**Secret societies**

Survival in the rural regions of the Guinea coast relied heavily on communal effort throughout the twentieth century. Life here developed within a dynamic, albeit hierarchical, social order. Its course was constrained by the lineage with which one was associated, or to which one was indebted by birth, marriage or even—if one were a guest of a family elder— by choice.

A prerequisite for membership in the community was enrollment, by the age of puberty, in one of the two principal secret societies of the Guinea coast: *Poro* in the case of men, and *Sande* in that of women. Both societies regulated all aspects of life, from birth to death, and enabled one to find one’s place and maintain it within the elaborate dual and ever-changing hierarchical social order, that is, within one’s lineage and one’s society.

Even today, *Sande,* which is said to have over three million members, encompasses most aspects of the life of the female rural population of the Guinea coast. In the 1985 national census of Liberia, the concept was institutionalized as "*mawaee,*" that is, those who eat together from the same pot. In this way, 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, each recognizing the hierarchy and power symbols of its neighbors. By contrast, no evidence of structural pan-tribal leadership has ever come to light.

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 regarded as a great privilege. Research on Sande society 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 under the presidency of 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, it undermined the wealth of the elders and the community overnight and forcibly imposed a new tax—the Hut tax—payable only in international hard currency. The government also outlawed indigenous secret male societies of the Guinea coast that had formerly regulated all aspects of life, imprisoned their elders, and suspended the all-powerful *Poro*. Its officials brushed aside the human rights violations committed against the rural population by branding the leaders of these societies as cannibals or members of the notorious Tiger association. The persecutions reduced the villages to poverty, which, in turn, stripped them of their male population and thus eroded the men’s historical position within these traditional societies.

**Revolving door in gender-related roles**

During this difficult period, women, as one might expect, had to assume a more active role in the community, filling in for males both as breadwinners and keepers of tradition. This granted their *Sande* society more power and importance.

The main cash crop of the region, the oil palm fruit, was processed by female working teams 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 organizations received the oil of the fruit kernel in lieu of payment.

Until the early twentieth century, 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 economically viable. Between 1900 and 1920, margarine began being made 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 that fetched 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. After the men refused to be exploited or sell crops to merchants at such low prices, they were persecuted and jailed. The *Sande* then took over the direct commerce and consequently gained sudden access to relatively great wealth and power. This became evident in elaborate rituals and liturgical paraphernalia that enhanced reality through an increase in the body imaginary boundaries. 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 postulated. Its sheer enormity and sculptural complexity, however, suggests a structured, secret indoor liturgy, every aspect of which was carefully 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 carefully conceived illumination and sound effects that made the static figure come to life through a play of light, shadow, and music.

The three cornucopia-like horns that comprise the figure's coiffure are still sealed and filled with a potent "medicine" meant to activate a protective zone around the *Sande* society house in which it resided. 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), 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 who they have entrusted to the Sande elders.

The complex scarification engraved on the figure's back can be read from top to bottom. Signifying east to west, it mirrors the way in which one enters the Sande association 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 germination. Next comes a section of an oil palm fruit representing the Sande house, which is set apart by a zig zag referring to the river. 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 off-limit 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.

But by 2020 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.