**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 enrollment, by puberty, in either of the two main Guinea coast's secret societies – *Poro* for men and *Sande* for women. These societies regulated all aspects of life, from birth to death, and 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.

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. The concept was institutionalized in the 1985 national census in Liberia as "*mawaee*" – those who eat together from the same pot - formalizing the existence of semi-independent family units 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 in limited as the *Poro* attached most of the interest of 20th century anthropologies.

**Quelling The Hinterland**

In the 1920s, when this monumental Bassa maternity figure was crafted, the Christian Americano Liberian government in Monrovia, under the presidency of Charles King, for the first time enjoyed 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.

The Liberian government systematically impoverished the rural areas under its control. The local population’s iron-rod based currency system was rendered obsolete, making the wealth of the elders and the 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, and 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 population, 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 taking on more power and importance.

The main cash crop of the region, the oil palm fruits, 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.

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. Between 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. The oil fetched high prices on the international markets. Traditionally the men were responsible for selling the crops to the city merchants. The merchants sold the corps 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. 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 liturgical paraphernalia thus magnifying reality, through the increase of body imaginary boundaries. This Bassa female ritual figure sheer size, quadruple than what is the size of similar figures from different periods, is a possible reflection of the Sande society sudden but short change in its socioeconomic 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 come 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", 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 are depicted in many Bondo masks.

The figure is depicting an initiate participating in the “Gani ceremony” – a coming out graduation ceremony in which following initial seclusion the Sande initiates seat outside the Sande enclosure in a stony silence with downcast eyes, lined up in a straight row deaf to the calls and praise heaped at them by their relatives who are making a show of not being able to find the daughter or sister they have entrusted to the Sande elders.

The complex scarified patterns engraved in the figure's back can be read from top to bottom, 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, 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.

In the early 1990s, 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. In 2015, Mr. Diaw haunted by the figure memory commissioned a full scale copy of the statue using photographs.

But by 2020 died in seclusion.

The statue was chemically dated to 1925, using IRS technology in a renowned Swiss laboratory. An MRI scan revealed that the organic "medicine" activating the figure is still intact.