While all masks from the Guinean coast outdo each other in metaphysical beauty, those made by the Grebo people stand out, with their intense gaze through multiple pairs of eyes. Although these masks are completely foreign to Western aesthetics, each encounter with them enhances their power and attraction. Close examination reveals that they tell an underlying story of a people striving to preserve their independence and culture vis-a-vis the West, even as they were unknowingly losing the ability to shape their own image in the world.

The Grebo, numbering about 400,000 people, live on the coastal plain of Liberia. Their villages are mainly situated on dunes between the Atlantic Ocean coast and freshwater lagoons surrounded by swamps of mangrove trees. The many rivers that cross the coastal plain make travel difficult. Even reaching a village that is close, as the crow flies, to the capital city of Monrovia can take several days of hard travel by boat, over suspension bridges, etc.

In Liberia, the Grebo are viewed as a separatist group of warriors who jealously preserve their traditions, which include human sacrifice. Their villages are considered off limits; people who value their lives will keep their distance.

The Wikipedia entry about the Grebo describes the ankle bracelets their leaders once wore, which could not be removed and had to be frequently “fed” with human blood. It also notes their tradition of sharpening their front teeth, leaving it to the reader to draw the obvious conclusion that this is a tribe of cannibals.

Against this background are the tales of figures from the First Liberian Civil War, such as Samuel Doe, who was executed and cannibalized on a live television broadcast, and Joshua Blahyi AKA “General Butt Naked” who was photographed running completely naked and massacring civilians with an assault rifle.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Liberian press published numerous articles about children being kidnapped and ritually murdered. Richard Harris’ canonical book *The Mask of the Medusa* explores the roots of the endemic violence on the Liberian coast. He claims that responsibility for the outbreak of the civil war in the late twentieth century lies primarily with Grebo warriors armed with curved knives, such as those whose images were published in Schwab’s book. Fitting this same narrative, fifty years ago (in 1971) Grebo danced at the funeral of President Tubman. Although he was from an American-Liberian family, they viewed him as their local leader, because his family’s origins were in Grebo territory. These graphic images are in line with those of savages cooking White people in soup, such as the ones used in campaigns to legitimize colonial rule, which became enshrined in the Western imagination during the twentieth century.

This differs drastically from the portrayal of the Grebo who live in the neighboring Ivory Coast, where about 10% of this ethnic group resides. In the Ivory Coast, this group is called the Kru (not to be confused with the Kru of Liberia, a distinct ethnic group). Even the name Kru has a quite different connotation. Some people say that Kru is an abbreviation of *krumen* (crewmen) and that they performed essential services as crew members with the British navy and other ships that sailed off the coasts of West Africa, starting in the early eighteenth century.

The Grebo were a skilled labor force, willing to work for hire. Over time, the Grebo became the primary intermediaries between representatives of trading companies and the people who lived along the Guinean coast. White crew members were reluctant to do this work, especially given the harsh climate.

In order to distinguish themselves from the millions of their fellow Africans who were kidnapped and sold into slavery, the Grebo marked their foreheads with indigo blue, a tradition that continued through the beginning of the twentieth century. Being a free people who retained their independence and resisted enslavement became essential aspects of the Grebo mythology. One indicator of their strengths was that they were able to produce this shade of ultramarine a century before Yves Klein patented it, by mixing clay and soil with the Reckitt's Blue detergent, which was already available to them by the eighteenth century.

The reasons for their “safety net” were primarily economic. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, the Guinean coastal region was sparsely populated. Slaving expeditions captured approximately 2000 people each year. Given the high mortality rate of about 60%, this yielded a total of some 800 unskilled slaves annually. During the 19th century, the colonial powers used a labor force estimated at between 5000 and 10000 people per year. The fact that those accompanying Dr. Livingstone's expedition included some Grebo people attests to the impressive success rate of the work crews from Liberia.

Shortly before the abolition of slavery, the boundary between slaves and hired free laborers was blurred, particularly as the Europeans understood it. As a result of this, a group of laborers who had been brought onto the French navy ship the Regina Coelli mutinied to kill the crew and set the ship on fire.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the economy in the Liberian coastal region was based on trade in palm products (oil and wood) and hired labor. There are few natural harbors, so ships would draw close to the river mouths and the local inhabitants would row out to them to conduct trade and seek work. A crew was usually hired for two-year stints. Ships that finished their previous voyage would drop off the crew wherever they docked, sometimes a long distance from the starting point. The Grebo were paid in goods, which they traded during their return journey. As the local economy strengthened and security improved, the coastal strip became more densely populated with villages, and the sites where the Grebo/Kru traded with Western shippers developed into port cities.

Starting in 1819, the British began to employ “headmen” as intermediaries to organize the recruitment of laborers and to negotiate wages. These headmen received a commission from both the employers and the hired laborers. A historical study shows the vast difference in representation of Grebo in Liberia compared to in the Ivory Coast.

Liberia was founded by the American organizations, whose mission was to repatriate freed slaves from America to the African continent. However, they completely exploited the deported slaves, giving them no training and taking no responsibility for them. This mirrored the racist and self-righteous narrative of the nineteenth century. The first shiploads of ex-slaves were settled near Grebo villages. It was hoped that there would be harmony between the new settlers and the locals, and that they would learn from and teach each other, even though they had nothing in common except their skin color.

There was ongoing dispute between the new settlers and the local population regarding the conditions under which the new “guests” would be accepted. It was part of West African culture for established households to accept new members into the community. The perpetual need for workers gave rise to the idea that people were a source of wealth. Therefore, established households welcomed the services of nomadic peoples, who in turn accepted their hosts’ political hierarchy and the full set of obligations and conditions for living in proximity.

The settlers were completely foreign to this culture, ethnically and religiously. In 1857, the “Republic of Maryland” was annexed to the territory of Liberia, but the local population was excluded from it. The settlers’ livelihood was based on an exclusive relationship with the colonial power and its economy. The new republic was supported by heavy taxes on trade between the interior of the country and the coast. A head tax was levied, so every employer had to pay for every local worker (for example, ship captains had to pay a tax for every crew member who boarded their ships).

The coastal area had been sparsely populated until the mid-eighteenth century, due to lack of security, widespread malaria, and poor agriculture, but increased trade transformed it into an economic engine. People from the interior hinterlands relocated and settled along the coast. This overcrowding led to conflicts between families and even inter-tribal wars over land ownership.

As trade between the West and the Guinean coast increased, due to rising global demand for palm products such as oil and piassava (palm fibers required for the brush industry), migrants from the interior tried to create independent trade routes to the coastal area without reliance on intermediaries. However, the government based in Monrovia limited trade to certain sites and prohibited trade or hiring labor anywhere else. European countries did not recognize the authority of the American-based government in Liberia, which they viewed as colonizing the land and enslaving free people. The Europeans provided weapons and support to Grebo insurgents, which fueled the wars that the Grebo waged at the beginning the twentieth century.

The Grebo found themselves in a double conflict. They were in competition with tribes from the interior, who sent their traders to the coastal area. At the same time, they clashed with the settlers from America, who viewed the Grebo only as a source of labor. Every few years, Grebo rebellions broke out, but these were brutally suppressed with warships and artillery provided by America. Additionally, there were notorious “frontier forces” trained to sustain themselves by looting the local population’s crops. American mediators called for the Grebo to be included in the Republic, but these requests went unanswered. Imposition of high tariffs and strict regulation at the trading points by a corrupt bureaucracy meant that the coastal area would remain in a state of chronic unrest.

In 1914, the outbreak of World War I dramatically changed the balance of power. The British imposed an embargo that brought maritime trade to a halt. Starved for income, the Liberian government tried make up the deficit by imposing a hut tax. This led to a general uprising in 1915. At the height of the rebellion, the local Liberian population requested assistance from the UK. However, American warships supported the settlers, and quickly put down the rebellion, including burning villages and executing rebel leaders.

By the 1930s, the Liberian government was faced with chronic monetary shortages. Their top-down economy enabled them to sign agreements with the Spanish government and Dutch companies that sent thousands of people to forced labor, which differed from slavery only in name. This followed the 1926 Firestone Agreement to lease 10% of the entire agricultural area of Liberia to the tire company. The government sank further into debt, a trap from which it emerged only half a century later.

The poor outlook on the economic horizon given the impending world recession, and the heavy tax burden on the people led to another outbreak of unrest in 1931. Only the infusion of American capital to construct an US Navy base and the integration of Liberia into the war effort during World War II managed to calm the situation.

The representation of the Grebo in the history of Liberia written by the Monrovian-based government in the 1970s was completely biased. Even today, there is no accurate portrayal of them, even though they produced (among other things) the war mask that hung in Picasso's dining room in Montrouge, and thus had a major impact on twentieth century art.

The incongruity between the conventional image of the Grebo and reality based on historical facts is especially jarring given that this “tribe of bloodthirsty cannibals” established one of the first democracies, which implemented the principle of separation of powers and guaranteed rights and freedom for members of all ethnic groups in the society. Further, there was clear separation between ceremonial appointments-for-life and short-term civil appointments, with mechanisms for rotating between the various age groups. It is possible to document an unbroken transition of social and governmental structures from the eighteenth century to the present day.

The most comprehensive work on this group, *Traditional History and Folklore of the Glebo Tribe*, was written by J. M. Johnson and published in 1957 by the Liberia Ministry of the Interior. A copy of this has been preserved in the Library of Congress. From Johnson and other researchers, we learn that the basic unit of Grebo settlements is the *panton*, each of which consists of a main patrilinear family and its branches. Each *panton* sends a representative to the council of elders, known as the *panton nyefue,* who was usually the oldest healthy male in the family*.* The size of each village or city was assessed according to the number of these units.

The council of elders would choose the *krogoba* or *worabanh* – city leader – who serves in this position for the rest of his life. However, his leadership is not absolute, in that he does not have the authority to oust members from the council of elders. The council and its leader are responsible for the civil leadership of the village or city. In the past, the leader was viewed as a sort of civilian king, when he entered or left the village, he was accompanied by drums and ceremonies. Most of these civilian kings were chosen from the primary dynastic line of settlement’s founders, although the position was not necessarily hereditary.

Like other West African societies, the social structure is based on age groups. Among the Grebo, the three groups are:

*Gnbade*: elders, who serve on the village council

*Sedibo:* mid-aged adults, most of whom are married and with families

*Keyabo:* youth with no political influence, but who serve on work crews, etc.

Another important role is that of *krogba* the head of the army, who is elected by the middle age group. Roles that are not part of this structure include the *deyabo* (doctors) responsible for maintaining relations among the age groups and with members of West Africa secret societies, such as the “tiger” and “snake” societies.

During times of war, the head of the army had the authority to overrule the council of elders and take command. The person holding this important role had to receive the blessing of an oracle who lived in the Putu Mountains, now part of Liberia’s Sapo Nature Reserve. The oracle’s decision regarding the head of the army was final and could not be appealed.

Another position elected by the council of elders was the *bodio* (leopard mouth) who supervised religious community life, kept the perpetual ritual fire burning, and maintained the prayer houses where religious relics were kept.

The first missionaries who arrived in the Cape Palmas area on Liberian coast were surprised by the Grebos’ complex governmental systems, and their taboos and burial customs. The *bodio* priest’s black clothing and his various roles such as maintaining a perpetual fire and the altar with horns led them to develop theories that the Grebo culture had origins in Judaism.

It is possible to track the history of settlements and villages from the time of their establishment, through records on people who were appointed to the life-long roles, which included their names and the dates of their deaths.

One Grebo origin myths dates back to 1699. A group of people from the Niger region, fearing slave hunters, fled to the coastal area with their leader *pudi momolla*. During their river journeys, some of their boats capsized (*wlebo).* The people who swam, called the *wlebo,* became the founders of the people called the We. Those who succeeded in navigating the rapids with the agility of monkeys (*glebo*) became the *Gle* people, also called the Grebo, or the monkey people.

Another origin myth refers to an elephant tusk, sunk deep in a lake in the Putu Mountains, which contained a magical substance that would grant the power to conquer the coastal plain. Only a hunter who could dive and drink from the water would be able to lead a group of warriors to victory. After completing this task, the ivory tusk would transform into a metal bracelet, which would symbolize the hunter’s election as leader. The hunter who returned with the metal bracelet and became the first leader was Nyama Kewa. On their way to the coastal plain, the founding fathers stopped and established a city they called Pahn, now identified with the city of Zwedru, the administrative center of Grand Gedeh County, which includes the Putu mountain range in Liberia’s Sapo Nature Reserve.

Until today, the city is the location of the oracle whose blessing is needed to appoint a new head of the army.

The Grebo villages bordering the Sapo Nature Reserve are geographically isolated. The very mention of their name protected the community throughout the Liberian civil war in the 1990s, and the Grebo were largely left alone.

In 2015, contact was made with Mr. Williams, who served as a *bodio* in one of the communities, to finance infrastructure works in the village. Meetings were held outside the village, at a hunting lodge near Zerikore. As the relationship deepened, the meetings were moved to John Davis town in the Sapo.

During these meetings, the use of sacred items to be sold was demonstrated, such as the Grebo divination boards used to choreograph ceremonies to worship the ancestors and the spirits of the forest. These rituals were performed by society members at night, in the depths of the sacred forest, between the roots of the cotton silk tree.

There are strong ties between the Garbo communities in the Ivory Coast and Liberia. Marriages between them are customary, to expand kinship circles beyond the local group. Before the civil war, the Liberian government sponsored camps in the forest, and hosted groups from the Ivory Coast and Guinea, where forest ceremonies had been completely banned. The government in Monrovia also supported the establishment of a local museum of forest cultures. The museum was established by William Siegman, who contributed to documenting this heritage.

Over the years, the Grebo communities in Liberia and those in the Ivory Coast developed different formal languages.

Artwork from the Ivory Coast underwent a process of abstraction and refinement, creating a complex collage of elements symbolizing the forest culture. For example, the eye slits in a mask from the Ivory Coast are hidden by a diagonal lattice symbolizing the branches of forest trees. However, in Liberian masks, which were created in more isolated communities, the original iconography has been preserved almost unchanged. They correspond precisely with illustrations in literature from the beginning of the twentieth century. The two communities used to exchange masks during joint ceremonies, as evidenced by the masks that each society preserved in their treasury houses. This issue of the formal aspects of the different Grebo communities clearly requires further research.