.P., Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders versus Youth, *Africa*, Vol. 50, 1980

⁴⁵ Fanthorpe, Limba Deep Rural Strategies

⁴⁶ Hoffer, C.P., Madam Yoko, Ruler of the Kpa Mende Confederacy, in M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, Culture and Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974

⁴⁷ MacCormack, C.P., Sande, p. 30

Stevens, were members of Ojeh. It is unlikely that Ojeh played a leading role in the APC government's notorious policy of recruiting underemployed youths as political enforcers, since many of these youths were recruited from the self-organized, "working class" Odelay societies.⁴⁸ However, at least one APC politician is reported to have used Ojeh to recruit and train a private security force during the recent civil war. This force was based in the small fishing port of Shenge in southern Sierra Leone and clashed frequently with the Kamajors at the close of the war.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the APC had little choice but to look to urban and mining areas of the north for its young strongmen. For many years, SLPP supporters in rural areas of the south had used the Poro society to harass APC activists and deny them access to local youth.⁵⁰

The recent civil war provided a new context for these strategies. In April 2003, I interviewed a Paramount Chief in central Sierra Leone who had used the Poro society to recruit and train a loyal force of local defence fighters. A few other senior chiefs followed a similar strategy, but early government attempts at coordinating these local forces were not successful. Part of the problem was that senior chiefs were often targeted by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgents and most fled to the capital. But even those chiefs that remained in rural areas were reluctant to place the power and prestige of men's societies at the disposal of state authorities. For example, while giving testimony to the Special Court for Sierra Leone, one Paramount Chief from Moyamba District was asked about his reaction to the government's call in 1994 for a military muster of secret society adepts. He replied that "...even now I have a Wunde society. We prepared our own in that little way, in our own little way and the other chiefs prepared their own people [for war] in their own way. But nobody was ready to disclose the secret".⁵¹ Allieu Kondewa's Kamajors managed to break this impasse because his was a "new" society lacking place-specific community links. Paramount Chiefs and the beleaguered central government were united in supporting the Kamajor movement and oversaw its incorporation into a national Civil Defence Force (CDF). At the close of the war, the government promptly disbanded all Kamajor/CDF units. CDF leaders, Kondewa included, were put on trial at the Special Court for war crimes.

It was not only pro-government forces that sought to use the secret societies for military and political ends. It was reported in April 2001 that RUF leader General Issa Sesay had given a large sum of money, a head of cattle, a drum of palm oil and several bags of rice to Poro society leaders in Makeni (the northern provincial headquarters) with orders to initiate several hundred young men. Some of these youths were already RUF members. The timing of this initiative, a few months before the formal cessation of hostilities, suggests that its primary objective was not military recruitment, but the establishment of a post-war political power

⁴⁸ Abdullah, I., *Youth Culture and Violence*, pp. 179-80

⁴⁹ Kamajors, Ojeh Scatter Wedding, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 7 February 2001; Kamajors, Ojeh Members at War, *The Pool Newspaper of Sierra Leone* [Freetown], 22 March 2001, <http://poolnewspaper.tripod.com/homepage.html> [accessed August 2007]

⁵⁰ Lavalie, A., *Government and Opposition in Sierra Leone, 1968-1978*, paper presented at the *Fourth Birmingham Sierra Leone Studies Symposium*, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, 13-15 July, 1985, p. 80

⁵¹ Sierra Leone, Special Court, Testimony of Paramount Chief Joseph Ali-Kavura Kongomah II, 1 June 2006, <http://www.sc-sl.org/Transcripts/CDF-060106.pdf> [accessed August 2007]

base. Sesay's initiation drive was apparently thwarted by the intervention of United Nations peacekeepers.⁵²

The secret societies have retained a high political profile since the close of the civil war. Conflict-induced displacement was especially traumatic for rural people due to their lack of written guarantees of property and identity. Many were - and remain - profoundly shocked by the vicious and apparently motiveless attacks upon civilians by the young Sierra Leoneans who fought under the banner of the RUF, and there is still much talk in rural areas about these fighters' fearless transgression of secret society laws as they entered village sacred bushes in search of hoarded weapons and food. Some commentators argue that the civil war reflects a schism between increasingly secular and modernized youth and forces of conservatism in the government and the chiefdoms.⁵³ But since the cessation of the conflict, the priority for most Sierra Leoneans has been the reestablishment of the familiar political order based on "primordial" loyalties and secret societies. For example, in 2003 I was asked to supply an expert report on an asylum case in which the claimant was a young man fleeing Poro initiation. This man had been born into a landowning family in a small town in northern Sierra Leone, but most of his family had been killed during the war. There were many socially unattached youths living in the town at the close of the war and this was a source of considerable anxiety to the town elders after their earlier experiences at the hands of young RUF conscripts. Like General Sesay, the elders' chosen solution was to hold a mass Poro initiation in the town. Those that refused to be initiated were allegedly being denied access to their family lands under Poro law.

The post-war drive to reassert locally rooted authority has also seen the secret societies becoming openly involved in disputes between local communities and government agencies. For example, the Masanki oil palm plantation in Moyamba District was established under a land leasing agreement in the 1920s and passed through several management agencies until taken over by the Sierra Leone Prisons Department in the 1960s. Prison Department staff fled during the war, leaving the plantation open to anyone who wished to harvest the fruits. When the government workers returned after the war they found that a Poro curfew had been placed upon the plantation. Government payment of ground rent was in considerable arrears as a result of the war, and the instigator of the curfew, allegedly with the full support of the chiefdom authorities and the local MP, claimed ownership of the plantation in the name of his village and chiefdom. Poro masquerades were allegedly held in broad daylight to prevent Prison Department staff from intervening to prevent the illegal harvesting of the palm fruits.⁵⁴

The societies have also had a raised profile in post-war electoral politics. For example, during the run up to the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections, President Kabbah was challenged for the SLPP leadership by Charles Margai, a former Minister in Kabbah's government and son and nephew of Sierra Leonean Prime Ministers. On the eve of the SLPP national convention in March, a Kabbah supporter allegedly declared: "if it costs us to initiate

⁵² In Makeni UNAMSIL Halts Raid on Poro Society, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 25 April 2001; confirmed by Trond Husby, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Personal interview, Freetown, February 2002

⁵³ Richards, P., To Fight or To Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone), *African Affairs*, Vol. 104, 2005

⁵⁴ Defying State Authority - Poro Devil Threatens Govt. Workers, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 20 September 2002; MP Backs Lawless Villagers, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 3 October 2002

the Poro society, we will do so to ensure that Kabbah is re-elected as leader of the SLPP". The point being made here was that, as a last resort, the Kabbah supporters would use the Poro society to mobilize youth to "handle" Margai's supporters. In the event, this threat was not carried out.⁵⁵ It was also reported after the 2004 local government elections that both the Poro and Ojeh societies had been carrying out masquerades in some wards in an attempt to "cancel" the elections. In several cases these actions were prompted by the exclusion of leading community figures from a pre-election registration exercise intended purely for training electoral officials. Such is the mistrust of minor government officials in rural Sierra Leone that there was widespread fear that voters excluded from the training exercise would also be excluded from the election proper.⁵⁶

Since the close of the war, the societies have also become involved in inter-community conflicts, especially conflicts between "indigenous" local religionists and "stranger" Muslims. Relationships between the two have always been complex. Mandingo and Fula, the leading "stranger" groups, have been living in Sierra Leone for centuries. Yet many Sierra Leoneans do not consider them "indigenes" because they do not "belong" in any particular locality. The distinguishing characteristics of the "stranger" lifestyle are adherence to a strict interpretation of the Koran that precludes society membership, a specialization in import-export trade, retailing and the diamond industry, and finally a tendency to live in towns rather than the countryside. Members of the "indigenous" Mende, Temne, Kono and Limba groups often combine Christian or Muslim worship with secret society membership and many have Mandingo and Fula ancestry. But those that adopt the "stranger" identity also tend to join the stricter Muslim sects. The Muslim trading community was better equipped than most to escape the fighting during the civil war, and has returned to the provincial towns strongly influenced by the current global climate of Islamic self-determinism. In some towns, the secret societies have become actively involved in attempts to re-establish the political primacy of "indigenes" over "stranger" Muslims, whatever the implicit risks to the efficacy of their medicines. For example, it was reported in January 2005 that the Poro society in Kailahun town in eastern Sierra Leone was restricting the movement of traders and forcing some to undergo initiation.⁵⁷ In March 2005, it was reported that Muslims in Bo township had protested en masse to local government officials following the forced initiation of a local Imam who had questioned the right of Poro members to initiate two of his Arabic students without first obtaining permission from their parents.⁵⁸ Some Muslims also took the initiative against their opponents. For example, in May 2006, the eastern regional representative of the newly launched National League of Islamic Organizations of Sierra Leone claimed 420 recent Poro "converts" to Islam in his area and the subsequent burning of 51 Poro bushes.⁵⁹ With the stakes thus raised, Poro society members in Pendembu town in Kailahun District were reported to have stormed a mosque where sermons had been preached against the society. Several people were reportedly injured and some members of the congregation were forcibly initiated.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Violence Awaits SLPP Convention, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 6 March 2002

⁵⁶ Police Disrupt Poro Devil Plans for Elections, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 2 June 2004

⁵⁷ Poro Men Intimidate Kailahun Residents, *Concord Times* [Freetown], 26 January 2005

⁵⁸ Muslims Demonstrate Against Poro Devil, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 11 March 2005

⁵⁹ Kabbah Condemns Islamic Disunity, *Concord Times* [Freetown], 4 May 2006

⁶⁰ Muslims Clash with Poro Society in Kailahun, Sierra Leone, *Awareness Times* [Freetown], 29 January 2007

While most of recent reports of the societies' involvement in overt political activity focus on the men's society, the women's society has also made its presence felt. For example, in May 2004, Sande/Bondo society leaders in Kenema town staged a mass protest to coincide with a state visit from President Kabbah. The subject of their protest was the SLPP party hierarchy's alleged interference in the election of the Town Council Chairman. Furthermore, in August 2006, women's society leaders in Kamabai in Bombali District in northern Sierra Leone placed a permanent Bondo curfew on the chiefdom's court house and central meeting hall in protest against the government's handling of a paramount chieftaincy election. Political rivalry between "indigenous" Limba and "stranger" Mandingo had been longstanding in the chiefdom, and it was the government's open support for a Mandingo candidacy in what was supposed to be the election of a "Limba" Paramount Chief that lay at the root of the women's protest.⁶¹

2.4 Profile of Individuals at Risk of Enforced Membership

The vast majority of people that join secret societies do so as part of the normal process of social maturation in the communities in which they were born. However, Sierra Leone remains in a state of social flux in the aftermath of civil war and many aspects of economic and cultural life have become politicized. At present, four social groups are most at risk of forced initiation.

2.4.1 *Trans-local Religionists*

As already mentioned the drive to reassert locally rooted culture and authority in the post-war era has seen secret society members come into conflict with "stranger" groups, notably members of the Muslim merchant community. Forced initiation of imams and other leading Muslim figures are overtly political acts designed to intimidate and punish rather than convert. Charismatic Christian churches are increasingly popular in Sierra Leone, especially in Freetown, and some of these preach openly against the secret societies. While there have been no recent reports of society members targeting Christians for forced initiation, I have recently been asked to supply expert reports for several United Kingdom asylum cases where claimants stated a fear of forced initiation and cited Christian faith among their principled objections to society membership.

2.4.2 *Socially Marginalized Youth*

The recent civil war displaced up to 2 million Sierra Leonean civilians and forced another 500,000 to take refuge in foreign countries. Wartime destruction and displacement was immensely destructive to family life, especially for individuals abducted by the RUF. As a result of the war, many young people of both sexes that would normally have been initiated in late childhood were not initiated. Some returned to their villages after the war while others went on to join the post-war influx of population into the capital. For many Sierra Leoneans, both rural and urban dwelling, resuming initiations represents a major step towards post-war recovery. However, many young adults (girls especially) who managed to survive for years outside the old social matrix have no wish to submit to genital cutting and the uncompromising authority of family heads and elders. While few cases of forced initiation of socially marginalized youth have been reported in the national press, social pressure on young people to submit to initiation is considerable. This pressure can take many (not necessarily violent) forms and may stem as much from a fear of social breakdown as a desire to dominate and control.

⁶¹ Personal interviews, Kamabai, May 2007

2.4.3 Western Area Urban Poor

The old Sierra Leone Colony is now the capital district (Western Area). Even today, this area has a different legal and administrative system from that of the interior provinces and a substantial minority of its population are Krios (descendants of liberated slaves), who do not subject their children to secluded initiation rituals. While the traditional secret societies were brought to the Freetown area many generations ago by immigrants from the interior, the power and influence of the men's societies in particular are much attenuated in comparison to rural areas. Bondo/Sande initiation does take place regularly in the Western Area, but those among the more prosperous urban dwellers who wish to initiate their children in the traditional way tend to send them back to their ancestral villages.

The post-war era has nevertheless seen more aggressive use of traditional society rituals in urban areas, which has led to clashes between initiates and non-initiates. For example, in March 2003, Poro society members caused public outrage by carrying out a masquerade through the centre of Waterloo town without giving prior warning. The masquerade was being performed in celebration of an initiation rite but many Waterloo residents later expressed the view that Poro initiations belonged in the provinces and should not be brought into the Western Area.⁶² In April 2007, it was reported that a teenage secondary school student who had allegedly used "insulting words" against the Bondo society was seized from her Freetown residence in the middle of the night and forcibly initiated.⁶³ A similar case was reported in May 2007. Here, a young mother living in the Freetown suburb of Grafton allegedly had a row with a neighbour, who later told friends that the woman had said "all sorts of disparaging words about the Bondo society". This woman was also seized and forcibly initiated.⁶⁴

2.4.4 Government Workers on Professional Postings in Provincial Areas

Pressure on school teachers and other government workers to join secret societies controlled by the communities in which they work (if they are not locally born) reflects these communities' desire to coordinate their children's education in both "modern" and "traditional" sectors and ensure that they receive maximum support as they struggle for qualifications and job opportunities. This pressure was reported in the colonial era,⁶⁵ and a recent (March 2006) case in point is the forced initiation into Poro of a teacher at the Makeni Comprehensive Academy, allegedly at the behest of the locally born school bursar.⁶⁶ Other government employees in daily contact with local communities in the provinces come under similar pressure, notably Chiefdom Treasury Clerks, Police and NGO workers. One Sierra Leonean NGO manager in Kambia District told me in 2002 that he had joined the Ojeh society in his home town partly out of curiosity, partly because it was expected of him as a service provider to his community and partly to counter village chiefs' habit of seizing relief distributions and hoarding them in the men's society bush.

⁶² Abuse of Secret Society in Waterloo, *Standard Times* [Freetown], 20 March 2003

⁶³ Enact Laws Against Forceful Initiation into the 'Bondo Society', *Standard Times* [Freetown], 7 April 2007

⁶⁴ Secret Society Top Brass Apprehended for FGM, *Awareness Times* [Freetown], 30 May 2007

⁶⁵ See e.g., Report on Bo District for the Year 1947, p.3, unpublished report in Sierra Leone Government Archives, Freetown

⁶⁶ Poro Society Terrorizes Makeni, *Concord Times* [Freetown], 15 March 2006

2.5 Risks Faced by Critics and Opponents of Secret Societies

Public criticism of the secret societies has been on the increase among some Christian and Muslim groups in recent years, although it is uncertain whether this reflects an underlying change in social attitudes or a reaction to more aggressive use of society rituals in the post-war era. The raid on the Pendembu mosque and forced initiation of imams, noted above, indicate the risks faced by religious critics of the societies. The news article on the Pendembu raid mentions that some of the Muslims abducted by Poro members had not been seen for over a month.⁶⁷ Reports of their release had yet to appear in the national press as of July 2007.

Aggressive use of secret society rituals in urban areas has also seen society members clash with non-initiates, especially in the capital district (Western Area). Again, people who speak out against the societies risk violent confrontation and forced initiation.

The growing campaign against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among civil rights organizations in Sierra Leone has not, as yet, provoked any public confrontations with secret society leaders. However, four activists reportedly stopped working for the anti-FGM campaign group Amazonian Initiative Movement after receiving death threats,⁶⁸ and the coordinator of the anti-FGM campaign group Katanya Women's Development Association reported that "it is not an easy job. Sometimes I get booed and taunted. At crucial moments I get chased out of places where the practice [of FGM] is much more prevalent."⁶⁹

There have been no reports of Sierra Leoneans living abroad suffering persecution for criticizing the societies, nor have there been any reports of individuals suffering persecution abroad for citing a fear of forced initiation or ritual participation (e.g. forced performance of FGM) in asylum claims.

3 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Sierra Leone

3.1 Incidence and Medical Risks

FGM is practised by all ethno-linguistic groups in Sierra Leone except the Christian Krio population of the Western Area. Two types of FGM predominate:

Type I FGM (removal of the prepuce of the clitoris) is performed by Krio Muslims (Akus) living in the Western Area, and some urban-dwelling Temne, Mandingo and Fula, in fulfilment of Sunna (Traditions of the Prophet) requirements. Some Islamic authorities worldwide dispute the authenticity of this tradition, but there are no reports of debate on this matter in Sierra Leone.⁷⁰ This type of FGM is normally performed on girls around the age of

⁶⁷ Muslims Clash with Poro Society

⁶⁸ World Health Organization, Fighting Genital Mutilation in Sierra Leone, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, Vol. 83, November 2005, p. 801

⁶⁹ Inter Press News Agency, Female Circumcision used as a Weapon of Political Campaign, 19 April 2007, <http://ipsnews.net/print.asp?idnews=28359> [accessed August 2007]

⁷⁰ Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, *Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): Debates about FGM in Africa, the Middle East & Far East*, http://www.religioustolerance.org/fem_cirm.htm, [accessed August 2007]

puberty and the ceremonies many include elements characteristic of Sande/Bondo initiation.⁷¹

TYPE II FGM (excision of the entire clitoris and all or part of the labia minora) is performed in the context of Sande/Bondo initiation. Young men interviewed in 2003 claimed that girls from prosperous urban families who are sent back to their parents' villages for initiation often undergo a less extensive operation (e.g. Type I FGM) than rural girls, although no medical study has confirmed this claim. It is possible that different initiators, as a matter of personal choice, perform more or less extensive operations. Girls are normally subjected to Bondo/Sande initiation around the age of puberty, but in the post-war era very young girls as well as fully grown adults have been subjected to initiation.

The chief medical risks caused by FGM are:⁷²

- acute pain due to lack of local anaesthesia
- post operative haemorrhage
- urinary infection
- pelvic infection
- septicaemia and tetanus due to the use of unsterilized equipment
- dysmenorrhoea due to the growth of keloid scars that obstruct the vaginal orifice
- painful intercourse due to scarring and infection
- prolonged and obstructed childbirth due to unyielding scars
- post-partum haemorrhage due to tearing of scar tissue or the uterine cervix.

Several of these conditions can result in serious trauma or death.

3.2 Cultural Rationale

Circumcision/excision are the central element in rites of passage into adulthood for both males and females. The genital organs are, naturally enough, considered primary embodiments of the gender-specific powers that the societies seek to regulate. Carol MacCormack suggested that the whole idea that girls are transformed into women through the intervention of the Sande/Bondo society, rather than leaving matters to nature, provides a rationale for operations on the genitals: "...by excising the clitoris, a rudiment of maleness, all sexual ambiguity is removed from the incipient woman. She then fits 'purely' and 'safely' into the social structure, free from the 'impurity' and 'danger' of categorical ambiguity."⁷³ A young Sierra Leonean woman interviewed in 1981 made a similar point in blunter terms while stating her belief that, if a clitoris is left uncut, it might grow uncontrollably into a penis.

Also at work here is a cultural aesthetic of concealment: the idea that overt displays of emotion or intent are morally distasteful and, furthermore, court spiritual danger.⁷⁴ Western pornographic videos circulate widely in urban areas of Sierra Leone. Several female members

⁷¹ Banton, M., *West African City: A Study of Tribal Life in Freetown*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 209

⁷² Koso-Thomas, O., *The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication*, London: Zed Books, 1987, pp.25-8

⁷³ MacCormack, C.P., Sande, p.32

⁷⁴ Ferme, M.C., *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp.1-3

of the Mende extended family with whom I lodged in Freetown in 2002-2003 had seen examples of these videos. While not expressing any distaste at the content of these videos, they expressed the view that the genitalia of uncircumcised Western women are “ugly” and protruding compared to “beautiful”, hidden genitalia of African women initiated into Sande/Bondo.

3.3 Social Context and Post-War Changes

Olayinka Koso-Thomas has argued that the educational functions of Sande/Bondo are slowly disappearing, and that secluded training once extending over one or two years is now completed in a few weeks.⁷⁵ Carol MacCormack has also noted that social class is now a strong factor in determining the length of girls’ initiatory training:

Girls from families that are wealthy or influential enough to send them to school may remain in the [society bush] for the duration of the Christmas school vacation only. At a pragmatic level of analysis, there are social distinctions made between aristocratic girls who are transformed into women with a minimum of time and toil, while girls from less fortunate families may work for years making farms... and extracting palm oil for the [Sande] officials.⁷⁶

The nuclear family is gaining headway among the urban professional classes and many among this group find succour in Christian churches at the less ecumenical and more charismatic end of the spectrum. One young woman who belongs to one of these churches in Freetown told me in 2003 that while she herself had been initiated, the pain had been excruciating and she had vowed never to subject a daughter of her own to that ordeal. As far as she was concerned, God, rather than “juju”, would protect her daughters from harm. Even in rural areas, the traditional view that a girl should marry as soon as she completes her initiation is beginning to fall by the wayside. Educating children is expensive for most Sierra Leonean families, even now that fees for primary education have been abolished. The importance of educating girls as well as boys is now widely acknowledged, yet fees for “marriage licences” are still demanded by chieftom authorities from families of girls who have recently completed their initiations. Such demands generate considerable resentment in cases where the girl is still attending school. It is therefore becoming a common strategy to delay a girl’s initiation until she has completed her schooling. In this respect, modern concepts of social maturation are beginning to challenge the old.

Furthermore, the ending of the war in Sierra Leone has seen an influx of foreign aid and NGOs seeking to help rebuild the county. This international intervention has given new impetus to national anti-FGM campaigners. Sierra Leonean anti-FGM organizations have recently enjoyed a raised profile, notably Amazonian Initiative Movement (AIM), Centre for Safe Motherhood and Katanya Women’s Development Association (KWDA). In addition to advocacy work, these organizations have been providing skills training to rural women and girls who might otherwise seek an income as Bondo initiators. For example, KWDA aims to recruit uninitiated girls and place them in skills training centres. The girls learn tailoring, dyeing, weaving and soap making, but they also attend lectures and discussion on the harmful effects of FGM and are encouraged to resist pressure from their families and communities to undergo initiation. AIM visits rural areas and tries to persuade Sande/Bondo leaders who earn

⁷⁵ Koso-Thomas, *Circumcision of Women*, pp. 23-4

⁷⁶ MacCormack, C.P., *Sande*, p.32

a living from initiation fees to give up the practice. The organization has received money from donors in the United States to provide 40 of 700 women who perform FGM with alternative employment. In May 2007, 15 former FGM practitioners, who had received sponsorship to attend courses at St Joseph's Vocation Training Centre in Lunsar in northern Sierra Leone, received certificates of achievement and starter kits of seeds, fertilizers and small livestock to help them start their own farms.⁷⁷ However, the funds currently available to these organizations are small and their overall impact has been modest at best.

In spite of these changes, many Sierra Leoneans still consider Sande/Bondo initiation as a social and cultural necessity. Girls from all social backgrounds continue to suffer FGM, including the educated elite. For the latter group, initiating daughters may serve as a confirmation of African identity and Sierra Leoneans living abroad still bring their daughters back home to undergo initiation. Furthermore, rural men in particular fear and respect the women's society, especially its putative power to punish them both spiritually and physically if they mistreat their wives or otherwise transgress Sande/Bondo medicine laws. The rural poor have a further incentive for maintaining the practice. Customary marriage involves the payment of "bridewealth" to a new wife's family and most poor families consider it imperative to initiate daughters so that they can negotiate successfully for this payment. Furthermore, as AIM's FGM eradication strategy indicates, women's society leaders receive considerable income from initiation fees, which are paid over by the girls' families.

As emphasized earlier, the current social situation in Sierra Leone is complex and fluid. A recent study by a Freetown governance monitoring agency reported that women enjoy much greater economic and social independence in Freetown and the major provincial towns in comparison to rural areas.⁷⁸ But it is often in the towns that women face the greatest backlash from supporters of patriarchy. During recent fieldwork in Sierra Leone, I have often come across well-educated and gainfully employed young men who retain extremely conservative attitudes towards women. For example, on one occasion in Freetown I witnessed a young woman being publicly humiliated by her common-law husband because she had discussed a family dispute with a neighbour before first informing him. I also witnessed a teenage school student being evicted from her parental home because she had been caught having sex with a classmate (the boy was not punished as far as I know), and a young woman in her twenties being forced to beg female friends for a floor to sleep on because her father would not allow her back into the family house until she had undergone initiation in the Bondo society. This same young woman was later badly beaten by a boyfriend on suspicion of infidelity, even though she had acquiesced to his demands for sex whilst still recovering from FGM. Another young professional living in the provinces had his workers drag his girlfriend, kicking and screaming, from a disco because she had disobeyed his direct order to leave. Whatever the future holds for FGM, modern Sierra Leonean women still have need of the sisterly solidarity and protections offered by Sande/Bondo membership.

⁷⁷ Where Have They All Gone? *The New Citizen* [Freetown], 31 May 2007, http://www.christiantrede.com/webdesign/clients/newcitizen/archive.php?subaction=showfull&id=1180609242&archive=1180648821&start_from=&ucat=6& [accessed August 2007]

⁷⁸ Barnbrick, Kati, *Silent Victims: An Evaluation of Post-War Rape and the Response to Rape in the Provinces of Sierra Leone*, Freetown: Campaign for Good Governance, December 2004, www.slccg.org/silent_victims.pdf [accessed August 2007]

3.4 Profile of Individuals at Risk of Enforced FGM

As with groups generally at risk of forced initiation, individuals specifically at risk of enforced FGM are caught between competing ideas and values with regard to social conduct, moral authority, and political identification. Since the primary purpose of women's society initiation is to prepare girls for marriage and motherhood, the majority of individuals at risk of enforced FGM are postmenarchal yet unmarried adolescents and young adults. For the same reasons, the threat of enforced FGM is more likely to originate from within extended families than from without. At present, it is possible to identify three categories of individuals at risk of enforced FGM, all of which are effectively sub-sets of the categories identified in the case of individuals at risk of forced initiation.

3.4.1 *Returning Refugees and Displaced Persons*

In normal circumstances, initiations are organized in each village once in every five to ten years. They are major social events to which numerous guests are invited and which involve considerable financial expenditure for all families concerned. Holding such ceremonies was impossible during the war, which left a large cohort of uninitiated adolescents. Many families that remained more or less intact in refugee and Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps put their daughters through Sande/Bondo initiation whilst still living in camp. The adolescent female population of some Sierra Leonean IDP camps was initiated en masse at the close of the war.⁷⁹ Girls that had been separated from their families, whether living in camps or outside, did not come under the same pressure to undergo initiation. Those living outside camps tended to seek protection from extended family members or boyfriends, many of whom lacked both the means and interest to organize initiations. Endemic poverty always makes such attachments precarious, however, and sooner or later many of these girls had little choice except to seek shelter and protection from surviving members of their natal families. Unattached girls returning home after the post-war closure of refugee and IDP camps faced a similar predicament. In these situations, sexually active and socially aspirational girls who have become used to surviving on their own initiative can suddenly come under intense family pressure to undergo initiation. Overt reluctance to suffer FGM and embrace Sande/Bondo traditions of deference to patriarchy only serves to intensify this pressure.

3.4.2 *Reclaimed Urban Foster Children*

This group faces a similar predicament to returning refugees and IDPs, but is somewhat younger. Marriages between people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds are fairly common in Sierra Leone, especially in Freetown. Child fostering, notably the placement of rural children with urban families in order to further their education and broaden their social horizons, is also common. Even fostering within the same extended family can sometimes see the children of a rural dwelling, local religionist father being brought up by the urban dwelling, devoutly Christian relatives of their mother. Traditionally, fathers always had the final say in the upbringing of their children and it was their prerogative to reclaim them from their foster parents whenever they saw fit. However, the scattering of families during the war often left urban foster children out of contact with one or both parents for many years. The post-war drive to reassert locally rooted culture and authority, plus the lure of "bridewealth" payments, may now see a girl brought up in Freetown in a culturally relaxed environment suddenly facing pressure from rural dwelling relatives (usually her father's family) to go back to the ancestral village to undergo Sande/Bondo initiation. Often, the girl in question has no wish to undergo initiation and seeks help from her foster parents and other sympathetic agencies (notably the charismatic Christian churches that preach against the secret societies).

⁷⁹ Victor Kalie Kamara. Personal Communication

Cases of this kind rarely reach the local courts or news media, but nevertheless feature prominently among the asylum claims, recently made by Sierra Leoneans in the United Kingdom, for which I have been asked to supply expert reports.

3.4.3 *Victims of Random Cross-Community Disputes*

As previously noted there have been recent reports of forced initiation of women and girls in Freetown following what appear to be unpremeditated disputes with Sande/Bondo initiates. In urban settings, Sande/Bondo initiates come into daily contact with non-initiates (notably Krios and some of the stricter Muslim groups). Normally, observing women's society laws in urban areas is a private affair for families and migrant communities identifying with a particular area of rural origin. But the heightening of political and cultural sensitivities in the post-war era has resulted in the use of forced initiation as a punishment for perceived insults. There is no evidence at present that these assaults are part of a systematic campaign.

3.5 Legal Status

Sierra Leone has no laws banning FGM. The legacy of colonial "indirect rule" remains strong in rural Sierra Leone and the local court system deals almost exclusively with byelaws passed by chieftdom authorities and general customary law. FGM is simply not an issue in these courts and professional lawyers are not allowed to practise in them. Furthermore, the state police are very thin on the ground outside the larger towns, and the police officers I interviewed during research on community policing in 2001 always took the position that they dealt with "English" (state) law, not customary law. They would investigate cases of alleged assault in respect of forced initiation and alleged manslaughter whenever initiates, male or female, died of blood loss and shock as a result of their operations.⁸⁰ Very few cases of this kind come before the higher courts, almost all in Freetown. For example, in 1996, a 28 year-old Freetown woman sought to bring an assault charge against Bondo society leaders who she claimed had forcibly initiated her. She was still waiting for the case to come to trial when fighting resumed.⁸¹ In 2002, a 14 year old Freetown girl bled to death after undergoing FGM and the Bondo society leader who had performed the operation was put on trial for manslaughter.⁸²

International agencies and civil rights activists within Sierra Leone have put pressure on the Sierra Leone government to enact laws to give greater protection to the rights of women. Sierra Leone ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1988, but did not report on it until May 2007. The following month saw the passage of much delayed legislation outlawing domestic violence and establishing the rights of women with respect to inheritance and the registration of customary marriages.⁸³

⁸⁰ Fanthorpe, R., *Communities and Formal/Informal Systems of Justice*, unpublished research report, Commonwealth Community Safety and Security Project, Sierra Leone, United Kingdom Department for International Development, November 2001

⁸¹ United States Department of State, *Sierra Leone Country Report on Human Rights for 1996*, Washington, January 1997, p.6, http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1996_hrp_report/sierrale.html [accessed August 2007]; *Sierra Leone Country Report on Human Rights for 1997*, Washington, January 1998, p. 18, http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1997_hrp_report/sierrale.html [accessed August 2007]

⁸² Teenage Girl in Sierra Leone Dies after Female Genital Mutilation, *Reproductive Freedom News*, Vol. 11, September 2002, http://www.reproductiverights.org/rfn_02_09.html [accessed August 2007]

⁸³ Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone: Gender Laws Mean Greater Rights and Protection for Women*, 19 June 2007 (press release), <http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGAFR510022007> [accessed August 2007]

Sierra Leone ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, and the government announced the drafting of a domestic Child Rights Bill in 2001. In 2006, Amnesty International drew up a petition calling on President Kabbah to end FGM in accordance with the UN Conventions on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Rights of the Child. The Bill was drafted by the Sierra Leone Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Children's Affairs with the assistance of experts hired by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The new Bill incorporated clauses from the UN Convention prohibiting "cruel, inhuman or degrading" treatment of children, which were applicable to FGM. Indeed, many commentators, including the United Nations, interpreted clauses in the Bill banning "harmful traditional practices" against children as an effective ban on FGM.⁸⁴ After much delay, the Bill was presented to Parliament in September 2006 and passed in June 2007. However, the "FGM clause" was removed from the final version of the Bill during parliamentary debate. At the conclusion of the debate a senior MP told reporters that there was "general consensus" in parliament not to outlaw FGM.⁸⁵

3.6 Current Position of the Sierra Leone Government

All governments in post-colonial Sierra Leone have been socially conservative and the present government is no exception. Following the ratification of the revised Child Rights Bill, the Deputy Minister of Gender, Social Welfare and Social Affairs stated that the practice of FGM was part of Sierra Leone's culture and therefore it "could not just be eradicated from the land".⁸⁶ A decade earlier, the Minister for Social Welfare had publicly declared that "we will sew the mouths up of those preaching against Bondo" and in the 2002 general elections the sole woman candidate for the Presidency felt obliged to deny rumours that she had advocated a ban on FGM.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the recent House of Lords judgement in favour of a young Sierra Leonean woman who had claimed asylum in the United Kingdom due to a fear of forced initiation provoked a strong reaction from the Sierra Leone government. A spokesman condemned the asylum claim on the grounds that Bondo initiation is entirely voluntary and that the asylum seeker was besmirching Sierra Leone's international reputation.⁸⁸

Political pragmatism underlies this conservative stance. As explained previously, local, "primordial" political loyalties remain very strong in Sierra Leone and national parties compete for the support of these informal constituencies. For example, Patricia Kabbah, the late wife of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, sponsored the circumcision of 1,500 young girls during the presidential election campaign of 2002 and other politicians have organized

⁸⁴ UNICEF, Sierra Leone Approves the National Child Rights Bill, 7 June 2007 (news note), http://www.unicef.org/media/media_39951.html [accessed August 2007]

⁸⁵ BBC News, S Leone Bans Child Brides not FGM, 8 June 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6734273.stm>, [accessed August 2007]

⁸⁶ Government Minister Defends FGM Practice, *Awareness Times* [Freetown], 13 June, 2007

⁸⁷ Afrol News, Female Genital Mutilation Election Issue in Sierra Leone, 11 May 2002, http://www.afrol.com/News2002/sil010_fgm_elections.htm [accessed August 2007]

⁸⁸ BBC News, S Leone Anger at FGM Asylum in UK, 19 October 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/6065682.stm> [accessed August 2007]

smaller initiation ceremonies to gain popularity in virtually every district of the country.⁸⁹ At present, a change in the law regarding FGM seems unlikely.

4 Conclusions

The secret societies have become intertwined with modern political life in Sierra Leone and retain considerable power and influence. However, new forms of urbanized social life are gaining ground along with resurgent trans-local religionism. These developments are partly due to wartime destruction and displacement, partly a reflection of the paucity of gainful employment opportunities in the countryside, and partly a reflection of global trends towards individualism and mass consumption. These new and resurgent forms of sociality are clashing with “primordial” political and cultural loyalties, which remain dominant and retain the strong support of the present Sierra Leonean government. At present, asylum seekers fearing persecution perpetrated by members of the secret societies are most likely to be drawn from either the socially modernized urban group or the trans-local religionist group.

However, it must also be noted that Sierra Leone, despite the considerable recent efforts of international donors and aid agencies, remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Young people who have received post-war support from aid agencies, whether in refugee camps or their home areas, have every incentive to claim further support if the only alternative is a hand-to-mouth existence in rural villages or urban slums. By no means all refugee and asylum claims are a cover for economic migrancy or human trafficking. Yet the current economic and political situation in Sierra Leone demands caution when assessing Sierra Leonean cases, especially as the concealed nature of the societies makes accurate assessment of the risks faced by young people who claim a fear of persecution from them extremely difficult.

⁸⁹ United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network, Sierra Leone: Female Circumcision is a Vote Winner, Freetown, 17 March 2005, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=53443> [accessed August 2007]

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