**Secret societies**

In the rural regions of the Guinea coast, survival demanded heavy reliance on communal institutions throughout the twentieth century. Life here developed within a dynamic, albeit hierarchical, social order. Advancement within it was constrained by one’s lineage, to which one was indebted either by birth, marriage, or even—if chosen to become a guest of a family elder—by choice.

A prerequisite for membership in the community was initiation by the age of puberty in one of the Guinea coast’s two principal secret societies: *Poro* for the men, and *Sande* for the women. Both societies regulated all aspects of life from birth to death, enabling enabled a young man or woman to find their place in the society and maintain a balance within the elaborate duality and fluidity of the hierarchical social order; that is, within one’s lineage and one’s society.

Even today, *Sande,* which is reported to have over three million members, encompasses most aspects of the life of women in the rural population of the Guinea coast. In the 1985 national census of Liberia, the concept of a woman’s society was recognized as “*mawaee,”* that is, those who eat together from the same pot. Thus, the existence of semi-independent family units consisting solely of women and children was formalized.

The secret societies were organized according to localized tribal chapters. While they recognized the hierarchy and power symbols of their neighbors, there is no evidence of structural pan-tribal leadership having ever emerged.

Although *Sande* can be dated back as early as the fifteenth century, the society’s actual practices and liturgy remain largely unknown. The oath of secrecy taken by its initiates is closely guarded and initiation is regarded as a great privilege. Research on *Sande* is also limited, since it was primarily the *Poro* that attracted the interest of twentieth-century anthropologists.

**Quelling the hinterland**

At the time this monumental Bassa maternity figure was crafted in the 1920s, the Christian Americo-Liberian government in Monrovia, led by its president Charles King, was enjoying a positive cash flow for the first time. This was due, in part, to its famous agreement with the Firestone rubber company. From this position of relative strength, the government was able to use its resources to consolidate control over the Liberian hinterland.

However, the Liberian government systematically impoverished the rural areas under its control. By rendering the local populations’ iron-rod-based currency system obsolete and forcibly imposing the new Hut tax, payable only in international hard currency, the government virtually devastating the wealth of the elders and the community overnight. The government also outlawed indigenous secret male societies of the Guinea coast that had formerly regulated all aspects of life, imprisoning their elders and suspending the all-powerful *Poro*. Liberian officials disregarded human rights violations committed against the rural population, branding the leaders of these once proud societies as cannibals or members of the notorious Tiger association. The persecutions further reduced the villages to poverty, which, in turn, stripped them of their male population, thereby eroding the men’s historical position within these traditional societies.

**Revolving door in gender-related roles**

During this painful period, women inevitably had to assume a more active role in the community, filling in for males as both breadwinners and keepers of tradition. This then endowed their *Sande* society with even more power and importance.

The main cash crop of the region, the oil palm fruit, was processed by working teams of women overseen by *Sande* “big women.” While the plantation owners kept the more desirable oil extracted from the pulp of the palm fruit, the women’s organization received the oil of the fruit kernel in lieu of payment.

This oil became especially important in the early twentieth century. In that century’s first years, beef fat was the main type of fat used in margarine. But shortly after the turn of the century, a lack of beef fat coupled with new techniques for hydrogenating plant materials made the use of vegetable oils in the formulation of margarine not only possible, but also far more efficient economically. Between 1900 and 1920, margarine began being manufactured from a mixture of animal fats and vegetable oils, such as palm kernel oil. A key ingredient of margarine and soap, palm kernel oil, now became a sought-after commodity fetching high prices on the international market. Traditionally, men had been responsible for selling the crops to city merchants, who then sold it on the international market, keeping most of the profits for themselves. Following the men’s express refusal to be exploited or to sell crops to merchants at such low prices, they were persecuted and jailed. The *Sande* then took over the direct commerce, thereby gaining sudden access to somewhat considerable wealth and power. Their new status was expressed in elaborate rituals and liturgical paraphernalia that enhanced reality by increasing the proportions of the body images. The sheer size of this female Bassa ritual figure, quadruple that of similar figures from other periods, may reflect the sudden but brief change in the socioeconomic status of *Sande* society.

**The *Bassa Lady***

Exactly how this figure figured in the role and power shift from *Poro* to *Sande*, male to female, can only be speculated about. Its sheer enormity and sculptural complexity, however, suggests a structured, secret indoor liturgy, every aspect of which was meticulously orchestrated.

Unlike masks and other figures that were celebrated as part of a carefully choreographed performance, the drama in this case was probably achieved through precisely conceived illumination and sound effects, bringing the static figure to life through a play of light, shadow, and music.

The three cornucopia-like horns comprising the figure’s coiffure remain sealed and filled with a potent “medicine” meant to activate a protective zone around the *Sande* society house in which it was located. Such horns were a common motif in *Sande* iconography and appear in many Bondo masks.

The figure represents a *Sande* initiate participating in the “Gani ceremony,” a coming-out ceremony at which, following an initial period of seclusion, during which the initiate sits outside the *Sande* enclosure in stony silence with downcast eyes, she lines up with other initiates, “deaf” to the calls and praise heaped upon them by relatives who pretend that they cannot find the daughters or sisters they have entrusted to the *Sande* elders.

The complex scarified engravings on the figure’s back can be read from top to bottom, signifying east to west. Their pattern mirrors the route into the *Sande* house, where initiates live for a year during the initiation process. The pattern begins with a cluster of triangles symbolizing cultivated fields—the women’s sphere of birth and fertility. Next comes a section of an oil palm fruit representing the *Sande* house, which is set apart by a zigzag line referring to the nearby river that isolates the village. The village and everyday life are depicted as a palm kernel at the bottom—the West—followed by the primeval wood, *Poro*, and death.

Such patterns etched in kaolin chalk are still applied daily onto the bodies of young Bassa *Sande* initiates. The clay acts serves as a protective shell, physically beautifying the skin, eliminating its flaws, and designating the girls as forbidden to men. Girls in this liminal state are considered especially seductive; still virgins, they are already excised and therefore ready for sexual activity. The application of white clay signifies the departure of black people from the natural world and their entry into that of the dead—a world of white, invisible spirits.

Due to the mayhem of the Liberian civil wars in the early 1990s, a Bassa community near Buchanan fled to neighboring Guinea, where it sold this maternity figure to Mr. Amadou Diaw, a renowned antiques dealer in Conakry. For nearly 15 years, and cherished it as his most prized possession. In 2010, he passed it on to the author in a sale reported in the local press. Haunted by the memory of the figure, Mr. Diaw commissioned a full-scale copy of it based on photographs in 2015.

Sadly, by 2020 Mr. Diaw had died in seclusion.

The statue has been dated to 1925 based on a chemical analysis conducted with IRS technology at a renowned Swiss laboratory. The MRI revealed that the organic “medicine” activating the figure is still intact.