

**Gender, Palm Oil and
The *Lady Bassa*
Guinea Coast, 1920's**



Lady Bassa

Buchanan Liberia

Grand Bassa County, 1925

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Dina and Michael Weiss Collection of African Art

Printed in Israel



(1) "Bundu Girls" Alphonso Lisk-Carew – 1914 Sierra Leone

Secret Societies

Throughout the 20th century, survival in the Guinea coast rural regions was much dependent on communal effort. Life evolved through interdependences within a dynamic, albeit hierarchical, social order. Its course was constrained by the lineage with which one was associated or indebted to either by birth, marriage or choice as a guest of the family elder.

A prerequisite for becoming a member of the community was enrolment, by puberty, in either of the two main Guinea coast's secret societies – Poro for men and Sande for women (1). These societies regulated all aspects of life, from birth to death. They were responsible for enabling one to find his or her place, as well as maintaining it in balance, within this elaborate dual and ever-changing hierarchical social order, i.e., person position within his or her lineage as well as within his or her society.



(2) "Coming out of age" Mona Sturges – 1997 Liberia, Grand Bassa county

Even today, the Sande society still encompasses most aspects of life of the female rural population on the Guinea coast, with a current estimated participation of more than three million members (2). The concept was institutionalized in the 1985 national census in Liberia as “mawae” – those who eat together from the same pot, formalizing the existence of semi-independent family units consisting of only women and children.

The secret societies were organized in localized tribal chapters, each recognizing the hierarchy and power symbols of its neighbor. Even so, no evidence of structural pan-tribal leadership was ever found.

Although evidence of the Sande society is documented as early as the fifteenth century, its actual practices and liturgy are mostly unknown. A secrecy oath taken by its initiates, is closely kept and is held as a great virtue. Sande society research is limited as the Poro attracted most of the interest of 20th century anthropologies.

Quelling The Hinterland

In the 1920's, when this monumental Bassa maternity figure was crafted, the Christian Americano Liberian government in Monrovia, under the presidency of Charles King, enjoyed for the first time a positive cash flow. This was due, in part, to the famous Firestone rubber agreement. From this position of relative strength, the government was able to use its resources to consolidate its control over the Liberian hinterland (3).

The Liberian government systematically impoverished the rural areas under its control. The local population's iron-rod based currency system was rendered obsolete (4), making the wealth of the elders and the



- (3) Liberian Frontier Force T.D.Nevin
- (4) Kissi Money DMW collection.



(5) "Elders Imprisoned" Tribes of the Liberian hinterland - G.Schwab

community disappear overnight. A new tax, the Hut tax, payable only in international hard currency, was forcefully enforced. The male indigenous Guinea coast secret societies, which regulated all aspects of life were outlawed, their elders jailed (5). The all-powerful Poro society was suspended. Human rights violations committed against the rural population were brushed aside by branding their leaders as members of the notorious Tiger association, or cannibals. Government persecutions induced poverty which in turn stripped the villages of their male power, resulting in continual erosion of the historical male position within these traditional societies.

Revolving Door in Gender Related Roles

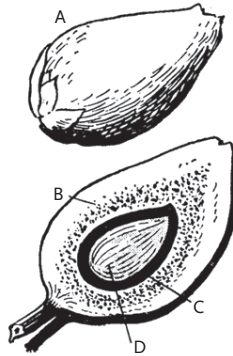
In these hard times it is not surprising to see that women had to take on a more active role in the community, filling in for the males as the breadwinners, and also as keepers of the tradition. This also led to the women's Sande society to take on more power and importance.



(6) Oil Palm fruit



(7) 1920's Blue Band advertisement
Grace's Guide to British
Industrial history



(8) Palm fruit kernel.
A – Fruit of the palm
B – Pulp containing palm oil
C – Hard shell
D – Kernel from which palm
kernel oil is extracted





The main cash crop of the region, the oil palm fruits (6), was processed by female working parties overseen by Sande “big women”. The plantation owners kept the more desirable palm oil, which was extracted from the pulp of the fruit, and the women’s organizations received the fruit kernel oil, in lieu of payment (7).

At the beginning of the 20th century the main type of fat used in margarine, beef fat, was about to change. The lack of available beef fat coupled with new techniques in the hydrogenation of plant materials, made the use of vegetable oils in the formulation of margarine not only possible for the first time, but much more economically viable. During 1900 and 1920, margarine was made with a mixture of animal fats and vegetable oils such as palm kernel oil. As a result, palm kernel oil became a sought after commodity in the international markets, being used as a key ingredient for making margarine and soap (8). The oil fetched high prices on the international markets. Traditionally the men

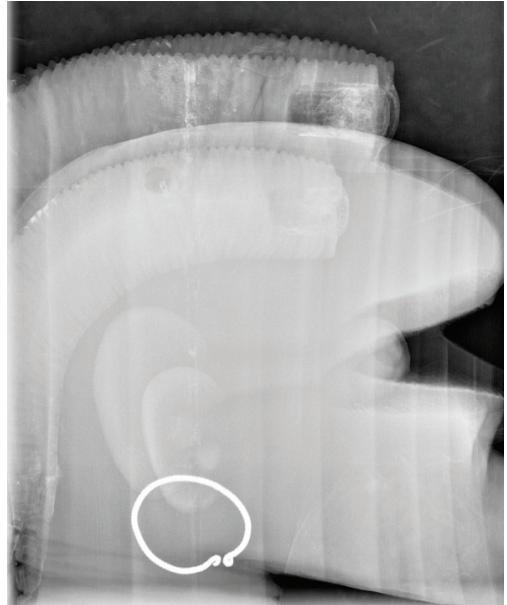
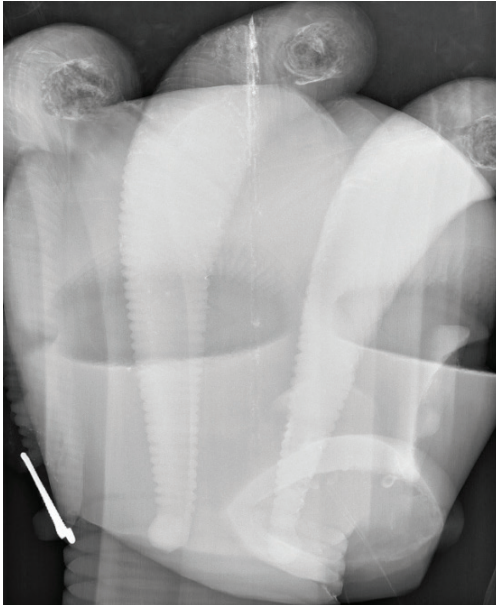


(9) "Gani Ceremony" W.C.Siegmann – 1980 Indiana University archive.



(10) "Bassa – Liberia"
D.M.W Collection – h 86,5 cm
Kerchache Collection – h 44,4 cm

were responsible for selling the crops to the city merchants. The merchants sold the crops on international markets but kept most of the profits to themselves. Once the men actively refused to be exploited and sell to the merchants at such low prices, they were persecuted and jailed, and the Sande took over the direct commerce. As a result, the Sande officials had all of the sudden access to relatively great wealth and power. This was manifested in elaborate rituals and



(11) M.R.I Asaf Harophe Radiology labs – Israel

liturgical paraphernalia thus magnifying reality, through the increase of body imaginary boundaries. This Bassa female ritual figure sheer size, (10) quadruple the size of similar figures from different periods, is a possible reflection of the Sande society sudden but short change in its socio-economic status.

The Lady Bassa

Exactly which role this figure played in the shift of roles and power – from male to female, from Poro to Sande – can only be guessed. However, its sheer enormity and sculptural complexity suggests a structural indoor secret liturgy – in which every aspect was carefully orchestrated.

Unlike masks and other figures which were celebrated in motion, and were part of a carefully choreographed performance, here the drama was achieved, probably, by means of planned illumination effects and sound, thus enabling a static figure to turn to life through a play of light, shadows and music.

The three cornucopia-like horns, which comprise the figure's coiffure are still sealed and filled with potent "medicine" (11), which was supposed to activate a protection zone around the Sande society house in which it resided. Such horns filled with "medicine" were a common theme in Sande iconography, and



(12) Sande Mask – Liberia Charles Miller III Collection



(13) Scarified patterns engraved in the figure's back



(14) Gani Graduate Mona Sturges – 1997 Liberia, Grand Bassa

are depicted in many Bondo masks (12).

The figure is depicting an initiate participating in the “Gani ceremony” in which following the initial seclusion the initiates seat in stony silence with downcast eyes outside the Sande enclosure on a mat, lined up in a row with legs stretched out in front of them deaf to the calls and praise surrounding them while their relatives are making a show of not being able to find the daughter or sister they had given to the Sande Elders (9).

The complex scarified patterns engraved in the figure’s back can be read from top to bottom (13), signifying east to west, mirroring the way one enters the Sande association house - where the initiates live for a year during their initiation process. The patterns begin with a cluster of triangles, an analogy of cultivated fields, the women’s sphere of birth and germination followed by a section of the oil palm, representing the Sande house as a protected zone, separated by a zig zag line, representing a river which acts as a barrier isolating and the village and everyday

life depicted as a palm kernel, from the bottom, the West, the primeval wood, Poro and death.

Such patterns can be seen even today (14), etched using kaolin chalk, which is still applied daily onto the bodies of young Bassa Sande initiates. The clay acts as protective shell, physically beautifying the skin, eliminating its flows as well as branding the girls as off-limit for men. Girls in this liminal state are considered especially seductive, they are still virgins and yet already excised and, therefore prepared for sexual activity. Applying white clay signifies the departure from the natural world of black people into that of the dead, a world of white invisible spirits (16).

In the early 1990's, due to the mayhem of the Liberian civil wars, a Bassa community near Buchanan fled to neighboring Guinea where they sold this maternity figure to Mr. Amadou Diaw, a renowned antiques dealer in Conakry. Mr. Diaw kept it for nearly 15 years and cherished it as his most prized possession. In 2010 it

was purchased by the author, a sale which was published in the local press (15). In 2015, Mr. Diaw commissioned a full scale copy of the statue using photographs. The statue was chemically dated to 1925, using IRS technology in a renowned Swiss laboratory. An MRI scan revealed that the organic "medicine" is still intact.

Michael Weiss 2016

Amadou Diaw, Antiquaire au quartier Almamyah

« Nous avons des arts anciens qui datent de plus de deux cent ans et qui gardent encore leur forme primitive »

La richesse des pays africains dans les sociétés traditionnelles se manifestait à travers des corps de métiers, tels que la sculpture, le dessin et autres. Pour pérenniser ces acquis, il fallait la participation des antiquaires. C'est ainsi que nous avons rencontré M. Amadou Diaw, le remplaçant de M. Sidikiba Sidimé de la grande maison des Antiquaires du quartier Almamyah, commune de Kaloum.

Depuis combien de temps, vous pratiquez ce métier ?

J'ai débuté ce métier en 1973 au Zaïre, actuelle République de Congo. Donc, il y a plus de 40 ans, j'ai fait une série de voyages dans les plusieurs pays africains afin de mieux maîtriser ce travail avant de revenir m'installer au pays natal.

Comment êtes-vous venu à ce travail ?

J'ai appris cette fonction ou ce métier auprès de mon beau père, Sidikiba Sidimé de la grande famille Sidimé de Kankan. Lui aussi, à son tour, est l'un des héritiers de cette maison. Je vous précise que plusieurs antiquaires de notre pays sont passés par cette maison. Elle est d'une importance capitale pour la Guinée.

Quel est l'avantage de ce travail ?

Tout d'abord, c'est un héritage, donc l'enfant apprend directement auprès du père. Le problème des frais scolaires ne se pose pas ainsi que d'autres tracasseries liées à la scolarisation. Un autre avantage est qu'on tire de ce métier, est la connaissance de plusieurs objets d'arts anciens. Mieux, le secret des vieux y sont cachés et nécessaire pour la connaissance de l'apprenti. Nous avons des arts anciens qui datent de plus de deux cent (200) ans et plus, mais, qui gardent encore leur forme primitive.

Comment faites-vous pour écouler vos produits ?

Merci, je vous fais comprendre que c'est de là que nous rencontrons beaucoup de problèmes. Car, nos produits sont difficilement écoulés actuellement, compte de

son caractère spécifique d'arts anciens. Nos principaux clients sont des expatriés qui séjournent dans notre pays. Et vous n'êtes pas sans savoir que depuis l'apparition de la fièvre Ebola, plusieurs Européens ou Blancs ne viennent plus dans les pays touchés par le virus Ebola. Vous savez, ce sont souvent ces Blancs qui connaissent l'intérêt des arts anciens. Donc, à part de ceux-ci, l'écoulement ou la vente est très difficile et très rare.

Avez-vous un message ?

Oui ! Je demande au gouvernement guinéen de faire face aux antiquaires. Il est important de connaître le savoir et du faire savoir les secrets de nos sociétés traditionnelles aux générations montantes. Et c'est justement l'antiquaire qui peut, une fois assisté par l'Etat,

donner tous les secrets des objets d'anciens arts. Et, il est très facile de donner une assistance éventuelle en prenant quelques unes de nos charges courantes. Donc, je demande alors au gouvernement de prendre en compte notre corps de métier, car nous sommes de véritables détenteurs de la vie des sociétés traditionnelles. Nous avons beaucoup de choses qui ne doivent pas disparaître

maintenant. C'est là notre combat de tous les jours. Pour cela, on a besoin d'une assistance pour mieux conserver nos objets d'arts anciens. Beaucoup de jeunes ignorent aujourd'hui le caractère culturel des arts anciens. Il faut absolument faire connaître à la génération montante ce côté culturel des arts anciens que nous, nous incarnons quotidiennement.

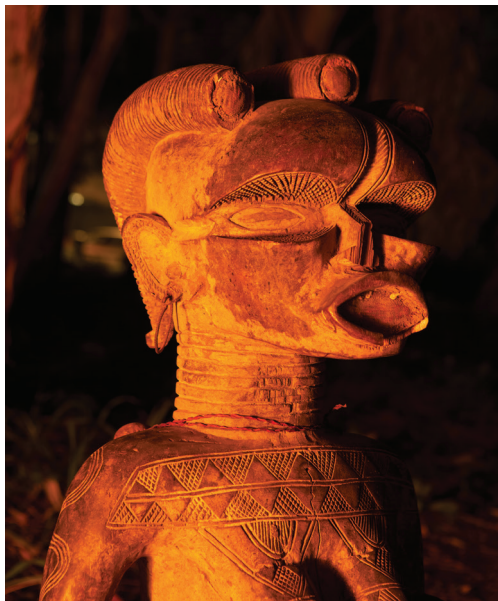
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WEEK-END INFO - N°004 DU 16 DECEMBRE - 2014



(16) Mona Sturges – 1997 Liberia, Grand Bassa county





(17) "Lady Bassa" – 1929, 86×47×74, Guinea



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