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TITLE: THE BONDOS SECRET SOCIETY: FEMALE CIRCUMCISION AND THE  
SIERRA LEONEAN STATE

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the place of the Bondo secret society, whose precondition for membership is female genital cutting (FGC), in Sierra Leone's post-war politics. The Bondo society is considered a repository of gendered knowledge that bestows members with significant forms of power in the local social context. Members, especially Bondo society leaders, are dedicated to the continued practice of FGC even amidst calls for its eradication. The Bondo is much sought after and overwhelmingly supported by the political elite due to the role it plays in ordering community life and its position as the depository of cultural repertoires (Swidler, 2001:24). Most women gravitate towards the Bondo who also use it to shape and reshape their identity. For example, as part of post war recovery, I argue, the Bondo was employed by political actors to legitimate and extend the hegemony of political movements. This analysis, therefore, examines the complicated interplay of power between politicians and the Bondo society members in the context of an international outcry against the practice of FGC. The thesis argues that the Bondo society leaders are keen to maintain the status quo because of the forms of power accessible to them in the local socio-economic and political context. Faced with an over-arching discourse of eradication and change concerning the FGC procedure, the Bondo society has in turn fashioned a counter-discourse framed in terms of "defending traditional culture" to forestall changes that could affect the "privileges" they access. I explore the tensions of this situation in this thesis. That is, on the one hand, the tension brought about by opposition between the FGC reform agenda and the Bondo society members' attempts to resist change in the ritual practice. On the other hand, I am concerned with the tension in the patronage they enjoy from politicians who are caught up in a double bind situation: they simultaneously need support from Bondo members but are, at the same time, reliant on international development aid. In exploring power from below, I examine Bondo society's community stock of knowledge and how this symbolic power is employed in Sierra Leonean politics. This does not lead to a vindication of FGC but underscores the complex social, economic and political meanings embedded in the Bondo and in discourses of power in Sierra Leone. The thesis points out that eradication advocates need to take account of the various dimensions of the Bondo society's embeddedness in relation to both state and society.

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## **List of Acronyms**

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council.
AIM	Amazonian Initiative (a local NGO championing against FGC based in Freetown, Sierra Leone).
APC	All People's Congress.
CDF	Civil Defence Forces.
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.
CGG	Campaign for Good Governance.
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (a civilian intelligence agency of the United States government).
CTN	Cotton Tree News radio, a partnership project between the University of Sierra Leone's Mass Communication Department and International donor agencies. CTN produces UN radio programmes.
DVD	An optical disc storage media format commonly used for storing videos.
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States.
FC	Female Circumcision.
FGC	Female Genital Cutting.
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation.
FSU	Family Support Unit (An annexed Sierra Leone police wing in charge of domestic cases).

HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus.
IDP	Internally Displaced People.
IDRC	International Development Research Center .
IMF	International Monetary Fund.
INGO	International Non Governmental Organization.
IRB	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus.
KWDA	Katanya Women's Development Association.
MP	Member of Parliament.
NGOs	Non Governmental Organizations.
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia.
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council.
ODA	Overseas Development Agency.
PRO	Public relations officer.
RUF	Royal United Front.
SLPP	Sierra Leone Peoples Party.
UK	United Kingdom.
UN	United Nations Organization.

UNDP	United Nations Development Program.
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund.
UNICEF	United Nations Children Emergency Fund.
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women.
USA	United States of America.
WAVES	Women Against Violence (A local NGO championing against FGC based in Bo, Sierra Leone).
WHO	World Health Organization.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction and background of Study

#### 1.0 Introduction

Over the years, debates in the “Western” world and other parts of the world through the media of mass communication have revolved around a broad range of local cultural practices which appear incompatible with the health, well-being and human rights of both women and children. These “harmful traditional” practices include, but are not limited to, polygamy, sati, forced and early child marriage, food taboos, wife sharing, wife inheritance, male child preference, widowhood rites and honour killings. However, it was the ritual practice called “Female Circumcision” (FC), also known as “Female Genital Mutilation” (FGM) that sparked off the most unsettling debates. National governments that have practicing communities within their frontiers have come up against an international discourse calling for an end to this practice. The international community explicitly called for the eradication of these practices by increasingly linking eradication to the disbursement of international development aid (Boyle, 2005). The United Nations Organization (UN) through its affiliate the United Nations Children Emergency Fund and United Nations Population Fund (UNICEF; UNFPA), defined “FGM” to mean:

all procedures involving the partial or total [amputation] of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reason (WHO UNFPA and UNICEF, 1997: 1-2; 2008:1).

The World Health Organization (1997:1) has, furthermore, classified genital cuttings into four categories:

Type I - Excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris

Type II - Excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora

Type III - Excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation)

Type IV - Unclassified: includes pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia; cauterization by burning of the clitoris



and surrounding tissue; scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice (angurya cuts) or cutting of the vagina (gishiri cuts); introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause bleeding or for the purposes of tightening or narrowing it; and any other procedure that falls under the definition of female genital mutilation given above.

The above definitions and categories, can be said to be problematic, since they are grounded in a Western conception of health. That is to say, they presuppose the universality of a particular concept of “health” whereas ideas about what is healthy vary across history and space. Health is a socially and culturally constructed reality (Foster & Anderson 1978; Kleinman; 1980; Romanucci-Ross et al, 1997 and Hahn & Inhorn, 2009). Although WHO recognizes the existence of alternative medicines and by implication local therapeutic knowledge systems, it can be argued that it privileges the hegemony of the Western biomedical health model over local health concepts in its language and policy recommendations. This implies the rejection of alternative health practices and the communities that practice them. Moreover, even when no two societies practice FGC alike or for the same reasons, WHO’s definition homogenizes many different practices by subsuming them under the heading of “circumcision”. The practices reflect different local nomenclatures and are based on different cultural logics, which tend to be represented using all-encompassing concepts such as culture, religion, and aesthetics (Njambi, 2004).

Female Circumcision is practiced in 28 African countries, in some Middle Eastern countries and among immigrant populations in Europe, North America, the United States and Australia. Sierra Leone has an approximate 80-90 percent prevalence rate of FGM (Skaine, 2005:235). Debate on the practice of FGC has in the recent past reverberated across both local and international fora since the feminist “second wave” of the late 1970s. This, added to the global traffic of people, goods, ideas and services has turned a culturally specific rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1966) into an issue of great international concern. What is arguably lacking in such cases is an adequate understanding of the entanglement of the ritual practice with local politics. This case-based study of “female circumcision” among the Mende of Sierra Leone provides an arena for an examination of the intersection of this local rite of passage with national politics in Sierra Leone. Specifically it examines the simultaneous subscription and resistance to the international human rights discourse that calls for the eradication of female genital cutting practices on the part of the Sierra Leonean political community. Sierra Leonean politicians maintain an ambivalent posture in relation to the international discourse advocating the eradication of FGC. In this respect,

the politicians are simultaneously using the mobilizing skills of the Bondo secret society whose central rite for membership is FGC in order to foster their political careers while covertly challenging the international normative order since they need international development aid. Theoretically, this study shows how the practice is appropriated by various actors (the state, the Soweis<sup>1</sup> and politicians of different kinds) who support the continued existence of the Bondo society so that they can continue to apportion its associated symbolic meanings for their own interests. The cultural significance thus vested in this practice, therefore, calls for a re-evaluation of the agency of participants. I accordingly seek to unfold the politics behind the Bondo secret society, the struggles over the definition of the practice among different contending actors and the contradictions such struggles involve.

The anti-FGC advocacy literature has variously defined the ritual practice using expressions such as “Female Genital Mutilation”, “Female Genital Castration” and “Female Genital Surgery”. These expressions are, it can be argued, suggestive of an ideological dichotomy - Western/Non-Western or even superior/inferior. “FGM”, for instance, presents initiates as “mutilated”, which to those involved may be seen as an insult. On the other hand, the use of the expression “Female Genital Castration” conjures up an image of infertility whereas members of the Bondo society, at least, maintain that the practice specifically prepares women for motherhood. This terminological debate shows the different framings of the issue and the multiple conceptions of health and rights at stake. Practitioners are arguing that it is their right to practice their culture and accuse their critics of neo-colonialism. From the perspective of those focused on human and reproductive rights, however, “mutilation” reinforces the view that the practice involves a violation of women’s human rights, a form of culturally endorsed violence and potentially, child abuse. It was against the backdrop of this terminological divide and the conflicts that it expresses that the UN in 1999 drew attention to the risk of “demonizing” certain cultures, religions and communities. Since then, the term “cutting” has been increasingly used to avoid alienating practicing communities.

This study adopts Tangwa’s (1999:183) definition of female genital cutting as “any surgical intervention on the genitals of a human being for cultural, religious or purely secular and profane reasons”. Although, in the field, the expression “Female circumcision” provided a common discursive ground with my respondents, I will use the term Female

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<sup>1</sup> Soweis is the local name for the women who are responsible for overseeing initiation into *Bondo*. I use this term throughout my thesis to refer to FGC practitioners.

Genital Cutting (FGC) in this thesis. I will only use FC when making a direct quote from respondents or from theoretical texts. Among practicing communities in Sierra Leone, FGC is subsumed in the wider initiation procedures of the Bondo society. For that reason, in local nomenclature FGC is tangentially referred to as “put Bondo” (denoting the occasion when girls are first taken to the initiation camp) and “pull Bondo” (which means “graduation” from the Bondo initiation camp that confers membership to the society). The “pulling of Bondo” is marked by a major ceremony called “the coming out ceremony”. I will use these terms, together with the term “Soweï” that refers to female initiators, in my thesis, in order to contextualise my writing.

As suggested, this study examines the implications of this customary practice in both Sierra Leonean national and international politics. Local politicians are known to woo members of the Bondo secret society whose badge of membership is female circumcision for votes. This means that the ritual procedure is invested with wider significance within Sierra Leonean politics. Therefore, my concern is to provide an “emic” view of the dynamics of the ritual procedure and of its changes over time through a case study of the Bondo secret society’s relationship with the Sierra Leonean state. Therefore, though momentum for social change concerning FGC has been generated, cultural institutions such as secret societies perform specific functions within their socio-cultural setting. In this regard, I argue that FGC eradication campaigns need to situate their discourse within the social context of the practice.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem and Research Questions**

Sierra Leonean politicians constantly distance themselves from condemnations of female genital cutting. The Bondo secret society is believed to be the custodian of particular gendered knowledge, and has a wide appeal across the country and across almost all ethnic groups. During the 2002 elections, the lone female candidate was reportedly chased away during her campaigns in Kenema for allegedly being against FGM. Given the society’s place in Sierra Leonean politics as a mobilizing force in politics, public discussions of FGM are not tolerated. The Bondo society is seen to be capable both of making and ruining the careers of politicians. Indeed I was told during a focus group meeting that “the politician who will ban Bondo society activities in Sierra Leone has not yet been born [...] No politician will stand in front of us and say she or he hates Bondo because they are afraid to lose their election”(Focus group 4 on 05/03/09 with Mende initiators). Following

the presentation of a paper at an international conference by a gynaecologist and prominent anti-FGM activist, Dr. Olayinka Koso Thomas, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shirley Gbujama is said to have joined forces with demonstrators against Koso in the capital city and protested to the President, saying: “We will sew up the mouth of those preaching against Bondo” and urged President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to stand firm for the society and “not to forget your roots”. In his reply, the President is said to have promised the society his total support, pointing out that he himself is “from a traditional background”. Consequently, many Sierra Leonean politicians since independence in 1961, including former Prime Minister Sir Milton Margai<sup>2</sup>, have preferred to court and cajole members of the Bondo by building them initiation centres or “bushes” in their constituencies and providing money to support the initiation of large groups of girls into the society.

This is the relationship which I focus on in this research: examining the dynamics of the relationship between politicians and Bondo adherents over time in the face of criticisms of the presumed harmful effects of the practice of FGC. More closely defined, empirical questions, deriving from this main problem include the following:

- 1) Why are politicians supporting the Bondo secret society and by extension, FGC?
- 2) What is the trajectory of the relationship between the Bondo secret society and the Sierra Leonean state?
- 3) In what ways has this alliance been affected by the global condemnation of FGC?
- 4) What is the place of the Bondo secret society in Sierra Leonean politics and what type of agency do initiated women have in national politics in Sierra Leone?
- 5) What is the impact of the alliance between the Bondo secret society and the state on the campaign to end FGC in Sierra Leone?
- 6) What factors are contributing (if any) to the present state of acceptance and contestation of FGC by particular individuals, groups and within the national political arena of Sierra Leonean politics?

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<sup>2</sup> As a medical doctor, he is reported to have closed ranks with the Bondo and provided medical care for initiators as well as continuing to throw his weight behind the society by building ‘bushes’ for its members.

## **1.2 Rationale of Study**

Whereas the literature on FGC is extensive, systematic studies (based on empirical research) about state alignment with the institution sustaining the practice are rare. It is, therefore, useful to conduct a study that will help social scientists to understand the tensions and conflicts that are taking place between pro- and anti-female genital cutting activists at the local, national and international levels. The situation in Sierra Leone is a particularly appropriate context in which to examine these questions. This study will, therefore:

- 1) Provide a historically-based account of the dynamics of the relationship between the Bondo secret society and the Sierra Leonean state.
- 2) Explore the local, national and international dynamics involved in the renegotiations of the meaning of FGC as well as the various tensions and alliances between groups and individuals within this society at various scales.
- 3) Fill the gap in the existing empirical literature and provide an alternative understanding of FGC within the context of tacit state condonation of the practice.

## **1.3 Justification for the Study**

My research design will reflect the objectives of critical feminist scholars like Abu-Lughod (2002), Mohanty (1988), Sylvester (1995), Lazreg (1988) and Spivak (1994), who question previous approaches that, they claim, have tended to present non-Western women as having no agency or as being merely victims. They point to a hypocrisy implicit in the Western feminist interventions in relation to the lives of so called “Third World” women, pointing out that “Third World” women are neither a homogenous entity, share the same interests nor have a monopoly on victimhood. In this respect, they call for a more attentive recognition and consideration of difference. Wally (1997), for instance, takes issue with the sensationalisation of the anti-FGC campaign and suggests that we should take cognizance of power relationships when examining the social context of the ritual practices as well as international controversies and power dynamics surrounding support and opposition to such practices everywhere. It is this concern to recognise both women’s

agency and local meanings associated with the practice which I have tried to take into account through the ethnographic part of my research.

I believe that a historically and ethnographically based account might provide alternative understandings about the meanings of the ritual practice and about its symbolic place in the alliance between the Bondo institution and the Sierra Leonean state. “Western” research curiosity has tended to focus on the most drastic form of FGC, especially infibulations in the Sudan (see Boddy 1982, Gruenbaum 1982), and mostly on the Islamic context. In my own research, in the context of Sierra Leone, which is markedly different I have tried to locate and understand the meanings of the practice as dynamic.

Secret societies, of course, have existed in other cultural and geographical settings, such as among the ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and include such examples as the legendary Hung Society of China (a women’s secret society that lasted for over 1,500 years). In the context of Africa, many secret societies are mainly tribal or clan based with some taking the shape of age-set societies (Henderson and Umunna, 1988:30; Imperato, 1980:47; Shetler, 2003: 385). Others are general ritual (masking) societies predominated by men (Borgatti, 1976; Peel: 1977; Weatherby, 1988). While others are secret dancing societies (Butt-Thompson, 2005; Magid, 1972). Following the colonial encounter in Africa, many of these secret societies, at the behest of colonial decrees, either retreated to well-nigh underground operations and soon ceased to exist (Smith, 2001:187) or were adapted into administrative posts called chieftaincy to serve in the colonial indirect rule policy (Magid, 1972:289). Magid (1972) writing in the 1970s noted that though external domination by colonialists had affected the socio-political significance of secret societies by super-imposing their place with “apparatus of modern government”<sup>3</sup>, secret societies and dance groups among the Idoma of Nigeria had started gaining political significance especially in local government politics (Ibid, 1972:302). Similarly, Fatton (1986:67) points out the centrality of secret societies and Morabouts in particular in Senegal’s local and parliamentary politics. The re-emergence of secret societies into the socio-political front

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<sup>3</sup> These are co-operative societies that offered credit facilities and marketing assistance, political parties and Christian denominations. As it were, these organs drew very few members because they did not capture the wider spirit of rural social past-time activities. Christianity, for example, was handicapped by the fact that it was a recent entry into the community social set-up and was at the same time distracted by the riveting denominational rivalries between Catholics and Methodists. Christianity was also overwhelmed by the enormous task of rolling out an education program in the community that diverted resources from its core objective of spiritual evangelism while political parties were dominated by village elites and “would be notables” thereby leaving little room for a wide array of people that did not fall into the elite class to engage meaningfully in community social recreation (Magid, 1972:300).

has something to do with the fact that the changes introduced during colonial administration were just the “super-structure” and thus not grounded in local and cultural dynamics of the people. For instance, they did not take care of rural social interaction needs of the common person (Magid, 1972:300). Like most of the secret societies studied by the scholars above, the Idoma secret society studied by Magid (1972) excludes women from its membership. This is unlike the Bondo secret society of Sierra Leone which is the subject of my study.

Most secret societies in Africa have also not managed to appeal widely across clans and tribal boundaries like the Sierra Leone Bondo society does. Secret societies with a wide appeal more closely related to the context in which I conducted my research are the Poro, secret society in Sierra Leone and Liberia, an exclusively male organisation, which I discuss at points below, the Yassi and Bondo women’s secret societies in Liberia. The Bondo secret society in Sierra Leone though an exclusively women’s society, is openly courted by male political elites in contemporary Sierra Leone in spite of international condemnation of the practice of FGC which is a precondition of Bondo society membership. It is the forces that animate this special relationship between political actors and the Bondo society in Sierra Leone that my research sets out to explore.

In unravelling this dynamic, I will therefore explore the transformations of the Bondo over time with a view to deciphering the agency of individuals and groups alike. Additionally, my study will partly complement gaps in previous anthropological studies carried out on the institutional structure of the Bondo secret society. In the next chapter, I explore the literature on FGC with an intention of situating my study more carefully in relation to the existing literature.

## CHAPTER 2:

### Multiple universalisms: the Case of Female Genital Cutting in Sierra Leone

#### 2.0 Introduction

*As is often the case, the debate concerning these women is less about the women themselves than about the appropriation of women as political symbols. In other words, it is about the use of women as ammunition in a polemic of central concern to their lives, but where the issue at stake is not the women's own interests, but, rather, the consolidation of the powers of others to define those interests (Winter, 1994:939).*

An extensive literature exists on the ritual practice of FGC, but studies on the intersection of the ritual practice with local, national and international politics are rare (for exceptions see, for example, Kenyatta (1937), Pedersen (1991), Boyle and Preves (2000). This is the case despite the fact that this local rite of passage has become an issue of great international concern. Both Kenyatta and Pedersen examined the double appropriation of women as a form of symbolic ammunition in colonial Kenya by the British. The Mau Mau anti-colonial fighters opposed attempts by the colonial government to outlaw female circumcision in Kenya. Such debates were represented both as a clash between modernity and tradition, on the one hand, and as situations in which white men, under the auspices of feminism, protected black women from black men. On their part, Boyle and Preves (2000) document the fact that states often publicly subscribe to international norms prohibiting FGC for instrumental reasons - this subscription is used as an excuse to acquire scarce development resources that are diverted to other domains of national life. They note a clash between this subscription to international norms and national political interests; i.e. the protection of community interests and minority rights, since most often it is minority ethnic communities within national populations that practice FGC. For fear of demonizing these minority ethnic communities, these governments are ambivalent: they position themselves both with and against the international community. A similar ambivalence is evidenced in the case of Sierra Leone, which is the focus of this study.



Like these studies, my research examines the Bondo secret society's alliance with the Sierra Leonean state. I document the centrality of the debates on FGC in Sierra Leonean politics, specifically the dynamic relationship between anti-FGC activists, the Bondo secret society practitioners and the state over time in the face of criticisms of the presumed harmful effects of the practice of FGC.

## 2.1 FGC a 'sado-ritual'?

The issue of female genital cutting has elicited a variety of responses in both academic and public discourse. The earliest commentators on the issues of FGC were feminist activists and scholars (Hosken, 1978; 1986; 1993, Daly 1978, Levin, 1980, Walker, 1992, Walker and Parmar, 1995). They argued that FGC was an assertion of male dominance over women. Daly, for instance, pronounced the practice to be a form of "violence against women", a "Sado-ritual" that provided evidence of a "cross-cultural hatred towards women" (Daly 1978:155,160). Saurel extended this line of thinking by terming FGC "a genocide of girls and women" with its victims 'buried alive'" (1981:1-3, 19 in James and Robertson, 2002:83). Another term used to describe the practice was sexual torture (Levin, 1980:200). Fran Hosken, the American radical feminist, publisher of *Women's International Network News* newsletter and author of *The Hosken Report: genital and sexual mutilation of females* is widely credited with popularising the term female genital mutilation (FGM) that was/is widely used, including by international organisations and development agencies such as the WHO, ODA, IDRC and the UN. Hosken, for example, argued that the politics of FGM was predicated on African males' affirmation of power over female sexuality: "FGM is a training ground for male violence. It is used to assert absolute male domination over women not only in Somalia but all over Africa (Hosken 1993:5).... [F]or African men to subject their own small daughters to FGM in order to sell them for a good bride-price shows such total lack of human compassion and vicious greed that it is hard to comprehend (Hosken 1993:16)."

Despite criticism that her book borders on "yellow journalism" (Hay, 1981:526), Hosken's report generated interest over FGC in the media and in significant feminist journals such as *Signs* (see James and Robertson, 2002:67; Hay, 1981:524). More recently, but in line with Hosken (1978), Gordon (1991) accuses patriarchy of perpetuating the practice with the aim of controlling women's sexuality among Muslims in Arab society (see also, Al-Hibri, 1982, Antoun, 1968, Beck and Keddie, 1980, Rugh, 1984). He takes issue with the relativist

position espoused in ethnographic studies such as that by Boddy (1982) which tries to contextualise FGC as it is practiced in Sudan, describing Boddy's assertion that FGC is a rite of passage as the most "venerated anthropological explanation" (Gordon, 1991:9). Boddy, in a rejoinder, contends that his essay captured "the epistemological tacking between humanist positivism and contextual non-positivism" in the FGC debate (1991:15). Boddy therefore makes use of a relativist conception of the practice in order to capture the ideological understanding of FGC in the social and politico-religious contexts of her geographical area of study. Although Boddy clearly makes the case for a relativist argument, it can be claimed she does not adequately address the question of how or why women accept the received wisdom that FGC is a necessary practice. It could be argued, then, that one should remain alert to the fact that relativist propositions can at times be used to mask the reality of widespread domination in society. Conversely, of course, Gordon's (1991) critical attack on cultural relativism privileges an alternative understanding of the FGC practice. It prioritises the need to make an ethical judgement about the practice, regardless of local meanings, but is arguably blind to the significance of the latter.

## 2.2 Patriarchy and FGC

Meanwhile, other feminist scholars have accused women perpetuating the FGC practice of suffering from "false consciousness" (Daly, 1978) and being "*Prisoners of Ritual*" (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989)<sup>4</sup>. These studies, therefore, lay the blame for the practice of FGC at the feet of patriarchy. However, it is important to recognise that patriarchy is not monolithic (see, e.g. Anzilotti 2002; Hardwick 1998; Kandiyoti 1988; Lee and Clark 2000; Miller 1998; Anthias, Yuval-Davis and Cain, 1992:105-106). Patriarchy has to be understood as dynamic, and should not be described in a way that implies the lack of either resistance or agency among those affected by it.

In other words, the way the practice of FGC is construed varies from one geographical space and time to another as pointed out by critical feminists (cf Waley, 1997; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty 2002). Though instances of oppression by patriarchy have been

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<sup>4</sup> The title of her widely circulated book is *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Circumcision in Africa*. She says: "I looked for villains in this conundrum but I didn't find one, I found instead men and women entrapped into in an antiquated ritual dating heavens knows how far back into history, unable to free themselves from its centuries old enmeshment, all of them it's prisoners" (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989 in James and Robertson, 2002:66).

widely documented in feminist studies, the way in which power is negotiated in FGC practicing communities in Africa can be complex, as this thesis will discuss. In the case of the Bondo secret society in Sierra Leone, women exert significant social control through the Bondo society and the leaders of the society are, therefore, much sought after by politicians who are keen to tap into the Bondo society's mobilising skills to foster their political interests and careers. As a result of this, discourses of FGC eradication in Sierra Leone have been met with acts of resistance from sections of women in FGC practicing communities and from local political elites. Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain" may be instructive here (see also Lorber, 1989:24). She argues that women routinely strategize to maximise alternatives available to them within patriarchy so as to safeguard their security and well-being. She notes that there are different forms of patriarchy with "distinct rules of the game" (1988:274). The two variants of patriarchy include male domination in sub-Saharan Africa and what she calls "classical patriarchy"<sup>5</sup>. She argues that women make bargains with the patriarchal order so as to keep space open for themselves. These "bargains" are met with resistance, in the context of sub-Saharan male dominance, and by accommodation in classic patriarchy. In the sub-Saharan patriarchal context, she observes that polygyny and its attendant marital insecurities are at the same time "matched by areas of relative autonomy"<sup>6</sup> which [women] strive to maximise" (1988:277). Changes to an existing "patriarchal bargain" tend to be resisted by the women involved<sup>7</sup>. Her key argument then, is for an understanding of patriarchy which is willing to deal with local specificities and negotiations. Indeed the author says reflectively about male dominance in sub-Saharan Africa that "accustomed as I was to only one type of patriarchy [classic patriarchy], I was ill prepared for what I found" (Ibid).

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<sup>5</sup> Under classical patriarchy, women accommodate male control but in return, more responsibility is then placed on the men to provide the women with security and well-being. A case in point is the case of pro-family feminists who opposed abortion despite the fact that it would give women more sexual freedom. Acceptance of abortion would spare the men responsibility and consequences of their sexual activity in a way that could potentially deprive women of security stemming from the responsibility placed on men (Kandiyoti, 1988:284). Though this form of male domination initially suppresses women's freedom, the women prefer to adopt interpersonal strategies through their sons and husbands to "maximise their security" thereby colluding in their own suppression rather than come into direct conflict with patriarchy and lose their "bargaining" base (Ibid: 274).

<sup>6</sup> She elaborates the concept of relative autonomy by stating that "Men's responsibility for their wives' support, while normative in some instances, is in actual fact relatively low. Typically, it is the woman who is primarily responsible for her own and her children's upkeep, including meeting the costs of their education, with variable degrees of assistance from her husband. Women have very little to gain and a lot to lose by becoming totally dependent on husbands, and hence they quite rightly resist projects that tilt the delicate balance they strive to maintain. In their protests, wives are safeguarding already existing spheres of autonomy" (Kandiyoti, 1988:277).

<sup>7</sup> "The [...] development projects discussed [...] tend to assume or impose a male-headed corporate family model, which curtails women's options without opening up other avenues to security and well-being. The women perceive these changes, especially if they occur abruptly, as infractions that constitute a breach of their existing accommodations with the male dominated order. Consequently, they openly resist them" (Ibid).

This, broadly, is the perspective which I wish to adopt. I understand FGC as an act of gender based violence, but I argue that in the case of Sierra Leone, it must be understood from the perspective of its practitioners - that is, in terms of the local and national context that shape women's lives. In this scenario, there is a need to investigate how women are using the gendered<sup>8</sup> knowledge of the procedures as powerful resources in their own right.

Other scholars have noted that although the practice is ordained by women, they are often following a wider "normative" belief that dovetails with the central guiding principle of patriarchy - men's ability to control women's sexuality for both biological and social reproduction. El Dawla (1999) argues that, in a context in which women are socially defined by their bodies and by regimes of practices controlling their bodies in ways that are different from men, it is possible for such women to be controlled and manipulated to uphold FGC despite the practice being harmful to them. She thus highlights the paradox that FGC is designed to curtail women's sexual appetite yet they are expected to be sexually responsive to their spouses during marriage. On her part Parker (1995:520), argues that the concern with FGC coincided with the emergence of feminist movements that championed sexual freedom of women when the clitoris was symbolically a powerful representation of women's sexual liberation and other rights (see also Obermeyer, 1999; Greer, 1984:201; Dorkenoo, 1994:17). This view of FGC as extenuating women's sexual pleasure has been central to the discussions of a number of feminist scholars (see Koso-Thomas, 1987; Lightfoot-Klein, 1989; Dorkenoo, 1994, Obermeyer and Reynolds, 1999:116).

Arguably, however, such a view is based on a Euro-American conception of sexuality (cf Walley 1997:421; Nnaemeka, 2005:193) whereas I would argue that "appropriate sexuality" should be understood as being socially and culturally constructed. In this respect, for example, Johnson describes how loud noises among the Mandinga in Guinea-Bissau are associated with wild animals, witches, spirits, etc., and thus experienced as negative and dangerous: "Screaming during sex – associated with sexual pleasure – is a highly inappropriate mixture of these human/nonhuman realms and thus considered to be dangerous" (2000,:228). For a commentary on the ideological aspects of the western discussion on sexuality of circumcised women see Ogbu (1997), Obermeyer (1999), Johnson (2000), Dellenborg (2004:79) and Ahmadu (2000). Alongside the question of

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<sup>8</sup> The Bondo society is considered a key source of knowledge on issues related to women and family life. This knowledge is used in some forms to structure community organisation in ways that empower members. A case in point is knowledge regarding traditional herbal medicines locally known as "the leaf" which can be used to cure common ailments and also for "protection" against malevolence (Field-notes 23/03/2009).

FGC as a practice which deprives women of sexual pleasure, harmful health effects associated with FGC have been presented as a compelling reason why the practice should be eradicated. In what follows, I analyse the literature on the harmful health effects of FGC and its impact on FGC eradication discourse in Sierra Leone.

### **2.3 The health and human security paradigm in the anti-FGC discourse**

FGC eradication discourses were for a long time mainly premised on the negative health effects associated with the practice. Jones *et al* (1999), for example, examined genital cutting practices in clinics in Burkina Faso and Mali with the intention of assessing the impact of the practice on women's health. They discovered that 93% of women in the Burkina Faso and 94% in the Mali clinics had undergone genital cuttings. Their regression analysis showed a significant positive relationship between the severity of genital cutting and the probability of gynaecological and obstetrical problems, although many of the complications frequently mentioned in the literature as harmful effects of FGC, for example, fistulae (Toubia, 1994) were quite insignificant in both samples (Jones *et al*, 1999:224). According to the survey, the most significant gynaecological complication was mainly associated with infibulations. Obermeyer (2005), however, has criticised such studies. She argues out that some respondents are unable to link the complicated medical jargon to their embodied experience. As a result of this, she argues, there is a need to domesticate and contextualize research instruments through the use of local meanings, and appropriate local equivalents of complex concepts. In other words, as with sexuality, health should be seen as a social and culturally constructed concept. Health is not something that we all agree on; it is couched in a "web of beliefs" about the human whole (Bishop 2004:482). On the other hand, Mackie (2003) contends that by appropriate standards of evaluation, FGC is injurious because it involves the irreversible alteration of a human capacity in the absence of meaningful consent.

Elsewhere, Kun (1997) notes that establishing an association between HIV and FGC might clearly demonstrate to village elders, opinion leaders and parents why FGC should be stopped. Using secondary sources, he maintains that infection and scarring due to FGC may lead to the risk of inflammation and bleeding during coitus. Exposure to blood during intercourse may, therefore, enhance the risk of infection. Moreover, he goes on to emphasize, the use of unsterilized instruments in FGC procedures poses the risk of infection and HIV transmission. Knives or blades may be contaminated with blood, since

five to ten women may undergo the procedure at the same time with the same instrument. Kun's survey study clearly draws attention to substantial potential health issues, but his findings are not unequivocally backed by ethnography. Drawing from her own field experience in Sudan, for instance, Parker (1995:518) reported that sterilized cutting tools were always used in initiation and noted that the association of unsterilized tools with FGC reflected a "moral panic" on the part of 'Western' observers (Johnsdotter, 2002). She says, "It is likely that future research investigating the biomedical and social aspects of female circumcision would benefit a great deal by not only acknowledging this but also accepting that intense emotions aroused by the subject among Western researchers are, to a large extent, influenced by Euro-American discourses and debates which have little or nothing to do with the study populations" (Parker, 1995:520). Statistics of HIV prevalence rates in respect of FGC do not necessarily show that there is a significant correlation between HIV and the practice (see Kun, 1997; DeWalque, 2006:3, 30; Klouman *et al*, 2005; Yount and Abraham, 2007:83). Yount and Abraham, for example, note that few survey studies on health effects associated with FGC use probability samples, many tend to use clinically based samples or self reports that may be inaccurate; the clinic and population based samples are beset with low and unreported response rates (see also Althaus, 1997). They further note that previous studies tended to employ an insufficient sample size, did not control for uncut women as a basis for comparison and thus were unable to extrapolate relative risk. They also point out that the association between FGC and health risks may be affected by un-measurable variables or "pathways" (2007:74). In view of these alleged deficiencies in previous studies (Kun, 1997, Klouman *et al*, 2005, Pepin *et al*, 2005), they conclude that levels of FGC have not been shown to be directly correlated with rates of HIV infection, at least in the specific Kenyan context which they examined (Yount and Abraham, 2007:83). Furthermore, it should be added that FGC practice is not frozen but is constantly undergoing change especially in response to the eradication discourse. Some practicing communities now opt for symbolic cuts while other FGC practicing communities are increasingly adopting a more medicalised or sanitised procedure (Njue and Askew, 2004). Despite the shortcomings of Kun's (1997) study, he does highlight potential negative effects that could result from the practice. However, arguably, such studies need to contextualise the practice of FGC in relation to local meanings and conceptualisations of health. Here again, then, responses to the practice return us to questions of universal versus relative judgements.

This line of thinking is extended by both Adbullahi Osman El-Tom (1998) and Boddy (1998). Boddy (1998) contends that using medical claims to condemn FGC ignores the fact that the health grounds espoused are not necessarily shared by the people whose culture is criticised. She argues that “social customs are not pathologies” (Boddy, 1998:90) and observes that FGC is often culturally understood to make bodies feel purified and brought under social control. She argues that the binary of presence/absence adopted by western feminists fails to capture the understandings related to FGC as practiced in various communities since, in those contexts, this binary view is not dominant. She observes that, “there is a clear material relevance to materialist misapprehension, one that unwittingly underwrites the continuation of neo-colonialist exploitation even as it judges Africans failure to modernise (Boddy, 1998:91). El-Tom, likewise, attributes the minimal effect of the campaign against FGC to a lack of connection between the eradication discourse premised on harmful health effects and the lived experience of the locals in what he calls a “paradigmatic gulf between the medical and the folk worlds” (1998:168). Many complications of FGC are, according to him, described in categories that mean little or nothing to those affected. Moreover, the causal link with FGC can only be taken at face value. Since circumcision has an almost total following among adults in the Darfur area which he studied, it is hard for the people to imagine the situation being otherwise. His study shows, in general, the extent to which the campaigns to contain FGC have been framed in “Western” medical terms (El-Tom, 1998:168). In a similar way, as we have seen, Obermeyer and Reynolds (1999:117) decry the extent to which the ‘harmful health effects’ discourse is presented in the literature using disembodied parts of FGC initiated women as illustrations of the dangers of FGC. They argue that such presentations invite “the reader [to] become both a voyeur looking at sexual organs and a clinician assessing damage.” Echoing El-Tom’s (1998:168) argument, Obermeyer and Reynolds also note that the [FGC] text is technical in its use of medical jargon, and “at the same time emphasises the unsterile environment, the crude instruments, the untrained operators, the blood, the pain and the screams. The visual images and textual descriptions thus elicit contradictory responses of horror and detachment, and express a profound ambivalence towards an ‘Other’ who is both human and object” (1999:117). They conclude by arguing that although logistical and ethical difficulties may explain some of the insufficiencies in research into the health effects of FGC, “other reasons must be invoked to explain why the harmful effects of female genital surgeries are so often assumed to be indisputably true that they are rarely posed as questions to be investigated. While this article does not directly analyse these reasons, it does suggest that they have to do with political, economic.

and ethical factors at both the local and international levels” (Obermeyer and Reynolds, 1999:118). They therefore invite scholars to put aside emotions in FGC debates and “‘suspend beliefs’ in the face of what appear to be violations of values such as bodily integrity, health, and informed consent”. Similarly, Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000:15) question the “laundry list of adverse health outcomes” associated with FGC, pointing out that most of the accounts on harmful health effects are biased since they rely on self accounts of retrospective survey data in which respondents simply state health complications they think they could have experienced without medical cross checking. They argue that FGC is often less extensive than assumed.

There is, finally, a related debate around the World Health Organisation’s refusal to endorse a strategy which seeks to medicalise FGC practice. In line with FGC eradication efforts, the WHO in 1982 declared it unethical for FGC to be performed by “any health official in any setting- including in hospitals or other health establishment” (Shell-Duncan, 2001:22; Boddy, 1998). Shell-Duncan (2001) takes issue with the ethical basis of WHO’s insistence on disallowing medicalisation of FGC<sup>9</sup>. She notes that the WHO is motivated by an aim of hastening the elimination of a dangerous practice yet its approach continues to allow women to die of preventable conditions. She proposes the medicalisation of female “circumcision” as a harm reduction strategy. She thus brings to the discussion the concept of harm reduction borrowed from public health and points up the dilemma it engenders. On the basis of the above, therefore, we can argue, that it is imperative to analyse the harmful health effects discourse within its local context if we are to avoid adopting a simple binary in which “Western rational medicine” opposes “traditional primitive practice”. Such an approach would lend credence to, and make more effective, the anti-FGC campaign and hopefully help lead towards an eradication of the practice. Although I do not address the question of health effects directly in this thesis, I follow the theorists discussed above in believing that the situation of FGC as practiced in Sierra Leone is one which cannot be grasped in terms of any simplistic dichotomy. Smith (1987) notes that people experience their everyday worlds from their respective, particular position in society. In an interview with Widerberg, Smith makes the case for the importance of privileging embodied experiential knowledge based on “reflexivity and indexicality”. Such knowledge, she

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, Prazak and Coffman (2007: vii ) “...Joy Phumaphi, Assistant Director-General of Family and Community Health, WHO, says ‘FGM is a practice steeped in culture and tradition but it should not be allowed to carry on. We must support communities in their efforts to abandon the practice and to improve care for those who have undergone FGM. We must also steadfastly resist the medicalisation of FGM. WHO is totally opposed to FGM being carried out by medical personnel’ (WHO 2006).”



notes, is able to “hook the local to the extra-local and trans-local” (Widerberg, 2004, unpaginated). These are the connections which I am concerned to address in this study. In what follows I examine the literature on the power dynamics embedded in the anti-FGC discourse.

## **2.4 The intersection between “the local” and “the global” in FGC eradication campaign discourse**

The case for eradication of the practice of female genital cutting is characterised by concerted international lobbying through Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) at both the local and international scale. It is therefore through NGOs that the global call to eradicate the practice of FGC is articulated. It is thus through these organisations that gaps between local and global knowledge are exposed, even though both are not antithetical (cf Edelman et al 1999; El-dareer 1982:96). In this section, I consider some of the arguments in relation to international intervention in relation to the practice. Mackie (1998), for instance, explores ways to end FGC using a convention shift model<sup>10</sup>. He argues that FGC is undertaken to guarantee marriageability, woman’s virtue and for the honour of her family. He argues, thus, that if an entire group pledges to refrain from FGC and other intermarrying groups do not, it will not end. In his opinion, therefore, group consensus is the only way to end FGC. He claims that this convention shift model has worked elsewhere, especially in ending the practice of foot binding in China. He, however, cautiously notes that a clumsily imposed convention shift can cause a backlash and ruin the credibility of the “pledge” tactic altogether. I argue, however, that different socio-cultural systems manifest different levels of the interwovenness of cultural elements. Mackie (1998) proposes the possibility of group cultural consensus, yet culture remains a contested domain even to people in the same cultural universe. Cultural meanings and understandings are always changing and are often appropriated or discarded depending on prevailing circumstances. Though Mackie’s model was considered successful in Senegal by Tostan (Mackie, 2000, Easton *et al*, 2003), its success suffered a blow following efforts by the government of Senegal to push for full criminalization of FGC in 1999, a move entangled with the government’s attempts to position itself as a potential recipient of

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<sup>10</sup> In this model, the practicing community is sensitised on the need to abandon FGC. Once a critical mass of opinion has been arrived at - a “tipping point” - members make a public pledge in a convention to end the practice. At the convention, community members renounce other social values ascribed to FGC, such as the claim that it enhances a woman’s chances of getting married. This is done by members in the convention coming to an agreement that their sons will marry uncut women (Mackie, 1998).

international aid from the USA (David,1999). This therefore underscores the complicated ways in which global discourses and local policies impact on FGC eradication efforts. In Senegal the government's efforts to directly outlaw FGC in line with donor conditionality slowed Tostan's effort to achieve social change through consensus.

As is the case in Senegal, in Sierra Leone a considerable number of anti-FGC initiatives are spearheaded by international NGOs who form alliances with local non-governmental organisations. A few of the more notable ones are: Women Against Violence (WAVES), Early Marriage and Sexual Harassment Centre, Centre for Motherhood, Amazonian Initiative (AIM) and Katanya Women's Development Association (KWDA). The main strategies employed to complement the eradication message are workshops to popularize a recent Child Rights' law (discussed further below), providing or promising to teach alternative skills to practitioners and giving speeches in schools. A significant number of Soweis depend on initiation dues which, though petty, can constitute a main source of income. In this respect, the NGO practitioners have significant power since they promise alternative means of livelihood to Bondo initiators. This notwithstanding, the Bondo practitioners are also power brokers in their own right because politicians routinely woo them in order to capture votes during elections. This thus creates a power dynamic with the Bondo and eradication activists as protagonists. The issue of FGC thus brings both local and international communities into contact via international and national health agencies.

What is crucial in such considerations is the politics of knowledge. Singer (1993:187) points out that the production of knowledge and its uses is an exercise of power and that whether scientists like it or not, they have to take sides. Thus, as we have seen, the presentation of arguments about health can be an obstacle to health promotion initiatives such as the campaign against FGC. Foster (1999:348), for example, points out how campaigns to meet health needs often involve a strategy to capture converts and thus ensure a steady flow of donor aid in what Foster calls a "donor-recipient pattern". Most institutional actors concerned with eradicating FGC and other harmful traditional practices tailor their programs to the most lucrative "donor recipient pattern". Foster goes on to note that western health strategies are often considered universals, "equally suited to Boston or Bombay" (1999:350). Accordingly, local activists in communities that practice FGC are recipients and translators of western imposed norms about appropriate health. Their Western headquartered donors define the agendas and since they need clients to justify their existence, their approach is often unrealistic in relation to local health conditions. Merry (2006) has thus made the case for anti-FGC activists to balance the need to please

their donors with the need to frame their anti-FGC discourse in such a way as to capture the imagination of locals. She calls this strategy “venacularization”. Anti-FGC activists, she says, find themselves in a dilemma whereby “Failure to fully indigenize these ideas impedes their spread, yet to fully indigenize would undermine the potential for change” (2006:49). Similarly Steinberg (1999:740) takes issue with the tenor of the human rights discourse. He argues that it is too narrow because it does not take into account the situations actors actually operate in. Anti-FGC activists are made to work “within established often hegemonic, discursive fields that determine which frameworks are available.” He advocates a more dialogic approach that views the production of meaning as “contested, shaped both by group conflict and by the internal dynamics of the discourse itself” (ibid: 737 in Merry 2006:41). Though there are some agencies, notably Tostan of Senegal, that have captured the views of the locals, conventions like CEDAW are at times perceived as externally imposed. As demonstrated in my thesis, the language of rights is also used by FGC adherents as a means of resistance against the powerful rhetoric embedded in anti-FGC discourse. Following Lundquist (2004), therefore, it can be argued that transnational mobilization must go beyond the rhetoric surrounding the practice of FGC and avoid a patronizing approach towards supporters of the ritual practice. In other words, he maintains, and I agree with him, that movement actors at various scales must be willing to engage with supporters of FGC and recognise the ways in which the practice is meaningful to them.

Following concerted media pressure and activism against the practice of FGC, efforts to eradicate FGC have become tied to financial aid by agencies such as the IMF (Parker,1995:506) and developed countries like the US (Boyle, 2005:41). In 1997, the WHO and UN gave a joint recommendation in which they proposed, the “adoption of clear national policies for the abolition of female genital mutilation, including where appropriate, the enactment of legislation to prohibit it”. The WHO and UN argued that legislation would indicate public disapproval and establish official sanction (Antonazzo, 2003:472). These recommendations have affected countries that depend on donor aid in complex ways. Sierra Leone, for instance, is a developing country and is considered one of the poorest countries in the world according to the UN Human Development Index<sup>11</sup>. In this respect, it depends on financial aid in order to support recurrent government expenditure. As with many other countries in Africa dependant on financial aid from the

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<sup>11</sup> Human Development Report 2010 —20th Anniversary Edition. The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development: Sierra Leone ranked last in the UN’s Human Development Index in 2007 and 2008 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2010/> Accessed on 23/12/2010.

“West,” the Sierra Leonean government sought to criminalise the practice of FGC as it positioned itself as a potential recipient of aid after ratifying international treaties such as CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Refugee Survey Quarterly, 2005:150). These treaties require governments to put in place efforts to end the practice of FGC (see also Antonazzo, 2003:473). The proposed new law, however, was fiercely criticised by members of the Bondo secret society that practice FGC and by local politicians. Indeed, one of the leading anti-FGC activists in Sierra-Leone, Koso-Thomas, wondered in an international online newspaper article in 2005, “How can they pass a law against this [FGC] when they [politicians] are paying for it?”<sup>12</sup>. Though the law against FGC was finally passed after protracted negotiations and trade-offs, it was passed only in a vague form, subsumed under section 33 subsection 1 of the 2007 Child Rights Act of Sierra-Leone<sup>13</sup> in a vague legal rubric that outlaws “harmful traditional practices” on minors. In the case of FGC eradication in Sierra Leone there thus emerges a complex situation in which politicians try to appease two competing camps. On the one hand, it is in the interest of the politicians to be seen to end the practice in line with the international treaties they have signed, if only to keep financial aid flowing. On the other hand, the politicians have to be wary of opposing a practice that is widely supported and practiced by a majority of the electorate. Antonazzo (2003:473) has pointed to the dilemma here by arguing that “when the voting citizens...do not favour criminalization [of FGC], a national ban would be undemocratic”. However, in my thesis, the issue is not only about criminalization of FGC but the symbolic significance drawn from the practice. I explore the debates and discourses of power in regard to the Bondo secret society as they interpenetrate international anti-FGC discourse and local power politics in post-war Sierra Leone. In the next section, I examine the literature on criminalization of FGC.

What is clear, then, is that the heated debate over FGC fuses the local and the international, raises questions of cultural relativism and ethnocentrism, and is at the same time enmeshed in issues of the power to construct or define social reality. Activist-scholars like Daly (1978), Hosken (1986), Walker (1992), Walker & Parmer (1995), Toubia (1993), Rahman

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<sup>12</sup> Accessed from <http://www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthId=15&ReportId=62473&Country=Yes> on 31/12/10. As discussed in my thesis, politicians routinely sponsor massive Bondo initiation drives as a way of wooing voters in their efforts to win both presidential and parliamentary political campaigns. This is the payment that Koso-Thomas is referring to.

<sup>13</sup> Section 33. (1) of the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act 2007 states that “No person shall subject a child to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment including any cultural practice which dehumanises or is injurious to the physical and mental welfare of a child.”

& Toubia (2000) among others, employed an equality paradigm that has a decidedly legalistic element to it (Hastrup, 2002:31). These activist-scholars, as noted, have successfully attracted the attention of the world to the specific issue of FGC and to other 'harmful traditional practices' in general. However, in doing so, they separated these practices from their various traditional, social, cultural, economic and legal contexts and pushed uncritically for legislation. Indeed, their work has led to a widespread call for the enactment of FGC related laws. However as is evident from Antonazzo's (2003) analysis, legislation could be counterproductive as was the case in Senegal (Miles *et al*, 2003). Contrastingly, Rahman and Toubia (2000) note that although legislation cannot change social behaviour, enacting laws may be appropriate to the FGC eradication campaign, in that they can serve as a catalyst for social change. Accordingly, they note that in a context of strong legal systems, a pro-active governmental response to the practice that entails political support and policy, FGC eradication campaigns can create adequate momentum in ending the practice. On her part, Boyle (2005) highlights the possible tension between the discourse of international conventions and that of the sovereignty of the nation state in relation to outlawing FGC. She, nevertheless, concludes that while globalization may accentuate such conflicts, legislation can ultimately lead to social change; although legislation against FGC might not lead to a straight forward path to ending the practice, it opens up space for eradication campaigns to make the case for change.

The tensions pointed out by Boyle thus become manifest as international laws and conventions are given prominence. Countries in which FGC is practiced have come to grapple with the issue of legislating against the practice. The dilemmas revealed here are partly shaped by instances of class struggle (cf El-tom, 1998:168) or by the existing economy of FGC practice. In countries like Sierra Leone, for example, FGC initiators perceive initiation as a job. Consequently, the issue of legislation has proved to be a contentious one. This is further compounded, in the case of Sierra Leone, by the close association of political power with FGC practitioners. As a result, countries like Kenya, Egypt and Sierra Leone have couched FGC legislation under discursive realms such as the Children's Act mentioned above. In Sierra Leone, the recently enacted Child Rights Act of 2007 has energised the anti-FGC campaign by opening space for a legalistic discourse and for interventions which justify themselves in relation to this discourse. This has led lobbyists to intensify the legal approach in sensitising people against the practice. However, law as applied in anti-FGC discourse valorises choice and individualism and these can be alien concepts among practicing communities where communal life is the

defining experience. Faced with this scenario, activists have had to integrate the legalistic approach with other strategies in order to lend weight and urgency to the campaign. They have thus adopted what Merry (2006:48) calls a mode of “hybridity” as opposed to “replication” (2006:48). In the same vein, although Price (1997) rightly questions the lopsided aspect of FGC legislation by arguing that seeking consent in FGC initiation does not obviate the “possible harm” it could cause to children, his analysis clearly separates out questions of social bodily understanding among the initiates from that of the physical integrity of their bodies. Parents pay for initiation based on the very best of intentions for their daughters. It can be argued, of course, that by subjecting their children to circumcision with the aim of improving their chances of getting married, parents may inadvertently reify the belief that girls should be passive and controlled. Yet as my thesis will demonstrate, in Sierra Leone, FGC does not necessarily lead to women being passive and controlled. As is elaborated below, women who have undergone FGC can access significant forms of power that are not available to uncut women. These women, who are invariably members of the powerful Bondo secret society, occasionally employ these powers with aggression when their interests are threatened<sup>14</sup>.

The studies discussed in this section foreground the tension inherent in formal law, both local and international especially in regards to community ascribed meanings in the practice and enterprise of FGC. FGC as practiced in Sierra Leone empowers the Bondo society and positions it strategically in local politics with attendant material benefits. To the Soweis, FGC initiation is considered a source of income in a highly precarious economic context. The discourse of eradication in Sierra Leone has culminated in a law banning “harmful traditional practices” on minors under which FGC is subsumed<sup>15</sup>. This has led to a situation of profound ambivalence, marked by various kinds of resistance and coalition between FGC practitioners, politicians and members of the Bondo cult. In the same vein, the ambivalence has led to a double appropriation of the legal discourse as this thesis will demonstrate. The adherents of FGC argue that it is their responsibility within the recognised practice to initiate their daughters while anti-FGC activists, wary of a backlash in pushing the language of law too far, clothe their eradication message in alternative or euphemistic language. Invoking the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007, they discourage parents from initiating young girls below the age of eighteen years in the course of sensitisation activities but also argue that it is fine to initiate girls who have

<sup>14</sup> Reuters. 11 February 2009. "Reporters Stripped By S. Leone Circumcision Society." <<http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSLB771752>> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2009].

<sup>15</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). 8 June 2007. "Sierra Leone Bans Child Brides Not FGM." <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6734273.stm>> [Accessed 24 Mar. 2009].

attained majority age when they are legally able to consent to being initiated. They thus employ a double discourse as I will argue later in this thesis. In the next section, I examine the literature on human rights in relation to FGC and anti-FGC activism.

## **2.5 FGC, activism and the human rights framework**

A host of FGC eradication activism is premised on a human rights framework. The language of rights highlights the importance of international culture in creating national policies. Boyle and Preves (2000) point out that FGC has generated intense debate particularly because it juxtaposes the ideals of sovereign autonomy and local representation against an international definition of human rights. They point out that, on the basis of a neo-liberal politics which holds that “universal” ideals comprise an institutional framework for the international system while simultaneously limiting the range of national actions, laws enacted in Western countries have more latitude within and beyond their frontiers than laws in African countries prohibiting FGC. For instance, the US 1996 law banning the practice was a conduit through which the specific ideals could be extended to FGC practicing countries by, for example, coupling eradication of FGC with the disbursement of donor funds (Boyle, 2005). As for the adoption of the human rights paradigm, Boyle argues that the UN decided to change tack and use the human rights discourse in order to facilitate the eradication of FGC because the health discourse, for reasons discussed above, did not capture the imagination of the practicing communities. With the adoption of the human rights discourse the language of the eradication campaign changes. There is now talk of female genital cutting as opposed to mutilation. The discourse of mutilation, conjured up an image of mothers wilfully “mutilating” their daughters with an ulterior motive of causing harm. This, of course, made little sense in the context of local meanings apportioned to FGC and hence the minimal achievement in eradication efforts.

In Sierra Leone, the human rights approach is gradually gaining momentum. Since the human rights strategy engages the state apparatus on other basic human rights such as the right to education, freedom of association and so forth, it has captured the imagination of the communities being sensitised. There is a mushrooming of local media scrutiny, local activism and human rights clubs in schools that have led to students (and, by extension, parents) using the language of rights. This has had the overall effect of opening up space for eradication efforts. Such efforts have also, as is discussed in this thesis, challenged the

silence and secrecy hitherto associated with FGC and Bondo activities. In the context of resistance by Bondo society practitioners in the wake of FGC eradication efforts, the human rights discourse has been invoked leading to court proceedings premised on charges of violence against women. Indeed, as this thesis will discuss, the Sierra Leone police administration has developed a special wing to deal with domestic violence or other related crimes, called the Family Support Unit (FSU). The unit is partly sponsored by two UN agencies: UNIFEM and UNDP. It is under the ambit of this unit that crimes associated with FGC are reported.

However, in keeping with the ambivalence exhibited by the central government when dealing with the Bondo society, many cases involving violence by the Bondo members are not conclusively prosecuted. They are often “frustrated”; either the case is withdrawn under the pretext that it endangers ‘national security’, or the case is continually adjourned until it becomes obsolete. The momentum gathered by the eradication campaign through the use of human rights discourse is thus, to some extent, derailed by the political and material interests surrounding the practice itself, and the Bondo society more widely. In what follows, I explore literature on violence against women in line with the human rights anti-FGC paradigm.

## **2.6 Women’s Rights and FGC**

As I have noted already, the FGC practice has been widely cast as being a violation of women’s rights (Hosken 1982; Gordon 1991; Koso-Thomas, 1987; Walker, 1992; Walker and Parmar, 1995). Koso-Thomas (1987), for example, maintains that FGC represents a form of patriarchal control over the female body. She points out that women are encouraged to adopt self-destructing attitudes by patriarchy through FGC. Stated differently, she argues that women unquestioningly abide by values that end up subjugating them in an effort to control their sexuality. Various commentators, such as Denniston *et al* (1999), have emphasised the pain and trauma associated with circumcision. Meanwhile, Abusharaf argues that in the case of FGC, suffering and pain are used to “create social intercourse and gender normalization” (2006:215). Ritual inscription on the body through FGC and emotional ties inherent in the initiation process embody power relations that structure the politics of marriage selection and child bearing in practicing communities. Abusharaf (2006) further argues that to the practicing Sudanese, FGC occupies an important aspect of their cosmology and world view. It is considered a ritual of



purification that “creates and reinforces femininity, is aesthetically pleasing, shows respect for tradition, inscribes gender, controls and enhances sexuality and attests to religiosity” (215). Besides this, women submit to the practice because of emotional embarrassment and peer pressure; they stand to be ridiculed during childbirth if they are seen to have uncircumcised genitalia (215). Here Abusharaf’s concern is not to vindicate the FGC practise but to point out more closely how the discourses of trauma and pain are construed in practicing communities and also to underscore the community ascribed meanings related to a distinct conception of femininity that structure social relations.

The assertion partly made by the human rights approach, that the practice is linked to the deprivation of women’s enjoyment of sex, has been put to question by another brand of literature (Boddy, 1998; Wally, 1997; Fotheringham, 2004). Boddy (1998), shows, for example, that for the FGC practicing Sudanese the ritual of FGC is closely related to kinship ties that stem from marriage. She notes that owing to the weakness of the state, a significant amount of social control and ordering occurs through kinship and the family. Far from being understood as a violation against women, she argues, FGC bestows on women the power to decide who is to be recruited into the family through marriage. Marriageability, fertility and social esteem are strongly tied to chastity and honour and all these virtues are invested and bestowed through the FGC practice which is a repository of gendered knowledge. Accordingly, Wally deplores the sensationalization surrounding FGC debates - the effect of which is “to titillate and to call attention to differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ so as to reaffirm Western superiority” (1997:409). She points out that FGC is a source of women’s power as a group, a source of cohesion and a mechanism for greater leverage in male/female interactions. For her part, Harriet D. Lyons (2007) calls us to recognise both the sexual and non-sexual aspects of the ritual procedures which go beyond the tradition/modernity binary. She argues that sexual pleasure itself has to be understood as a social construction and that women who have been circumcised may continue to reach orgasm because pleasure actually has to do with the state of one’s mind and that other “erogenous zones may become sensitive in the absence of a clitoris” (Lyons, 2007:5): The experiments of Masters and Johnson, in which women experienced orgasm under laboratory conditions, were widely believed, in the 1970s, to have “proved” that all orgasm was centred in the clitoris. It was thus taken for granted that women who had undergone genital cutting could not experience it. In fact, this has turned out to be a problematic assumption. Gruenbaum (1996: 462) has noted that some infibulated women in the Sudan give convincing accounts of their experience of orgasm [“they finish!”]. For that matter,

Marie Bonaparte, a disciple of Freud, who explored clitoridectomy as a means to encourage the transference of sexual sensation to the vagina, concluded on the basis of interviews with excised African women that women continued to experience orgasm (Bonaparte 1953:191–208). There are numerous possible explanations for this. The clitoris extends well under the surface; infibulators have been known to leave an intact clitoris under the fused outer labia; other erogenous zones may become more sensitive in the absence of the clitoris; the vagina may be a source of more pleasure than Masters and Johnson encouraged us to believe; mental stimuli and/or responses learned from sexual experience prior to undergoing genital cutting may be significant in producing orgasms (Lyons, 2007:5).

There is, then, a debate about the extent to which FGC is a form of systematic oppression visited on women's sexual enjoyment, and a need to recognise that sexuality is, at least in part, a social and cultural construction. For example, in her earlier work, Boddy (1989) has pointed out that among Sudanese women, sexuality is not about pleasure. It is about wombs and reproduction. Other scholars have openly challenged the notion that circumcision affects women's enjoyment of sex by claiming that such a charge is not corroborated by research findings (Ahmadu, 2007:284; Ahmadu and Shweder, 2009:18). Such debates highlight the gulf between western medicine, science, rationality and tradition even when there are alternative knowledge systems, rationalities and modernities. Walley argues that:

In some accounts, cultural beliefs are recognized only as "insanity." For example, A. M. Rosenthal of the *New York Times* called on the people and governments of the countries where genital operations are practiced "to revolt against the sexual and social insanities that allow the mutilation of half their population" (1992). In contrast to this image of sub-Saharan and North African societies as tradition-bound and oppressed by culture, Euro-American institutions and values are depicted as exemplars of culture-free reason and rationality, as represented in particular by Western medicine (Wally, 1997: 421).

In the case of Sierra Leone, the Bondo society members whose FGC practice is threatened by the eradication discourse have themselves turned to replicating the human rights paradigm by arguing that it is their human right to defend their cultural practice. On the other hand, anti-FGC activists responding to this development now argue that though it is the right of the Bondo to defend their culture, they must seek the initiates' consent before

performing the FGC ritual on them. Failure to seek consent, they argue, constitutes a violation of women's rights or a breach of the recently enacted Child Rights Act which is punishable by law. What is thus highlighted here is an ambiguous situation in which different kinds of rhetoric and claims can be used and appropriated by different actors in complicated ways. In what follows, I briefly examine literature on the issue of consent and arguments around relativism on both sides of debates about the FGC practice.

## **2.7 The issue of consent in the anti-FGC discourse: relativism or cultural integrity?**

Thus, as indicated above, one of the central tenets of the FGC eradication discourse in Sierra Leone is the issue of consent. In many cases the practice of FGC has occurred outside of any question of necessary consent. Cook, Dickens and Fathalla, for example, examine the ethical and legal dimensions of FGC as well as the clash between parental consent and ethics. They hold that FGC raises health-related concerns of considerable physical and psychological severity, and compromises gynaecological and obstetric care. The description of the practice as FGM, in their view, is not a neutral description but a justifiable "means of condemnatory advocacy" (2002:282). They further argue that any negative description or naming is a technique to "condition social understanding" (Ibid). They conclude by noting that FGC does not generally involve the subject's legally competent consent. They argue, therefore, that initiates should be informed on all aspects of the practice and also allowed to give informed consent. On the other hand, it can be argued that insistence on consent in regard to FGC favours "Western" concepts wrapped in discourses of choice at the expense of locally ascribed ones. Accordingly, Lyons (2007) proposes a polythetic approach to the issue of FGC. She calls on researchers to see the practice in the light of issues that both the West and Africa share and to avoid seeing the ritual practice as the anti-thesis of anything Western. She advocates an analysis that examines the practice in its "complex local context" and understood in relation to much broader categories, including "means of achieving socially acceptable bodies" (Lyons, 2007:9). This echoes Boddy's (1991) argument that understanding a practice is not the same as encouraging it. She observes that in the "West" too, women undergo painful caesarean sections, and mechanised forms of child birth to produce the "perfect" baby as well as in some cases undergoing genital cosmetic surgery in search of what is referred to as "designer virgins" (Braun, 2009:133; Hernlund and Shell-Duncan, 2007:19 ; Jonsdotter and Essen, 2004). Boddy (1991) further notes that women in the "West" are implicitly

pressurised to diet in order to get a perfect body and a perfect face (see, for example, discussion in Butler, 1990; 1993; Bordo, 1993, 2003; Wolf 1992). Drawing on an analogy of a slim western woman who elicited disgust from a sheikh in Sudan, she argues that slimming could also be seen as barbaric by those whose cultures do not foster dieting. This thus indicates that accusations of cultural relativism can be levelled in both directions and that consent is not an issue easily separated from wider contexts of social understanding.

## 2.8 The nexus between religion and FGC

Some studies hold that the practice of FGC is sustained under the belief that the practice is backed by Islamic teachings (Boddy, 1991; Moruzzi, 2005; Abu-Sahlieh, 2001; Mazharul and Mosleh, 2001). Moruzzi (2005:204), for example, notes that the association of female circumcision with Islam, although not mentioned in the Quran, derives from the *hadith* (the collected sayings and practices of the prophet Mohammed and interpretations of these) where FGC is mentioned. Dellenborg (2004), for instance, argues that among the Muslim Jola of Senegal, FGC is perceived as enhancing a woman's religious position. She says "The prayers of a women who is not circumcised will not 'take' as well, they will not give her as many 'points' as had she been circumcised [...] A circumcised woman is considered a better Muslim" (Dellenborg, 2004:82). On his part, Abu-Sahlieh (2001) argues that male and female circumcisions are presented as religious purificatory rites on behalf of their "victims". Boddy (1988), however, observes that despite orthodox Islamic disapproval of FGC and the existence of legislation against the practice in at least two modern Sudanese regimes, FGC has persisted. Though a good number of Sierra Leoneans are Muslims, the Bondo society initiation is not categorically based on Islamic teachings. However, on occasions, Islamic teachings are offered by some sections of the Bondo society as reasons for the practice of FGC. It is important to recognise, in this respect, that Islam is not a fixed and bounded category as some commentators imply (cf Gordon, 1991). Islam is not only evolving and changing but also involves a series of contested and disputed identities. In fact there are orthodox Muslims who have come out to condemn both the male and female secret societies in Sierra Leone as being un-Islamic. However, these condemnations have been met with a backlash of resistance from the respective secret societies. Fanthorpe (2007:13), for example, notes that in Sierra Leone, an "orthodox" Muslim Imam was forcefully initiated in March 2005 by Poro society members after he questioned of the fact that they initiated two of his Arabic students without seeking consent from their parents. This act provoked protests from the local orthodox Muslim community in Bo. As my thesis will discuss, FGC is widely practiced by all ethnic communities in Sierra Leone apart from the Krio who live in the capital city Freetown. However, according to Fanthorpe "Krio Muslims are said to practise FGM [While] Krio Christians of the Western Area [in Freetown, Sierra Leone] reportedly do not" (Fanthorpe 2007:16).

Islam, therefore, is also entangled in ambiguous ways with the practice. It can be referred to by the Bondo members in their spirited defence of the practice. They aver that those rallying against FGC do not follow Islamic teaching and therefore do not have a moral basis from which to preach against FGC. However, as I will discuss below, the issue of orthodox Islam teachings has also split the Bondo members, leading to what are called “strong Bondo” or “weak Bondo” sections. This has had the overall effect of dividing the once tightly controlled Bondo secret society and thus enabling eradication message to infiltrate the Bondo.

## 2.9 Conclusion

This study examines the embeddedness of FGC in local and national power structures in Sierra Leone in the wake of the Western led debates about the harmful effects of the ritual procedures. My argument is that the practice must be understood within a more subtle complex of power, that in itself, it does not indicate that women lack agency but rather that power must be understood in terms of a stock of knowledge and hierarchy of preferences which may well differ from those of the feminists in the “West”. A concern to understand this does not imply endorsement of female circumcision but highlights how male politicians and leaders seek to *represent* (Spivak, 1994) women who may not represent themselves. At the same time, however, my study simultaneously seeks to examine how female leaders of the Bondo seek to typify views of the wider Bondo society in ways that might at times serve their own economic and political interests. It is these tensions between groups and individuals at various scales, relating to both the state and to coalitions within the Bondo secret society that I intend to explore using ethnographic methods. In the following chapter, I explore the methods and strategies employed in my fieldwork.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **Methodology**

#### **3.0 Research strategy**

For this research I adopted multi-locale ethnographic methods that encompassed in-depth interviews, focus groups, informal discussion sessions and participant observation. This enabled me to examine the relationship between ritual FGC and local/ international politics. In essence, it allowed me to explore the relationship between politicians and Bondo adherents on the one hand, and on the other, the relationship between politicians and the international community, within the context of post-war destruction and displacement in Sierra Leone. Access was gained through prior work experience as a human rights activist with an international organisation during which I made many contacts and met significant “gatekeepers”. These “gatekeepers” mediated my entry into the “field”. They introduced me to their local networks of friends and relatives. This chapter documents the various research methods, issues of ethics and the data analysis process.

#### **3.1 Research Design: Multiple forms of ethnographic study method**

By method, I understand the sum total of intellectual and moral practices that a researcher needs to follow in generating the necessary data for his/her study on a specific subject matter. In my case, this included the necessary precautionary moves as to how I went about the data generation process considering the sensitive nature of my subject matter. I employed multiple forms of ethnography. A research site is chosen because it provides an apt context to answer the research question under consideration (Yin, 1994). The researcher should give an “in-depth elucidation” (Bryman, 2004:50) of what he has marked out to study. This is also called “situational analysis” (Gluckman, 1940, Cocks, 2001), a phrase coined by the Manchester School of social anthropology for which “extending out” from the field means looking beyond native claims as to what “natives” are doing and recording what they are actually doing, diarising “accounts of real events, struggles, and dramas that [take] place over space and time” (Burawoy, 1998:5). As Burawoy rightly

notes, this approach is capable of highlighting the discrepancies between normative prescriptions and everyday practices - discrepancies that can be traced to internal contradictions “but also to the intrusion of colonialism” (Ibid). This is the approach I adopted for this study so as to describe and analyze changes in the criteria governing membership into the Bondo cult and to capture the various debates going on in relation to the institution of FGC in the wake of recent civil war in Sierra Leone, cultural contact, normative prescriptions against FGC, changing social norms and the dynamic link between Bondo and politics in Sierra Leone. I was concerned then, to understand the wider context by taking local politics and socio-economic relations into account, and to uphold Dorothy Smith’s (1987) feminist injunction to ground lived experience within its context. Smith takes issue with abstract, de-contextualised, and universalistic sociology as the ideology of ruling men and considers the experience of women as the point of departure for an alternative project. In this case, the microstructure of everyday life, which is under women’s control, constitutes the foundation and invisible premise for macro structures controlled by men. This is the way in which I approached my research with specific reference to FGC and the Bondo secret society especially among the Mende and other practicing communities in Sierra Leone.

Rather than opting for a single geographical location study to research these questions, I conducted ethnographic study involving one ethnic community geographically located in the rural area but also “extending out” to others who I accessed in centres for internally displaced people<sup>16</sup> (IDP). I realised that the war had affected the settlement patterns in a major way such that many people and many Soweis of the Mende speaking community had relocated to the IDP camps in the capital city Freetown during the war and were too traumatised to return to their homeland. Many of the people who relocated to camps have chosen to remain in the camps for internally displaced people in spite of the war being over. Therefore, I set out to understand the situation in more than one local area in view of the dislocation and changed circumstance as a result of war.

By so doing, I am still operating within the same research strategy. Doing research in this manner has been variously justified: ethnographic data from different site studies is often considered more persuasive and thus argued to make the overall study more robust (Yin, 1994:141). “All other things being equal, a finding emerging repeatedly in the study of numerous sites (‘a multi-site study’) would seem to be more likely to be a good working

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<sup>16</sup> These are the internal refugee camps where people were temporarily settled during the war after their homes were invaded by the war lords in the decade long (1990-2002) Sierra Leone civil war. A number of people still live in these IDP centres despite the end of the civil war.

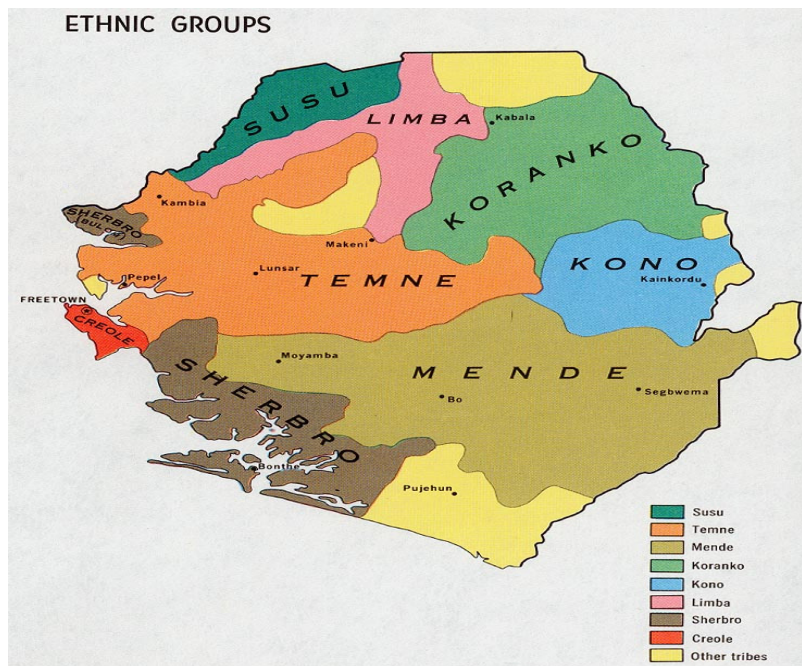


hypothesis about some yet unstudied site than a finding emerging from just one or two sites” (Schofield, 2000:79; see also Kennedy 1979: 662). In my research, an ethnographic study enabled me, in particular, to consider the effects of the recent civil war on core intrinsic practices of the Bondo society as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Most IDP camps are located in the outskirts of urban areas. Gupta and Ferguson (1997:4) have called for anthropology to embrace changing trends in a contemporary world marked by “rapid shifts in people, objects and ideas”. These shifts, they argue, have changed the notion of the “field” as a fixed territorial space. This is particularly evident when considering “new ethnic communities” such as refugees, migrants, displaced and nomadic communities. They note that culture is not bounded and therefore does not occupy designated spaces. Conceiving of the field as a fixed location, they argue, does not account for people inhabiting borderlands nor does it easily allow us to focus on the cultural differences of people occupying the same geographical space. They further assert that post-coloniality and globalisation have heralded the emergence of newly hybrid cultures in which concepts like identity and solidarity are no longer based on proximity to marked spaces and contact zones. On account of the shortcomings of the notion of the “field” thus discussed, they make the case for a re-thinking of anthropological models of analysis (Ibid). In the same way, Appadurai (1991; 191,196), argues that the contemporary world is re-structured by the overarching effects of globalisation such that it has become quite “de-territorialized” in ways that have altered the conception of “locality and space”. Similarly Fox and Gingrich argue that “of late, the notion of whole cultures or integrated societies has been questioned in the advent of new ideas of globalisation, cultural flows, fragmentation and fluid signs which have been touted as definitive blows to anthropology’s traditional objects of study: local communities of some order” (2002:27). There is, therefore, a general move in anthropological epistemology towards the use of a more fluid methodology, such as that of multiple case studies, now that the notion of bounded cultures is seen as increasingly untenable. It is with these considerations in mind that I changed my initial strategy of basing my study on a single ethnographic study of the Mende, located in the South Eastern part of Sierra Leone, and opted for a multi-site study which sought to recognise the effects of displacement on cultural practices.

I therefore conducted my ethnographic study in Bo and Freetown among the Mende and in various IDP centres. I also studied other Bondo practicing communities living in IDP camps. Bo is the largest settlement area in Mende land. I chose to work here primarily for logistical reasons: it has the largest cluster of Mende chiefdoms (I could access more

people in the neighbouring chiefdoms and clans), it is well networked by road transport and the NGO I interned for had a regional branch office in the area. It was from the Bo branch office that I initiated my fieldwork among the Mende, located in the south-eastern part of Sierra-Leone. Though I concentrated on the Mende, I also investigated the Limba, Themne, Kono, Susu, Sherbro, Fula and Kuranko ethnic communities through Soweis living in IDP camps located in the outskirts of Freetown. Below is a map of the different ethnic groups in Sierra Leone.



**Figure 3.1: Map of Sierra Leone showing the location of the different ethnic groups**

Sourced from [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sierra\\_leone.html](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sierra_leone.html) on 22/06/2011



**Figure 3-2: Map showing the main towns in Sierra Leone**

(Sourced from [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/maps/maptemplate\\_sl.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/maps/maptemplate_sl.html) on 22/06/2011). Below is a map showing the twelve districts and two areas of Sierra Leone. (Sourced from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra\\_Leone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra_Leone) on the 26/06/2011)



**Figure 3-3: Map shows the twelve districts and two areas of Sierra Leone**

### **3.2 Entry into the field**

My entry into the field would have been difficult but for the efforts of one of my friends I met at post graduate level. My friend, at the time of my fieldwork, was acting as the national co-ordinator of an influential NGO championing good governance in Sierra Leone. She was instrumental in my getting settled in Sierra Leone. She used her wide network to introduce me to the main gatekeepers both in Freetown and in Bo, the two main research settings in which I conducted my fieldwork.

### **3.3 Study design adopted**

I spent three months in the capital city, operating from the NGO offices, where my host had allocated me a desk. I had many colleagues in my new office setting. Through these officers, I met many Bondo initiators (Soweis). The majority of the Soweis I got acquainted with lived in refugee centres for internally displaced people in Sierra Leone. I formed relationships with these initiators and told them that I was interested in knowing more about their culture as opposed to being an NGO operative. It was important to draw this distinction to avoid conflating NGO objectives with my study. I spent three to four hours, three times a week, at the Freetown IDP camps and in the process, made many

acquaintances. With time, the female initiators became quite familiar with me and were happy to grant me interviews.

### **3.4 Institutions and participants**

As I mentioned above, I adopted an multiple forms of ethnographic study involving members of the Bondo society among whom female circumcision is a precondition for membership. I also engaged community leaders, members of parliament, and NGOs working in the research site, as well as members of the wider public. In this respect, my concern was to explore the social dynamics arising as a result of the campaign against FGC by anti-FGC activists and the international community. I considered it appropriate to contact initiates and non-initiates alike, as well as those fighting against the procedures, so as to get a sense of their attitudes and their relationships.

### **3.5 Sampling**

Through my new colleagues and the few “gate keepers” I had met in my previous visit, I started meeting more people using typical snow-ball sampling. I engaged in informal discussion of my topic of investigation with people and soon I generated interest from my colleagues. Although there was a certain amount of “convenience” sampling here, I also employed purposive sampling (Bernard 2006:189). Bernard notes that in purposive sampling, the investigator consciously decides which respondents are likely to serve in his study. Similarly Burns notes that purposive sampling is useful if it “serves the real purpose and objectives of the researcher by enabling him to discover, gain insight and understanding into a particular phenomenon” (2000:465). However, to a limited extent the selection of the Mende ethnic community is based on a “sampling logic” focussed on “those that are representative of the total population of similar cases” (Yin, 1994:47). The Mende people are one of the most populous ethnic communities in the whole of Sierra Leone. In addition, the practice of the Bondo secret society is thought to have originated with the Mende (see Rodney 1970; Little, 1951). Although many have taken issue with this latter sampling method in case study research on grounds that such research should not be concerned with generalization via representative sampling but rather with the generation of theoretical insights (see, for example, Yin 1994:31; Gomm et al, 2000), I believe that an attempt can be made in qualitative studies to consider the extent and conditions under which findings from a given number of cases studied can be extended to the wider

population from which samples were drawn. On this basis, I opted to work primarily in one ethnic community, the Mende who, I considered to be representative of wider discourses centred on FGC in Sierra Leone. I accessed this site as an ethnographer. As for the other ethnic groupings, I studied them through a mix of participant observation and deep interviews with respondents in the course of three months in which I spent three days a week interacting with respondents living in the IDP camps.

In my sample, I targeted both proponents and opponents of the practice of Bondo initiation in addition to getting the views of respondents from across a range of different age categories. Some of my colleagues had participated in projects on issues surrounding my subject of study. I worked closely with some of these officers who were part of a team that had run a project aimed at rallying Bondo initiators to sign a declaration endorsing the Child Rights Act of 2007 a few months before.

Overall I interviewed 70 people and held 5 focus group sessions over the nine months of my stay in Sierra Leone. My informants were: 56 women drawn from across all the age brackets (17 to 76 years) at various levels of education and 14 men in various positions that intersected with wider operations of the Bondo society. Fifty two of my female respondents were members of the Bondo society. Four had renounced their Bondo membership. Of the fifty two Bondo society female respondents, I interacted with and interviewed twenty two Bondo society leaders (Soweis) of different ranks<sup>17</sup> (10 lived in IDP camps in Freetown while the other 12 resided in villages surrounding Bo). The other thirty Bondo members were women from various different “walks of life” (11 in villages surrounding Bo, 10 in IDP camps in the outskirts of Freetown and 9 in Freetown). These included two current female members of parliament and eight other “politicians” (political party officials, journalists, civic government leaders like councillors and political appointees). The rest were “ordinary” women ranging from petty traders to school teachers. Two of the female respondents who had dissociated themselves from the Bondo were human rights activists working for different local and international organisations based in Sierra Leone (one in Bo and the other in Freetown). The remaining two female interlocutors who had given up their Bondo society membership, one (in Bo) had recently joined a Christian revivalist church and had therefore renounced her membership on account of the perception that being a Bondo member conflicted with her new Christian beliefs. The other (in Freetown) had just graduated from high school and planned to emigrate to Europe or America in search of a better life. She told me that she did not want

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<sup>17</sup> The Bondo is hierarchically structured as I will discuss in the next chapter.

to join the Bondo because she believed it was not going to enhance her perceived future abroad.

I also interviewed fourteen men who were purposively sampled to address key aspects of my study such as the intersection between Bondo society and politics and the different forms of power accessible to Bondo members in community organisation. I was, in this decision, motivated by Kratz's assertion that "women are not the only ones who create the practice and meanings associated with gender" (2008:197). Accordingly from my pool of male respondents, I interviewed and interacted with four anti-FGC activists from the NGO sector (two both in Bo and in Freetown respectively), two police men (in Bo), three village chiefs (in Bo), two sitting members of parliament and three Poro society leaders (in Bo and Freetown).

The main variables in relation to my informants were gender, status and leadership position. The interviews complemented my participant observation. Following Bernard (2006:189), I purposely sampled the men on the basis of their knowledge of the Bondo cultural practice in addition to their occupations which meant that they dealt with Bondo society issues in the course of their work. Finally, I held or attended five focus group discussions with the main interest groups in relation to the practice: i.e. Bondo initiators, community leaders and NGO operatives championing the eradication of FGC. Two group discussions were held in Freetown. One, to which I was invited, was actually financed by an international organisation and involved NGO anti-FGC activists and sixty selected members of the Soweï council<sup>18</sup>. Another, for which I was the moderator, comprised seven Bondo society members. In Bo, I moderated three focus groups (two with Bondo Soweïs and one involving Soweïs and a human rights activist).

### **3.6 Data gathering instruments**

In line with the "multi-site" case study (Burton, 2000:219) approach, the data for this research was generated using a wide array of methods: focus groups, informal group interviews and discussions, individual in-depth interviews, observation and participant observation. I also kept a daily journal and a field notebook. I jotted down pieces of relevant information collected informally. Using a multiplicity of methods is advantageous

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<sup>18</sup> This is an umbrella organisation championing Bondo society interests in light of anti-FGC discourses. It was said that the Soweï council had over five thousand members. I will discuss the Soweï council in detail in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

in three ways:

Firstly, it helps to generate multiple accounts of the same phenomenon representing different perspectives (members of the Bondo society, men and women, community leaders, activists against the ritual procedures) about the topic under investigation for the purpose of triangulation. Both direct observation and multi-perspective interview data helps to make it possible to map out similarities and differences of opinion about FGC, and to clarify the ways in which the practice has come to be a source of social tension and debate.

Secondly, the use of multiple methods also helps to address the problem of reliability and validity (Yin, 1989:94, Miles & Huberman, 1994:41; Burns, 2000:418-419.). The researcher is able to get information from different settings. In case there are marked differences in the accounts given, the researcher will be in a better position to approach claims in a more contextual fashion.

The other merit associated with using different sources of evidence is that this opens up space for a broader coverage of important issues. For example, through a multiplicity of evidence a researcher can document what people said they did and what they were actually seen to be doing. This helps the researcher grasp the “tacit understandings” involved (Burns, 2000:398) in social action.

### **3.7 Data collection techniques and procedures**

So far as my interviews were concerned, I employed a semi-structured open ended format with questions revolving around the main areas of interest to my study. I recorded the interviews on a tape recorder and also made detailed notes as the interviews progressed (Stake, 1995) as well as keeping a field diary (Malinowski, 1922:1). I was always accompanied by my assistant, a university graduate. The primary role of the assistant was to provide support in situations where the informants could not understand my foreign accent or where they used a form of Krio which I was not well versed in. In addition to the unstructured interviews, I also conducted participant observation in the surrounding chiefdoms within Bo for six months and kept a diary of events in my field notes. As my interaction with the female initiators developed, I cultivated close ties with a number of Soweis who became my main informants. One of them, a fifty-eight-year-old lady told me that she became a full time Bondo initiator at the age of thirty. She had thus been a Sowe



for twenty eight years and had initiated, she said, thousands of girls into the Bondo society. She was very knowledgeable and well versed in Bondo rituals and debates and therefore became a key source of information. She gave me very useful guides and on occasions, helped to provide contextualising information in relation to issues which I was unsure about, including the nature of the relationships between the Bondo and local politicians.

### **3.8 Ethical issues in the study**

From the outset, I maintain that the practice of FGC poses both a moral and health challenge and that, therefore, there is need to work towards social change in regard to the practice. However, as my thesis will argue, there is a corresponding need to understand the practice from below, i.e. from the social context in which it is grounded, if meaningful social change is to be achieved.

Nevertheless, in keeping with standard research practice, ethical considerations guided my actions in the implementation of this study. The main ethical issues in my study related to:

- 1) confidentiality and anonymity;
- 2) informed consent and vulnerability of participants;
- 3) the sensitivity of the topic under investigation.

It was always explained to informants that they had the choice to participate or not on each occasion before the conduct of an interview or a focus group discussion session. The concept of voluntary informed consent is at the very centre of research ethics in the social sciences. The human subjects of research according to this notion are entitled to know the nature, purposes and implications of research and to autonomously choose whether to take part in it or not (McNamee and Bridges, 2002, Homan, 2002, Bryman, 2004). Accordingly, my informants were debriefed (Bernard, 2006:77) on the study and reminded that they had the choice not to participate in the research and that they were free to disengage at any time.

Though I let my informants know that absolute confidentiality could not be promised, because I was going to write about their experiences, I assured them that anything said would be kept confidential and that any information made public would be anonymised. I therefore ensured informants' confidentiality by anonymising data, using pseudonyms and

fictitious acronyms to obscure personal or organisational information that could betray a respondent's identity. The principle of respect in regard to participant involvement (Reynolds, 1982; Burns, 2000:20) was, in this respect, of utmost importance in my research.

Issues to do with sexuality are sensitive in various respects. As will be clear from the literature review, the discussion around female circumcision is one that is highly charged with strong positions on both sides. My study, it should be emphasised, was not concerned with the ethics of the practice in itself, but with the public debates and discourses around FGC in the Sierra Leonean context. In that respect, I was concerned to ensure that the different perceptions and views about the practice, and about the wider relationship of the Bondo to the political class in Sierra Leone, were represented during interview sessions and focus groups. Many of my informants told me that they were eager to participate in the study specifically so that they could air their views in the wake of discourses against the practice. In line with the university research requirements, I sought, and was granted, ethical approval from the university ethics committee before I commenced my fieldwork.

### **3.9 Access to the Field**

Since Bondo initiation is part of a context in which strict secrecy is maintained, and because it is mainly performed by women, my participant observation involved attending social functions associated with the Bondo activities to which men had access. One such social event is the coming out ceremony of Bondo initiates where all members of the public join in as the Bondo initiates are escorted along the roads to their respective homes. I also attended general social gatherings and celebrations such as wedding ceremonies and death commemoration ceremonies in which many Bondo members were in attendance, Easter holiday celebrations and national public holiday celebrations. Bondo initiations are mainly carried out in December and over the Easter holidays. The Bondo initiations are timed such that the Bondo initiates graduate out of the Bondo bush shortly before Christmas or during the Easter holidays, as the case may be. During national public holidays, Bondo dancers grace public arenas and perform spectacular dances that create an aura of jubilation. Through attending such gatherings I made more contacts, as well as gathering observations. My extended stay in the areas in question built confidence and familiarity with informants and also enabled me to experience firsthand the lived realities of the socio-cultural environment of my research setting: as Vulliamy et al (1990:12) have

argued, prolonged stay at a researcher's area of study gives "ecological validity" to the conclusions arrived at.

While in Freetown, I attended a Sowe council group discussion session organised by an international organisation. Relying on my networks and contacts, with the permission of the main facilitator of the Sowe council focus group, I arranged to hold a parallel focus group after the main session. In this focus group, I was the moderator and the participants responded to a set of questions pertinent to my area of investigation. I collected data and collated it with information from the main focus group since the topic under discussion directly touched on my research. I employed such strategies at times to cut down on cost. My budget would not have accommodated the cost of catering for over sixty members of the Sowe council drawn from different parts of the country who were in attendance. It is worth pointing out that on many occasions, as here, I found that different modes of collecting data (observation, interviewing and focus group discussions) shaded into each other.

After the first two months of fieldwork, I moved to Bo, the biggest urban setting among the Mende speaking people located in the south Eastern part of Sierra Leone. I had initially planned to stay in Kenema, a slightly smaller town, also located in the South Eastern part of Sierra Leone, but after consultation with my friends and also considering the question of access, I decided to live in Bo. My friends had arranged for me an internship position with a major international organisation that had a branch office in Bo.

For the first two weeks following my arrival in Bo I stayed with a family I had been introduced to by a colleague before I secured accommodation for myself. I made very close friends through the family I stayed with. The lady who accommodated me was a mother of four in her mid fifties and had a very wide network of friends. I used this network to source informants. While living in Bo, this lady doubled up on some occasions as my research assistant and translator. I met many informants through her and on two occasions translated my questions into Mende when I had interview sessions and focus group discussions with Mende informants who could not speak Krio.

My internship position enabled me to blend into the social life of the research environment easily. With the help of my new friends, I entered into the day to day life of Bo. I "hung out" (Bernard, 2006:368) in the evening at corner Kiosks that are located in different parts of the town, at the Tele-centre (Kiosks where one can charge a mobile phone; Tele-centres are abuzz with activity) and sipped "Chinese tea". In these contexts I was able to witness

and take part in discussions about social life and general politics in Sierra Leone (Salone)<sup>19</sup> and beyond.



**Figure 3-4: Billboard emblazoned with the country’s vision; a part of the government’s post-war recovery and reconstruction project**

It was through these sessions that I made friends who later introduced me to their relatives. Besides the “Chinese tea” sessions, I also frequented the local social club, where a game of football was played every weekend. Just next to the football pitch a local brew “Poyo”, palm wine (wine tapped from palm trees) was sold, and men (and on some few instances women) sat to enjoy a drink as they watched a game of football. It was in these contexts that I met and fixed interview appointments with informants, such as with one “Poyo” patron who invited me to an Easter party at his home.

My position as an intern was based on a loose arrangement; I did not have to be at the office all the time since I was not charged with any particular responsibilities. I was, therefore, able to make arrangements to travel to more distant villages whenever I needed to. For example, if there was an event such as a “coming out ceremony”, a court barrie<sup>20</sup> session where a chief was presiding over a case touching on issues to do with what is called locally “women palaver” or “woman damage” I would attend this session. In addition, my internship position gave me the semblance of leading a “normal and settled”

<sup>19</sup> Sierra Leone in general discourse is fondly referred to as Salone.

<sup>20</sup> A court barrie is a local open village court presided over by a chief. It tries petty crimes and civil breaches such as “love triangles” commonly referred as *woman palaver* in the literature (cf Little, 1951; Phillips, 1995).

life, i.e. going to work and back as opposed to just staying locally and talking to informants. In this respect it helped give my presence validity. Being an intern also enabled me to access rural remote areas. The organisation I interned for had various projects in the hinterlands, one of which was the construction of community wells to help provide the communities with water. Through these community outreach programmes, I managed to reach and interact with people in distant villages. This also provided me with an opportunity for observing the day to day life in the villages. Below is a picture of a village in Bo.



**Figure 3-5: A village in Bo**

Sierra Leoneans in general have a tradition of treating “strangers” well. In this respect, I was warmly welcomed and often ‘spoilt’ with hospitality. People always volunteered to fetch water for me from the water well though I wanted to do it myself in order to be a part of the day to day social life. When my landlord in Bo learned that I was interested in understanding more about the culture, he invited me to eat meals at his place so as to talk about different aspects of traditional practices. My landlord later took me to his village during one long weekend where he introduced me to a number of senior Bondo women in the village. On this trip, I met a significant number of Soweis who granted me interviews. Indeed, I was not able to find time to interview all the Soweis who wished to be interviewed. I therefore decided to form a focus group in order to facilitate wider discussion, and to reflect on ideas emerging from the interviews I had conducted. The focus groups thus served as a basis for verifying or examining the reliability of the data I had gathered from numerous, more casual, informants (Nkwi and Nyamongo, 2001).





**Figure 3-6: People fetching water from water well in Bo**

### **3.10 Transcription and analysis**

My approach to the analysis of the data was a broadly hermeneutical one. I employed hermeneutics and the mode of grounded theory as a basis for my analysis. Hermeneutics “emphasizes the need to understand from the perspective of the social actor” (Bryman, 2004:540). Bernard notes that in grounded theory, emerging categories and concepts are pooled together after thorough perusal of interview data. The themes identified are then linked into substantive and formal theories (2006:492). The philosophical underpinning of hermeneutics is that it does not predefine dependent and independent variables but focuses on the full complexity of human sense making as situations emerge. It suggests a way of understanding textual data.

Generally, analysis was carried out at two levels: “individual-case” analysis and “cross case analysis” (Stake, 1995). Using these two levels, I identified patterns, consistencies and differences in what was observed and obtained from informants’ interviews and focus group discussion sessions. Following Edwards and Talbot (1994:45), such an analysis “takes us beyond the notion of the case as illustrative and allows us to look for ‘common themes and patterns to be elicited, hypotheses generated and theory generated’”. This formed the general framework for analysis. After gathering a significant amount of data, so

that I felt that I had reached a kind of saturation (Bryman, 2004, Stake 1995; Barnard 2006), I left Bo and went to the capital city Freetown. I had transcribed some interviews already at this point. However, there were some informants who spoke so fast that I was not confident in my ability to transcribe them. In such cases, I sought assistance from fluent Krio speakers. When back in Freetown, I recruited a team of transcribers from the University of Sierra Leone which was about to go on recess at the time. The transcription was done in three phases. The first phase was word for word transcription in the language in which the interview was conducted, usually Krio. The second phase was translation from Krio into English and was done by a different set of people from the initial transcribers. I made an effort to check and match the translation from Krio to English and also the direct transcription in the third phase. Each transcription was done by a different person to reduce the loss of meaning and nuance that invariably occurs in translation (Bryman, 2004). After a number of transcriptions, I realised I was running out of time. I therefore decided, for the remaining transcriptions, to rely on my notes in order fill in any gaps that might result from direct transcription and translation into English. I did not want to end up with a situation where I had a significant amount of un-transcribed tapes recorded in Krio once I left Sierra Leone. This would have meant hiring professional transcribers adept in the Krio language which would have been difficult and, in the Scottish context, expensive. In some cases one cannot avoid losing some nuances in the course of translation, but my efforts at double translation were aimed at minimising the loss of meaning and nuance (Barnard 2006). In the course of data collection, I made sure I took extensive notes that captured the context and detailed facial expressions and other aspects of non-verbal communication. The interviews that were conducted in Mende were transcribed directly into English. These transcriptions and translation processes were carried out by two people. Thereafter, I compared and collated the two scripts before I typed them up. The transcription process was very slow but I was impressed by the data I had collected when all the transcriptions had been typed out.

Once all data was typed up, I analysed it by identifying the major themes from the pooled interviews defined as relevant to my study and emerging categories in line with a hermeneutic approach as outlined above. In my writing, I quote verbatim many of my informants' views in an effort to acknowledge their input into my study. By quoting my informants directly, I intend to enable them to speak through the text. As Geertz (1988) has noted, it is important for the researcher to seek to allow the voices of informants to be heard directly (see also Spradley 1980: 123).

### **3.11 Problems and limitations of my field study**

I encountered relatively few problems in finding informants and respondents in the field in a general sense, due to the fact that I already knew some significant gatekeepers. However, I was aware that the investigation of female genital cutting, a practice normally conducted under the auspices of the secretive Bondo society, meant that there were important limitations on access to practices and events. Besides the secrecy surrounding Bondo society activities, my subject of study touched on the issue of sexuality. Sexuality is in almost all cultures in the world a very private domain protected by sanctions and taboos. Moreover, my gender as a man researching a matter relating to female sexuality obviously raised real ethical and practical difficulties. I had considered these potential problems in advance and had planned to recruit a female research assistant to help me in accessing the “field”. I envisioned using a qualified female research assistant for the well being and confidence of my research participants. However, I was unable to find a suitable female research assistant. However, I did in some instances receive informal help from ad hoc research assistants, as in the case of the mother of four mentioned above that hosted me in Bo who translated and interpreted my Krio into Mende in order to facilitate my inquiry. In this regard therefore, my inability to find a suitable female research assistant may have affected my access and the data that I collected in a way that will have shaped my findings. This notwithstanding I developed good research relationships with various respondents concerned with the debates relating to the socio-political aspects of the Bondo cultural practice.

Due to the exploratory nature of my study, the “field” to me would constitute people who were well versed in the Bondo cultural practice and the debates surrounding the practice. As I have explained, I sought to meet such people by slowly building trust and relationships with potential informants. Through typical snowball and purposive sampling I build rapport with gate keepers who helped me access the “field”. Within a few weeks I had considerable access with Bondo initiators some of whom eventually turned out to be my key informants. I was invited into their homes and participated in Bondo coming out celebrations where Bondo members shared their experiences and views with me (see Spradley, 1980:56).



### 3.12 Reflexivity

All the same, I remain well aware that my gender as a man investigating a cultural rite performed by women on female members of the community will have affected my study (cf Berliner and Falen, 2008; Kratz, 2008:196). Other factors like class, level of education and my position as a researcher will have also shaped my relationship with participants. These, added to the fact that I was a foreigner, and that the subject of my study was considered taboo since non-Bondo members are not supposed to “talk” about Bondo issues, constituted a major limitation to my enterprise. These facts meant, for example, that I was not able to access spaces where the practice itself was being carried out because only members of the Bondo society have this privilege. In retrospect however, though I was a Sierra Leonean national, my ethnicity as an African man from Kenya, where some communities practice FGC mediated my access into these domains considered “no go zones”. At times I negotiated difficulties in access by saying that I came from a community that practices FGC in Kenya (Abagusi). However, I often made clear to my respondents that, unlike in Sierra Leone, the practice of FGC in Kenya was not only in the wane but was also being medicalised (see Njue and Askew 2004) following campaigns around the practice which emphasis the health issues it entails (Prazak, 2007; Oloo et al, 2011). On account of this, I told my research participants that I wanted to find out why FGC in Sierra Leone had not been affected in the same way by anti-FGC campaigns. In doing this, I managed to position myself as somebody who was opposed to “prying” into Bondo secrets, but was actually interested in what made FGC in Sierra Leone so resilient. Framing myself in this manner often seemed to serve as an ice breaker, and I remember while having discussions with respondents that statements like “in your own Bondo” were occasionally made, clearly presuming that there was some form of imaginary continental (African) Bondo society that cut across all countries in Africa in which, as a researcher, I was enjoined with them.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that my study was mainly concerned with the various debates around the issue of the Bondo secret society, rather than FGC itself, especially in the context of a discourse for change in relation to the practice of FGC. In this respect, the limitations on access which resulted from my gender were to some extent overcome by the fact that a number of my key questions were already animating public discussions in Sierra Leonean politics. I managed to cultivate very good relations with

Bondo initiators and other informants who were ready to provide me with information and share their experience with me. Indeed, as a result of the discourse against the practice of FGC through international media, influential countries in the “West”, and international and local organisations opposed to the FGC practice, the activities of the Bondo have been “*exposed*”. Bondo members have had to come out and speak because they feel the discourse against FGC has in some cases painted the Bondo in a negative light and sometimes, misrepresented facts. This probably made it easier for me to access informants because most of them felt the need to tell the story from their point of view, at the bare minimum, according to them; to correct the “misrepresentation”, as they see it, of Bondo society activities.

However, as I will argue in this thesis the Soweis also have their own agenda in seeking to maintain or defend the status quo. Even after I accessed the field and collected data, when I typed up the interviews and compared these with each other and with my field notes, I noticed that many of my informants’ responses were punctuated with significant amounts of ellipsis. On reflection, it may be that these ellipses constituted words or things they could not have ordinarily talked about due to the culturally recognised Bondo laws of secrecy. In his study among the Saramaka, Price (in Clifford and Marcus 1986:7) noted that “strategies of ellipsis, concealment and partial disclosure were techniques of revelation and secrecy that governed communication”. Holders of a significant “corpus” of Samarakan lore had access to specific forms of power and since “knowledge is power [...] one must not reveal all of what one knows”. This resonates with my experience and with the case of the Bondo, which is a repository of gendered knowledge that bequeaths members with privileges and power safeguarded by secrecy. Secrecy is a powerful adhesive that binds the Bondo society together and should therefore be revealed “only” when one joins the Bondo and becomes a member.

Another impediment to my study had to do with my initial entry to the field. I accessed the main gatekeepers through my colleagues in the NGO sector with whom I interned. This was the case both in Freetown and in Bo, the two main regions in my case study. There was a setback in gaining entry to the field in this manner because, hardly ten months before my access to the field, NGOs intervening against the practice of female genital cutting had run a major campaign to popularise a new law: the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007 that outlawed “harmful traditional practices on minors” under which the FGC is subsumed. The thrust of the NGO campaign was predicated on the notion that Soweis should not initiate girls who are below the age of majority (eighteen years) and that when girls reach

majority age, the Bondo initiators should seek consent from the girls before initiating them into the Bondo society. In the incipient stages of my field study, I was accompanied by my NGO colleagues, who had been involved in the campaign to popularise the new law. I noticed after a couple of interviews that my informants were giving me views tailored to respond to the NGO discourse. One Bondo initiator, for example, was at pains to explain to me how she had never initiated any girl below the age of eighteen years. As the interview progressed, she pleaded to me not to take her to “Pademba” (a notorious prison along Pademba road in Freetown, Sierra Leone). My assistant had to make a particular effort to assure her that I had nothing to do with the government or the NGOs that had popularised the law on “harmful traditional practices” and that in any case I was a foreigner, a student studying in the UK, who was just interested in learning the culture. This incident parallels Rabinow’s (1977:39) fieldwork experience, in which his close association with a certain gatekeeper was misinterpreted by his target informants. After this incident, I worked independently of my NGO colleagues and befriended a young man who had seemed quite inspired by my study. I “hung out” (Bryman, 2004) with him and through him I met various other informants after attending numerous social events. I soon acquired the identity of a “stranger” who was interested in getting to know more about the discursive aspects of the cultural practice of Bondo society. Here the “stranger Phenomena”, as described by Karakayali (2006), worked in my favour (see also Simmel 1971:145). Karakayali (2006:319) has argued that the perception in many societies that a stranger has no stake in the prevailing local socio-dynamics means that people “let down their inhibitions around him” since “the stranger is not connected to anyone significant and would therefore pose no threat to the confessor’s life”. Before long I identified key informants who became central to my study.

### **3.13 Exiting the field**

I became, as other anthropologists have described, much attached to my research setting and I found it very hard to leave when it was time for me to exit the field. The field, in this respect, meant to me the friends and contacts I had made who invited me to their social space and shared “secret” information with me. I told my informants and friends well in advance of my departure date, but nothing could have prepared me or them of the strong emotion of loss and detachment associated with leaving. I promised them I would return to present to them copies of my published work when I finished my studies, but this could not

alleviate the pain of leaving. It was a profoundly emotional moment. I have since kept close contact with my friends, especially the families that hosted me in Freetown and in Bo who I email and call regularly. I plan to go back and present my findings in one of the many conferences that are normally held in the country and also share my finished work with my informants. By maintaining close communication, I am continually updated on events in regard to my subject matter and other topical issues in Sierra Leone.

## CHAPTER 4

### **The Bondo secret society in Sierra Leone: History, War and Context.**

#### **4.0 Historical and contemporary account of the Bondo secret society**

This thesis examines the ambivalence of the state of Sierra Leone towards the global movement to eradicate the practice of FGC - a *sine qua non* condition for membership of the Bondo secret society. In this chapter, in order to provide a more contextualised understanding, I map out the historical context, as well as the organisation and purposes, of the Bondo secret society specifically, and of the research context more generally. This account is based on both my ethnographic experience and on ethnographic reports by other scholars.

Men and uninitiated women are excluded from Bondo membership. Uninitiated women are derisively referred to as Boroka - a pejorative term meaning “foolish”, “childish” or “stupid” in contrast to initiates who are believed to have been schooled in secret knowledge through the Bondo initiation ritual. Non-members are charged heavy fines and penalties if they try to access Bondo bush meetings or pry into the secrets of the Bondo society. These factors therefore make unmediated study of the Bondo a challenging endeavor. However, having said this, there are a number of compelling anthropological accounts of the society (Boone, 1986; Phillips, 1995; Little, 1951, 1967; Rodney 1970; Bledsoe, 1984, 1993; Jedrej, 1976; MacCormack, 1974; Day, 2007). Little (1951) for instance, though a dated source, provides a detailed and elaborate ethnographic account of the Mende in the colonial context. This provides some basis for evaluating changes to the Bondo society over the years, in line with the understanding that culture is not frozen but changing and contested. In what follows, then, I also explore the recent civil war in Sierra Leone with a view to examining the effects of the war on the practices and social significance of the Bondo secret society. Although the war led to massive displacement of families from their home land, the movement of many Bondo practitioners to Internally Displaced People’s (IDP) camps has ironically placed the operations of the Bondo in a position where they are more likely to be pursued by politicians for political reasons. The ravages of the war culminated in many Bondo society leaders, formerly home makers, assuming the role of family heads and breadwinners. Many women lost their male partners

in the war. I further argue that in the context of the aftermath of the war in Sierra Leone, for many Bondo practitioners the Bondo provides vital economic opportunities through which to sustain themselves. This, I argue, has to some extent changed the way the society and FGC as a practice is fundamentally conceived. Below, I explore the historical accounts of the origins of the Bondo society.

There are different accounts of the history and origin of the Bondo society. The most widely accepted account is that the Bondo society was brought to Sierra Leone by the Mende people. The Mende people were a breakaway group from the Mane that revolted from King Sundiata's empire located towards western Sudan. After several waves of migration, the Mane settled in present day Sierra Leone. The Mane are thought to have been led by a woman called Macarico, who died shortly before reaching Sierra Leone (Rodney, 1970:44-45; Alie, 1990; Abraham, 2003). The Mane dominated and intermingled with the indigenous communities who ended up adopting their language and culture, culminating in the Mende ethnic group (Rodney, 1970:58; Philips, 1995:35). While in Sierra Leone, the Mane dominated the inhabitants of Sierra Leone as opposed to conquering them. This probably explains why in some ethnic groups in Sierra Leone there are both patrilineal and matrilineal traditional cultural practices. Having given a brief historical account of the origins of Bondo society, I next point out the economic activities in the local context with an intention of mapping the material conditions of Bondo members today.

#### **4.1 Livelihood Strategies and Socio-economic activities**

The main economic activities in Sierra Leone are diamond mining, farming, and fishing. Other activities include craft especially *gara* tie and dye<sup>21</sup> business, soap making (black soap) and other forms of petty trade. The mining sector is dominated by men. Alluvial diamond mining is done randomly without proper prospecting. The implications of this are that earnings from the mining sector though potentially huge are quite irregular. As a result, many households involved in the mining sector do not depend entirely on mining. The miner's partners, as well as other house-hold members, engage in petty trading in nearby markets. Though Richards (1996:103) argued that there is a superstition barring

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<sup>21</sup> Cotton clothes are tied into several knots then dyed with different colours to produce strikingly patterned fabrics. The *gara* is the local name for the substance extracted from kola nuts that is used in dyeing clothes (field notes 9/3/2009).

women from the mining sector, recent ethnographic evidence differs with this position (Levin, 2005:92). The number of single family households has risen following the war. This dispensation has to some extent altered traditional gender perceptions; women now do most jobs traditionally bracketed as “men’s work” such as gold panning, charcoal making, and diamond digging since they are the sole breadwinners in their families.



**Figure 4-1: Women making gara tie and dye clothes in Makeni (Northern Sierra Leone).**

Women are more likely to be engaged in petty trading. Among the things commonly traded are mining tools, used clothes or new fabric from China, petty household products such as plates, plastic buckets, foodstuffs like green vegetables (cassava leaf being the most highly rated vegetable), fish, palm-oil, charcoal, rice, kola nuts, ground nuts along with other petty produce.

Old 1980s Mercedes-Benz cars are quite common among the relatively well to do. Four door old cars (taxis) and *podapoda* (old people carrier cars) constitute the main form of

public transport within Freetown and Bo<sup>22</sup>. In the provincial towns, motor-cycle taxis (*okada*) are very popular (see for example, Peters, 2007). There are also trucks and buses, the most reliable being the green buses said to have been donated by the former Libyan president Colonel Gaddafi in 2006.<sup>23</sup> This limited means of transport poses a challenge to economic activities such as the marketing of sea and agricultural produce.

The discovery of diamonds in Sierra Leone in the 1930s led to a neglect of the agricultural sector. The agricultural sector still employs ancient techniques of “slash and burn” that do not maximise productivity of agricultural land.



**Figure 4-2: Slash and burn farm in Kailahun district**

There are no visible signs of intensive farming in Mende land (ibid). On my occasional travels to Freetown while I was based in Bo, I could see large swathes of fallow land especially between the towns of Moyamba and Mile Ninety One along the Freetown-Bo highway. One interlocutor told me that discovery of easy to mine alluvial diamond deposits and the insecurity associated with the recent civil war had affected the agricultural sector negatively. The unfarmed land is populated by bush trees which are normally burned to make charcoal. The few farms one sees are mainly subsistence farming which constitutes vegetable gardening (cassava, sweet potatoes, ‘krimkrim’<sup>24</sup>, carrots among others), upland rice farming, and swamp rice farming. There are also fish ponds which are sparsely

<sup>22</sup> Having said this, there are very rich Sierra Leoneans who can be seen driving the latest models of expensive cars normally imported from abroad. They have left hand driven cars and thus more preference for cars imported from Germany, Holland, Belgium and America.

<sup>23</sup> See news item titled “Brand New Buses, Garbage Trucks and Water Bowsers for Sierra Leone says President Kabbah” accessed from <http://news.sl/drwebsite/exec/view.cgi?archive=3&num=3531>; <http://www.globaltimes-sl.org/news1563.html> on 22/07/2011.

<sup>24</sup> Krim krim is a native green vegetable also used to prepare soup. It is quite popular in the markets especially in major towns in Sierra Leone.



located. The country still depends on imported rice and the readily available fish from the Atlantic Ocean as staple foods (Smillie et al, 2000:39; see also Richards, 1996:51).



**Figure 4-3: Upland rice farm in Lewabu, Bo**

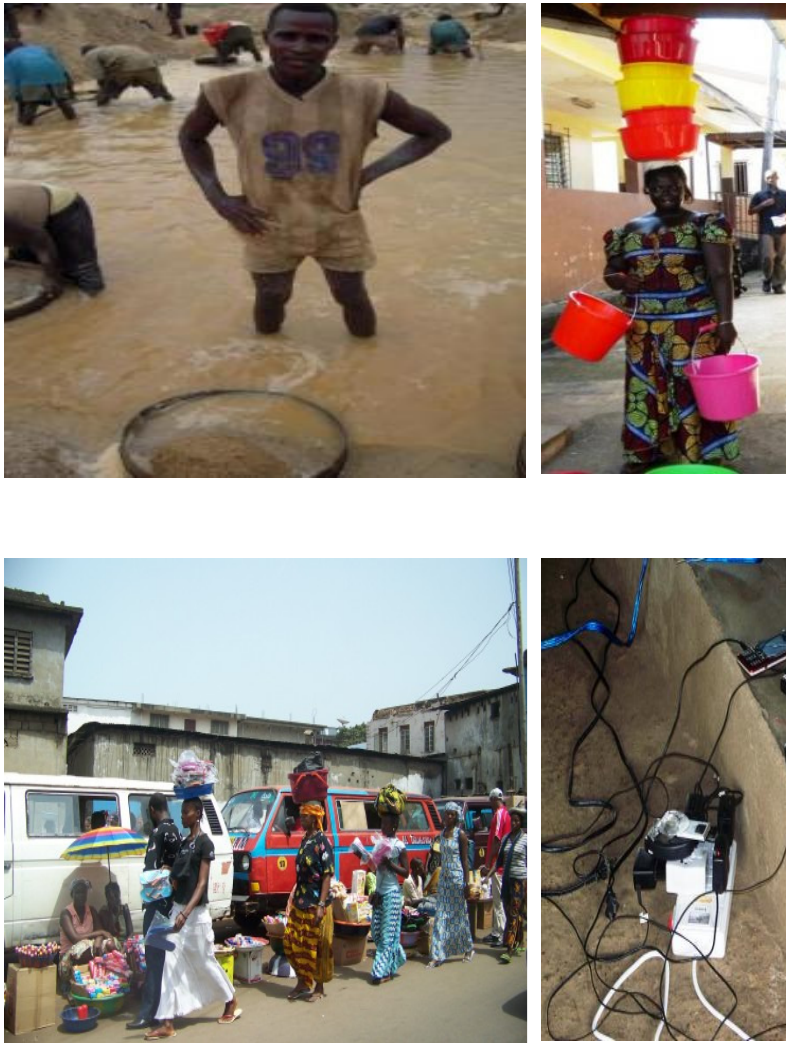
Animals reared are mainly goats and cows. There is an active practice of poultry farming. Livestock farming is also practiced especially to the north of Sierra Leone mainly inhabited by the Limba ethnic group. The main cash crops include coffee, cocoa, kola nuts, fruits (mangoes, oranges, bananas) and palm tree products (palm oil, palm kernels and coconuts). The palm trees are used for the extraction of palm-oil, Palm kernels (coconut), palm wine, soap (black soap) and kola nuts. Kola nut is associated with religious rites, initiation ceremonies, wedding ceremonies (life kola) and property rights; it is also used as a stimulant, as a yellow dye for medicinal purposes, as a symbol of hospitality and in diplomatic relations between rulers. Kola nut is highly regarded among Islamic communities. I was often told by a number of the Bondo initiators that kola nut and some other sacrifices were a requirement before any Bondo session could take place (see also Rodney, 1970:206; Little, 1951:158).



**Figure 4-4: Common means of public transport; the green buses, Podapoda (old people carrier vans) and motor-cycle (okada).**

There is a growing service sector in diamond towns like Bo and Kenema that involves selling cooked food, equipment repair, drugs and entertainment (showing English Premier League football, video shows and restaurants). Other petty occupations are: mobile phone charging kiosks<sup>25</sup> locally known as “Tele-center” and motor cycle taxis called “Okada”. Most of the Okada drivers are former war combatants (see Peters, 2007). It is at the “telecenter” that many people wind away time. In addition to charging phones, the proprietors of telecenters also sell and play music DVDs. Even the Okada drivers make a stop at the telecenter as they wait for customers to ride their taxis.

<sup>25</sup> There are chronic electricity power outages in Bo town. The surrounding villages do not have electricity. Many people own mobile phones in Bo. To stay in touch, people take their phones to be recharged (for a fee) at kiosks (Tele-center) which use diesel generated power.



**Figure 4-5: Men working in an alluvial diamond mine, Diamond offices in Bo and women selling petty merchandise plastic containers and phones being charged at a “Tele-centre”.**





**Figure 4-6: Used clothes and shoes market**

In the rural areas, the main source of domestic fuel is kerosene, charcoal, gas (for the well to do households) and firewood. Electricity is mainly found in urban areas. However, the electricity supply is quite unreliable. It is very common to see diesel fuelled electricity generators in shops because there can be two or three day long breaks in the centrally-supplied electricity each week in Bo and even in the capital city Freetown. A number of businesses in Bo and other smaller towns are owned by people from other ethnic communities commonly referred to as ‘strangers’<sup>26</sup>. Hospitality is considered culturally important among the Mende. The Mende also take pride in the goodwill they accrue from their guests. No well meaning Mende man will build a house without including a guest wing for his “strangers”.

There are a significant number of women traders (“strangers”) from the Fula, Limba and Mandingo in the local petty trading market in Bo. Naturalised Lebanese people dominate local super-markets and shops mainly stocked with electronics or motor-cycle<sup>27</sup> (*okada*)

<sup>26</sup> Rodney, (1970:83) notes that English traders were regarded as “strangers” and these new entrants into the territory often sided with the chiefs, kings and nobles who in turn gave them security. In the general culture of the people of the upper Guinea coast, people who come with good intentions are welcomed. These are the norms of hospitality, the people of Sierra Leone extended to the Portuguese. The name stranger is what the Portuguese who earlier settled in the Guinea coast called their rivals in business. The locals used the name stranger to ‘designate other Europeans apart from the Portuguese who were the earliest foreign contact with Sierra Leone’ (Rodney, 1970:88). This phenomenon has lived on such that during my stay in Sierra Leone especially in the provincial towns, I was often referred to as a stranger.

<sup>27</sup> Motor cycle taxis are commonly referred to as ‘Okada’, a name that is said to have been borrowed from Nigeria.

parts. The Lebanese are also predominantly found in the mining sector and their shops often double as mining offices.

Land ownership involves a mix of group and individual rights, where the rights to land are vested in one “owner” but other members who are heirs, such as sons, have a right to it. Little argues that, historically, group ownership of land was preferred to strict demarcation to individual sons since it was thought that this would bring fragmentation between families (Little, 1951:86-87).

The primary social problems are severe poverty and economic inequality, especially in the diamond-mining districts. The very rich are a tiny minority: Kandeh, in his analysis of the war in Sierra Leone, has referred to “...the absence of a hegemonic ruling class capable of promoting material and institutional development” (1999:359). Though there is a small middle class, class relations are not very pronounced<sup>28</sup> in day to day interaction in Sierra Leone (see also Billows and Miguel, 2009:4). People socialise freely across class and ethnic boundaries. Besides the secret societies, social capital is also enhanced through the participation of co-operatives, locally operated “merry-go round<sup>29</sup>” and loan schemes that are common in different local economic ventures and run by everyone from market traders and motor-cycle taxi riders to civil servants. Having sketched the economic activities, below I examine the general social context within which the Bondo society exists. Accordingly, below, I explore the institution of marriage, the organisation of households, the role of secret societies and their organisational structure.

## 4.2 Household arrangements

Historically, the Mende were considered polygynous and patrilineal probably due to their Islamic religious affiliation. Phillips (1995:42) has also argued that polygyny catered for the demands for labour<sup>30</sup> to till forest land. Despite the fact that polygyny is still accepted,

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<sup>28</sup> Billow and Miguel, for example, note that “our surveys indicate that rural Sierra Leonean villages consist almost entirely of subsistence farmers, and with the notable exception of traditional chiefly families, there is typically no conspicuous landowning elite for the RUF to target” (2009:4).

<sup>29</sup> Like is suggestive in the name Merry-go round, this is an arrangement where a group of people contribute a lump sum of money monthly, which is then given to one member of the group in the understanding that the following month, all members in similar fashion will equally contribute a similar amount to someone else in the group. This arrangement goes on until all the group members have received the pooled money. Once the cycle is over, they can start again.

<sup>30</sup> By marrying more than one wife, a household is endowed with access to a potentially higher level of labour to employ in the farms. In the rural households, members of the family produce their own food through manual labour in the subsistence farms.

few men tend to marry two or more wives. This is because of the heavy financial implications of such a venture. Many people's income was significantly reduced in the wake of the recent civil war where a lot of wealth was destroyed. This was compounded by the dwindling market value of diamonds after the war. In this context men tend to take mistresses or concubines rather than marrying two or more wives.

Bondo initiation was traditionally reserved for girls ready to join marital life among the Mende. However, nowadays, a number of parents prefer to initiate their girls while still very young<sup>31</sup>, school going girls continue with their studies after Bondo initiation (Interview with Mariama on 2/2/2009, a middle aged Bondo society member). Among the Mende, any arrangement for marriage is consensual. Little noted in the fifties that "no marriage is valid unless it is agreed to by the girl as well as her father and mother" (Little, 1951:149). He also noted that "Marriage is possible between persons of any social status with the exception of women who are paramount chiefs. The most common form of marriage, he argued, normally resulted from "friendship", a term he loosely defines as "casual" sexual relationship (Ibid, 153). Such practices seem to remain common according to my informants.

Though there is still a high premium placed on marriage and family life among many Bondo initiates as Phillips (1995:42) noted, some of the female respondents I talked to planned to immigrate in search of better lives or start careers before being married. However, most of my respondents demonstrated that they considered marriage, children and stability in marriage very important. According to Bondo ideology, becoming a Bondo member is one of the ways in which to attain these important things in life. Many of my Soweï respondents indicated that they enhanced their initiates' fertility through the use of Bondo secrets<sup>32</sup>.

We teach Bondo initiates domestic duties like how to handle themselves as mature people in the community, how to relate to other people especially when they get married. How to take care of their husbands, and generally how to maintain a home. If your husband has a sister, how to honour her and if there is a stranger [visitor], how to treat the visitor... smile if your husband needs you, you should cool down for your husband and you will give birth to beautiful babies and we will be blessed so

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<sup>31</sup> According to a number of respondents, initiating a very young girl is relatively cheaper than initiating a mature girl (Field notes).

<sup>32</sup> Due to the oaths of secrecy and ethical rules of confidentiality, such secrets or the actual process of imbuing women with fertility were neither divulged nor available to me, given my position as a man and a non-Bondo member.

that when a girl gets married, we will not be ashamed [...] I am proud of my Bondo society. I was born and raised up in this society. I have given birth to 14 children in this society and I have raised them up out of this society from the proceeds of initiation [...] A Bondo initiate will be a good mother to your children. That is why you marry her, so that your name will not disappear and she will respect culture.

(Interview with Banyatoto on 13/03/09, a Mende senior Soweï aged 58 living in an IDP refugee camp).

At least ten other Soweï respondents told me more or less the same thing: that the Bondo teaches initiates to take good care of a home and that initiation will lead to them being blessed with many children. The teachings are also directed towards producing a desired form of femininity in the community. This thus situates the role of secret societies at the core of the transition from childhood to adult life in places where the Poro and Bondo are practiced. It is evident that the Bondo thus stresses domestic roles for women. However, as I have pointed out above, such a view is increasingly challenged as women also engage in economic activities in order to earn a living, especially in the post-war context. I also learned from many of my respondents that the initiates are also taught how to fish and how to be brave in the face of adversity, in ways that prepare them to be “socio-economically rounded” and ready to integrate into the ordered way of life in the community.

### 4.3 Community organisation

Many Mende communities (villages) are organised into clusters of houses in a farming settlement called *mawe*. Kin family members are housed in the *mawes* (see also Little 1951:105). These *mawes* are grouped together to form an administrative unit called a section (small towns/village) presided over by a section chief. Several sections are grouped into political units called chiefdoms headed by paramount chiefs. A number of chiefdoms in a given region are combined together to form districts administered by a district officer. Unlike section and paramount chiefs, the district officers are appointed by the central government (Phillips, 1995:45; Fanthorpe, 2005). The chief is expected to maintain ancestral and other traditional religions; he is also a patron of the *Poro* society and among the Kpa Mende sub-group, the *wunde* military secret society (Little 1951:274). The position of paramount chief is said to be occupied by a descendant of a family

claimed to be the “founder” of the territory (Little, 1951:181; Archibald and Richards, 2002:2; Fanthorpe, 2005:27).



**Figure 4-7: Mawe (a small settlement area) in a Mende village**

Such arrangements are, of course, mutable, and have changed in certain respects in recent years. Fanthorpe (2005), for example, argues that though the plans to decentralise the way the chieftaincy is run may open up democratic space to the rural poor, speedy decentralisation as propounded by donors may lead to a shift in “the balance of political power away from the poor” (27). By the time I left the “field” in September 2009, the NGO I interned for (Campaign for Good Governance (CGG)), was still lobbying members of parliament and other “stakeholders” to pass a (revised and reformed) chieftaincy bill into law.

#### **4.4 Religion**

The main religious beliefs in Sierra Leone are Islam 60%, Christianity 10%, indigenous beliefs 30% (CIA, 2010). There is, generally, a balanced and harmonious relationship between Muslims and Christians among Sierra Leoneans at large. Not even the recent civil war ignited animosity between the two religions. Little, for instance, notes that Islam is popular in Sierra Leone because it is adapted to pre-existing cultures. Adaptations of this nature can be demonstrated in practices such as child naming, burial rites and in the practices of secret societies like the Poro (Little, 1951:273). Meanwhile, the Bondo, on occasion, use Islamic hadiths<sup>33</sup> to justify the continued practice of FGC (field notes). Moreover, according to some accounts of my Muslim respondents, it is believed that their prayers would not be answered if they were not initiated into Bondo.

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<sup>33</sup> Islamic normative precepts as prescribed by Prophet Mohammed’s teachings and other interpretations of the Koran by Muslim clerics.



#### 4.5 Secret societies

Among many ethnic communities in Sierra Leone, especially the Mende, communal life revolves around secret societies. There are two main secret societies among the Mende, these are the *Poros*, for men and the *Sande* [Bondo]<sup>34</sup> for women. There are also the *wunde* and *humui*. The *Wunde* society is concerned with military training and political matters and is a subset of the *Poros* mainly accessible to high ranking members of the *Poros* such as paramount chiefs. The *humui*, on the other hand, is a group whose membership falls under the *Bondo* society but unlike *Bondo* society membership as a whole, membership to *humui* is only acquired through patrilineal inheritance among ruling families. The *humui* is the secret society charged with the responsibility of controlling sexual behaviour and conduct within the community. The *wunde* is mainly patronised by people in the ruling class. Many paramount chiefs belong to this society in addition to being members of the *Poros*. The *Poros* society is in charge of socialising young boys into Mende adulthood and traditions while the *Bondo* is in charge of the socialisation of girls into female adults in the society (field notes; Little, 1951; Boone, 1986; Phillips, 1995). As I have already suggested, and as is further elaborated below, the two main secret societies (*Poros* and *Bondo*) play a central role in terms of community social life and organisation. The *Poros* and the *Bondo* secret societies have members from practically all ethnic communities other than the Krio (cf Little, 1965).

#### 4.6 The role of secret societies

The *Poros* and *Bondo* are institutions that socialise boys and girls into “desired” community members for the sake of social cohesion. The *Bondo*, as noted above, teaches its members the art of home keeping, good social relations with in-laws, sex matters, child-bearing and aspects of motherhood. In the case of the *Poros*, among other things, they teach boys how to defend their families and the community at large. Boys are also taught the art of war and generally what is understood to be entailed in being a functioning man in the community.

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<sup>34</sup> *Sande* is the Mende name for the secret society in which FGC initiation is the key precondition of membership while *Bondo* is the Krio word/name for the same society.

Both the Bondo and the Poro thus prepare young people for marriage. Other than those from the Krio ethnic group, no one is expected to marry or get married before graduating from the Bondo or Poro. However, in contemporary Sierra Leone, there are cases of people getting married before going through the Bondo or Poro. Such marriages are not socially sanctioned and are thus largely viewed as illegitimate. In 2002, when the then president Tejan Kabbah sponsored a mass Bondo initiation (as I will discuss in chapter six), it was said that a good number of the women who turned up for the “free” Bondo initiation were married women with one or two children. Such women, it was assumed, had not been able to afford to pay Bondo initiation fees and to cater for the celebrations associated with Bondo initiation due to poverty. It was reported to me that the free initiation drives were thronged by thousands of women waiting to become Bondo members to the extent that the Bondo Soweis were overwhelmed.

When Tejan Kabba became president, Bondo children and even married women with children [...] they are coming with them and hooting car horns, he said we put more and more and more then they book park and they sit like this and we put so many initiates until we got tired. Some of us initiated for days without rest, we even lost appetite to eat (Interview with Fatmata on 07/02/2009 a Soweï living in IDP aged 40)

The interest elicited by the free initiation drives is suggestive of the importance of being a Bondo initiate in the local cultural context. The significance of Bondo initiation draws on the fact that non-Bondo members are derided as children or deviants by being referred to as *Boroka*, as noted above. They are also denied access to Bondo meetings. Bondo members expect non-initiates to exhibit some form of deference when talking to them (field notes). This of course strains communication and relations in a way that leaves non-Bondo members with very limited access to the networks and information available to Bondo members. Such information may include ideas on treating sick babies and common ailments, managing a home or domestic conflict, accessing a social network or support in case of any other social problem. Indeed an individual cannot hold any significant social position in the community unless they join one of the main secret societies.

#### **4.7 Organisation and socio-political structure of Bondo**

The Bondo has a well defined organisational structure although the details of this are not easily accessed by non-initiates. The head is called chief *Soweï*, and then there is an

assistant Soweï referred to as *Ligba*, a main dancer, *Sampa*, and other attendants such as the *colonel*. This structure is by no means conclusive because I was given different accounts of the hierarchical structure from different respondents while in the field. Some names referencing Bondo leaders like *colonel* struck me by their close association with military vocabulary. What emerged, in general, from the accounts of my respondents was that there is a clear and hierarchical structure in the organisation of the Bondo. Elderly members of the Bondo society are also regarded as senior. Significant positions are achieved through either inheritance from close patrilineal kin or through the exhibition of exemplary skills in carrying out Bondo society issues (“business”) or through dreams where one receives a premonition to go and get Bondo society paraphernalia from under the water. Elsewhere Boone has argued that the acclaimed “abode of heaven” in Mende belief system is found under the water (1986:161). From the accounts of my respondents, it seemed that getting the Bondo from under the water was considered a prestigious way of ascending into the Bondo leadership hierarchy:

Interviewee: I took it (Bondo “tools”) from under water, through spiritual intervention and some superstition, and thus I cannot stop the Bondo lest the Bondo spirits come to haunt me.

Interviewer: How does one get promotion to senior positions in the Bondo?

Interviewee: This is what I am explaining. Like me, I took my society from under the water, so I am the leader. (Interview on 01/07/2009 with Salmata, a Soweï aged 45 living in an IDP camp in Freetown).

From what the Soweïs said, I could tell that they regarded getting the Bondo skills from under the water very highly. This could be gleaned by the tone of their voice and by the fact that they paused for a while after saying “I took it from under water” as though they paused for effect. They wanted me to register how important this was. The prestige could be attributed to the fact that they perceive themselves as the ones “chosen” by the Bondo spirit to receive the “Bondo box”. They also probably regarded themselves as deserving, and it is possible that attaining Bondo leadership in this way is understood to be hard work compared to the situation of those Soweïs who merely inherited their Bondo position. This, therefore, highlights some tension between those who acquire their position in the Bondo through inheritance and those whose competence is rewarded by being given a position in the leadership hierarchy.

Despite the clear hierarchy and the central Bondo and Poro teachings which emphasise a show of respect to people older than oneself, many respondents told me that in the Bondo bush meetings, all members were regarded as equal. They also said that any Bondo member could access anybody in the Bondo society irrespective of their position during Bondo bush meetings. Below are some of the accounts of my respondents.

Interviewer: What are some of the benefits of the Bondo society?

Interviewee: To the Soweï, they get money, food and respect. Before initiating your child, you will have to give the Soweï the following things: some amount of money, palm oil, rice, a cup, soap, cloth, plate, spoon and a big bowl in addition to other small items necessary for the initiation. To the person being initiated, the benefit is that you become a society member and enjoy the networks in the society because you are free to go anywhere and mingle with fellow members; you are also protected by the Bondo society. (Interview with Bendu, a market trader Mende woman aged 31).

Interviewee: They teach us how to maintain our mouth (be secretive). I should show respect to people of my mother's age and those older than my mother, my big sisters age mates and up to now I am still on it (I am still doing this to date) (Interview with Sonya on the 01/07/2009, a Soweï aged 55 living in an IDP camp in Freetown).

It is worth emphasising the point made by the Soweï below, who told me that she would not heed calls by the anti-FGC activists to stop the practice unless the activists gave her an alternative way of sustaining her family:

If you want us to forget about the society you should give us money or you open working shop so that we learn from the workshop and give us advice on how to feed our people, or give us money to do business. Then if you come with a child to me for initiation, I won't do it because I will be busy with the business, I will not leave my business for the society. But if I don't have any money to do business and they told me not to go and initiate, I will not listen to them because it is the only way I can survive, so if you want me to leave the society give me job or money to do business (Interview with Fatmata on 07/02/2009 a Soweï living in IDP camp aged 40).

Bondo Soweïs hold leverage in the local political economy through the role they play in the preparation of girls for marriage. The Bondo thus control one of the most important social processes in their society (Ibid: 164). Though the Poro is exclusively for men, there are instances when Bondo women are initiated into the Poro. In cases when a woman

becomes a paramount chief, she has first to be initiated into the Poro before she takes leadership. In such situations, the woman in question will have to give up her Bondo membership and join the Poro. The highest ranking female member of the Poro society is the *mabole*. According to Little's ethnography in the 1950s, "the office of the mabole in the Poro society which is held by a woman, commands the highest respect and has an integral role in the ceremonial life and purpose of that association" (1951:164). This is still the case according to my fieldwork; the mabole to date oversees initiation of boys and men into the Poro and is consulted by the Poro for traditional medicines.

One of the main symbols of the Bondo society is the Bondo masquerade. The masks worn by these figures are said to have ritualistic powers. There are also other masks that are mainly for entertainment (Little, 1951:273; Phillips, 1995:72). During my fieldwork, maskers performed dances and sang songs along the major streets of Bo on public holidays. In these public performances by the masquerades, members of the public were encouraged to join and dance with the masquerades as they beat their drums to a song. This created a kind of carnival atmosphere and mood among the general public.

The political participation of the Sowe mask is of long standing. Phillips, for example, observes that a "masked Sande [masquerade] danced as a representative of Sande and the women of Bo during a visit of the president of Sierra Leone in the early 1970s" (1995:87). While in the field, public performances of masquerades were common in political rallies. In one of the political rallies I attended held in Moyamba, masquerades from the different societies performed before the current president, Earnest Bai Koroma, addressed the members of public. The president was trying to calm unrest that had been generated when rivalry between the two main political parties (APC and SLPP) had resulted in the SLPP Freetown office being vandalised and burned in April 2009. The participation of the Bondo masquerade in this context is suggestive of the symbolic role the Bondo plays in politics over and above the educative and domestic roles taught to Bondo initiates.

It is characteristic of Mende cultural beliefs that diseases may be believed to be a result of a breach to one of the secret society's laws. The common antidote in case of such diseases is to be ritually washed by the appropriate society to rid oneself of the curse. In some cases, the best way to rid oneself of the disease is to join the offended society. These beliefs give the societies an additional sociological significance in the community (Little, 1951:249).

Respective society members of both the Bondo and the Poro gather at any time the members call for a meeting in the different secret society bushes to discuss matters of importance to them. The meetings address a need or objective that demands attention at a given time in the local community in regard to Bondo members. The Bondo members communicate through codes and symbols that only society members understand. This ability to easily mobilise members bestows social recognition and respect on Bondo members, especially their leaders. In standard ethnographies on the Bondo, (Little, 1951; Rodney, 1970, MacCormack, 1974; Bledsoe, 1984; Boone, 1986; Philips, 1995), it has been pointed out that the women in Bondo have access to some forms of significant power within their communities. There is also a level of interdependence between the male secret society, Poro and the Bondo. Below, I explore this in more detail.



**Figure 4.8: Ceremonial Bondo Masquerades perform in public.**





**Figure 4-9: Simulated masked Soweï and next, the investigator poses for a picture with a masked Bondo Soweï at home in an IDPcamp in Freetown (in a “real” Bondo performance, men are not allowed anywhere near a Bondo mask).**



**Figure 4-10: Bondo dancers performing a dance**

#### **4.8 Interdependence between the Bondo and the Poro secret societies**

As noted above, some breaches of Bondo law, especially by men, are punishable through the chief’s office. The Bondo members have to ask for permission from the chief (who is normally a patron of the local Poro chapter) to build a Bondo bush. During the “coming out” ceremony, the Bondo cook tasty food and take it to the local chief. This customary practice symbolises the working relationship between the chief and the Bondo. As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, the chief depends on levies from Bondo initiation and fines for breach of Bondo laws, in order to support his administration. Fees levied by the chief on Bondo include “marriage fees” and Bondo licence certificates given to Soweis. On their part, the Bondo charge initiation fees to new initiates as well as charging people who break Bondo laws. Failure to pay charges means that the Bondo will invoke their ritual curse which will harm the person. Many people know this and if one is asked to pay a Bondo fine, family members and friends of the accused person will contribute to the payment so as not to provoke the Bondo. In some cases the kin of a victim of Bondo charges will lobby the chief to beg mercy from the Bondo leaders on their behalf. Inter-

dependence between men and women in the community is also attested by the office of the *mabole* that is integral in the Poro but traditionally occupied by senior Bondo leaders.

#### 4.9 The Bondo initiation process

The Bondo initiation normally takes place at a secluded area preferably in a forest or a bush. However, in the IDP camps, the “Bondo bushes” are located in the vicinity of the internal refugee camp but towards the periphery. Owing to the importance attached to the role of Bondo initiation in a girl’s life, a lot of organisation goes into the preparation for the ceremony. Parents and guardians plan well in advance by preparing big farms to harvest more and save money. The Bondo initiation fee paid depends on negotiation. It could range from 20,000 Leones (five pounds) to 100,000 Leones (twenty pounds) or more. Some of my respondents told me that paying more for initiating one’s daughters constituted a kind of symbolic status marker in the community. This trend, they noted, was especially prevalent during the heady days of the diamond boom before the civil war.

Before the war in the villages, people who struck diamond used to say, ooh, I found a diamond and I initiated all my children to Bondo. In those days when you got diamond you got good money. The next thing you want to do... you want to do things that will make people to look at you with a good eye in the village. This is one of the things that one could boast about. That I initiated fifteen children; I paid such amount of money; they were all dressed in this kind of manner and so forth. So for me, it was about showing your wealth, showing how rich you were (Interview with Elissa on 29/03/09, a well educated Bondo member aged 30 working with an international organisation).

The Bondo initiation session normally starts after the rainy season in October. Initiations are thus common in November and December. They are also occasionally held over the Easter holidays in March and April. Many families prefer the coming out<sup>35</sup> ceremony of their daughters to coincide with the onset of Christmas or Easter celebrations when their daughters are on holiday from school (see also Boone, 1986:45).

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<sup>35</sup> This is one of the final parts of the Bondo initiation ceremony in which the fresh initiates are paraded in a procession that marches through the local towns amid cheers and jubilation to mark the successful graduation of Bondo initiates (Field notes, 4/5/2009).



According to Phillips: “Before she enters into the Sande bush, a candidate is a child; after being taken to the Sande enclosure the ‘child’ translates into a ‘novice.’ After clitoridectomy, a girl is known as (virgin) at the end of the initiation period, she emerges as a bride” (1995:81). My respondents did not seem to emphasise the idea of virginity in this way. They simply said that before one is initiated into the Bondo, they are considered to be children while after they have been initiated, they are regarded as adults and can interact with any Bondo member freely, irrespective of the difference in age and marital status. Other than the practice of FGC itself, and lessons on how to be a good wife undertaken during Bondo initiation, it was reported to me that there are also psychological exercises that are meant to prepare the initiate to be a fully socialised member of the society. One respondent said:

After you heal like after a week they give you like psychological exercises, gynaecological exercise and others... I mean it’s a thing to make you feel strong as a woman. I mean, it’s an exercise to overcome fear (Interview on 05/05/2009 with Gobebe, a well educated Bondo member working in an international organisation)<sup>36</sup>.

The planning of Bondo initiations, however, has been affected by the recent civil war given that many people have been displaced from their farms as I will discuss below. Elaborate preparations for Bondo initiation are no longer a priority in the context of displacement in post war Sierra Leone. Below, I examine in more detail the trajectory of the recent civil war in Sierra Leone and consider the displacement of people with a view to analysing how the war affected the society and in order to contextualise the Bondo society in its present-day cultural milieu.

As argued above, the Bondo society in general, and control of initiation practices in particular, are a significant economic resource to Soweis. The Soweis make money from initiation fees charged on new members joining the Bondo. They also gain symbolic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986) which in turn gives them political leverage. I will discuss this issue in more detail in other chapters of this thesis. Though the Bondo claim to be “defending our traditions and culture” in their fight against anti-FGC discourse, it is also true that “traditional practice” allows access to economic opportunity and political power. Traditional practice, in this context, constitutes a form of symbolic authority, as Bourdieu (1986; 1989:19) propounded, which is used to achieve other things (political, social and economic gain). Elsewhere Bledsoe (1984) has argued that Bondo leaders gain

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<sup>36</sup> For detailed descriptions of what happens during the initiation period and the Bondo masks, see Phillips (1995:81-85).

considerable control over Bondo initiates, the initiate's families, and young men who seek their hand in marriage. They do this because of the belief that they are responsible for ritually imbuing the initiates with fertility and overseeing their transition into mature women. The Bondo leaders can use this control to align themselves to powerful people such as land owners and leaders in the community. A historical case in point was the renowned Mende female chief called Madam Yoko, who used her position as a Soweï and paramount chief to consolidate her rule by "select[ing] all the best young girls in her area to enter her Sande bush, and dispos[ing] them in marriage to important men who would help in her own advancement" (MacCormack 1974:183 in Bledsoe, 1984:462). In contemporary Sierra Leone, the Bondo leaders form alliances with politicians for personal gain by exploiting the Bondo ideology of female solidarity and sodality. Bledsoe argues, in this respect, that the Bondo leaders strategically "manipulate resulting dualities" of Bondo teachings that crosscut the domains of desirable, undesirable and dangerous for political and economic gain (1984:466). Bledsoe point is that the Soweïs, could at times, use Bondo precepts that structure social relations and discourse in the community for expediency.

The Bondo is, therefore, a significant resource, especially for those in positions of authority within the society. The Bondo can thus also be seen as a context in which some benefit at the expense and pain of others. For instance, the Bondo is hierarchically organised in such a way that gaining positions of power, such as that of Soweï, is commonly transferred through inheritance, although, as described above, there are other ways of acquiring the Soweï position including through demonstration of exceptional prowess in the Bondo society. Nevertheless, the structure of the society thus privileges certain families who simply inherit positions of power without having to prove themselves. This brings us to the question; what things are left unsaid in accounts of the Bondo as a "safe" place for "all" women, in particular, the extent to which the Bondo society itself involves forms of internal inequality? Although the traditional accounts present Bondo society as a space where society members can meet and associate freely, they do not say that the most significant forms of power the Bondo society has access to are mainly available to the "privileged class" as we have seen above. This is especially the case in the affiliate secret society of the Bondo called humui. The humui regulates sexual control and behaviour in the society. The woman in charge of the humui inherits this position through kin in a patrilineal descent. Other members of the humui secret society who are not from the ruling class do not therefore have a way of rising through the ranks to acquire this

position by, for example, their exceptional abilities. Elsewhere El Dawla commenting on the sex paradoxes sustaining FGC in Egypt argues that “beneath the overt subordination to social norm the issue of female cutting is not just about mutilation but its core agenda that is usually hidden, concerns aspects of social control and power that are engendered in the role of women in the society (1999:129). In the same way, the *humui*, charged with overseeing sexual conduct and behaviour, can be said to control and maintain the patriarchal order and it is telling, in this respect, that its leadership positions are passed through patrilineal heritage such that power and control is retained within kin of men in the ruling class. In this respect, the female leaders of the *humui* only enjoy power as accomplices in upholding patriarchy and interests of the ruling class. The significance of retaining this control is highlighted by Phillips who notes that although the *humui* prohibits sexual relations between kin, the Mende in some cases “discard the usual prohibition against marriage between paternal first cousins in order to retain the ability to organise a chapter of the Sande [Bondo] society that possession of the medicine authorizes” (Phillips 1995:80). This is done in order to avoid losing control of high ranking positions of the Sande that can only be attained through patrilineal descent inheritance. In the same vein, Little, although writing about colonial Sierra Leone, says: “This kind of [incestuous] marriage is contracted, sometimes by chiefs and is known as *njoe*-‘family marriage.’ Its purpose is partly dynastic, and is rationalised in terms of the necessity for maintaining valuable property, such as land or important chiefdom secrets, within the same descent group. ‘Family marriage’ is also practiced among the *Humui* society itself for similar reasons, i.e. to keep intact hereditary society secrets and medicines” (Little, 1951:146).

Interestingly, in the course of my fieldwork, I came across a number of Bondo members who though lined up to inherit the Bondo *Sowei* positions from their relatives, did not seem to be enthused about this inherited Bondo position. Many such respondents I met had relocated to urban centres; some were pursuing tertiary and higher education. It is worth noting that the displacement caused by the war has altered the dynamics of social life in modern day Sierra Leone. This could explain such changes in perception. Nevertheless, the key issue is that the case of *humui* further emphasises how patriarchy co-opts some women by granting them privileges in order to maintain the status quo. In this way, some women do gain a form of autonomy and benefit from a form of egalitarianism within the female led *humui*, while they are, at the same time, solidifying the patriarchal order. These secret societies retain power through hereditary paternal descent aimed at maintaining the *status quo*. Therefore, the Bondo, like all cultural phenomena, is also a site of social struggle. The acquisition of leadership positions within the Bondo is a process in which some of the

inherent tensions and debates about the cultural uses of the Bondo, the meanings associated with some Bondo values, and the changing structures of the Bondo are played out. The tensions in the Bondo are partly engendered by the changes that the Bondo is undergoing in contemporary post-war Sierra Leone and in the face of FGC eradication discourse.

#### **4.10 “Blood diamond”, Poverty, Corruption and the road to War in Sierra Leone**

In this section I trace the factors leading to the recent civil war in Sierra Leone. The decade long civil war in Sierra Leone has been theorised in different ways. One of the main causes suggested by commentators is the fact that continued corruption by the then government and exclusion from “patrimonial networks” for the majority of the population resulted in disgruntlement among large numbers of Sierra Leonean young men (Richards, 1996:51). Out of this discontent emerged a subculture of violent radicals that included former student leaders and ex militias in the Charles Taylor led Liberian war, who later emerged as rebels referred to as the Royal United Front (RUF). RUF were the main protagonist in the war against the government of Sierra Leone (Reno, 1998). Another view is that state leaders ran into a crisis of legitimacy after governing the country with impunity and violence for decades in a manner that included systematic repression of any civil discontent. In a more general sense widespread corruption and systematic repression led to the collapse of structures inherent in the formation of a ruling class. The result of this was what has been described as the “lumpenisation<sup>37</sup>” of a majority of the population who saw no solution to their plight other than a resort to violence (Kandeh, 1999:350). This, coupled with an unmotivated and undisciplined military, led to the war being prolonged (Mauna et al, 2005:7). Others argue that the RUF intervention in the country was caused by the Liberian president Charles Taylor who wanted to have a favourable government in neighbouring Sierra Leone and also reward some of the RUF leaders who had fought alongside him in his quest to overthrow the Samuel Doe government in Liberia. It is also said that he wanted to cash in on the lucrative diamond mines in Sierra Leone (Abdulla, 1998:220). More generally, it has been suggested that the war was exacerbated by the scramble for Sierra Leonean’s alluvial diamonds by both foreigners

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<sup>37</sup> According to Ishmail Rashid (1997: 22-23), “lumpen”: ‘...represents that strata of the society that cannot fully employ or sell its labour because of capitalist transformation, restructuring or retrenchment’ ([see] Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1955, p. 20-21; *The Communist Manifesto*, New York; “Subaltern Reactions: Lumpens, Students and the Left”, *African Development* 22 (3/4): 19-44). Similarly Abdulla argues that “It is also not surprising that in the predominantly rural Mende southeast, the major theatre of war, the RUF cadres were collectively referred to as the Njahungbia Ngonga, meaning riffraff’s, lumpens and unruly youths. The bulk of the current RUF battle-front commanders were lumpens from the rural south-east” (1998:221).

and Sierra Leoneans (Clapham, 2003:12). Other factors that led to the eventual break out of war include: systematic centralisation of power under the APC government, efforts to quell all forms of civic opposition such as student activism and the press through repression, intimidation, and co-optation.

There are, then, many explanations as to the causes of war in Sierra Leone. However, compelling explanations also trace the trajectory of political events dating back to pre-independence days. Denov and Gervais, for example, note that Sierra Leone's<sup>38</sup> integration into the world system was hampered by corrupt leaders who ended up institutionalizing and elevating a culture of unbridled kleptocracy while pushing the traditional social system to the periphery (2007:887). This assertion is supported by Abdulla who argues that a vibrant pan-Africanist movement in the 1940s had formed a foundation for civil mobilisation and the creation of a ruling class. However, this pan-Africanist movement was deemed to conflict with colonial interest and was replaced by African leaders viewed to be friendly to the colonial government. In this light, Dr. Milton Margai, a medical doctor from a chiefly background was appointed as the first Prime Minister of Sierra Leone (Abdulla, 1998:206). Margai's Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP), was seen as a "gradualist and conservative political movement", and governed alongside the British colonialists from 1952 until his death in 1964 when his brother Albert Margai succeeded him (Smillie et al, 2000:39). Sierra Leone got its independence in 1961 after the colonial government left and held its first elections in 1968. Though there are seventeen ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, the two major ethnic communities are the Limba and the Mende who account for 30% of the population. These two communities form the bulk that dominates the two main political parties in Sierra Leone to date: All People's Congress (APC) dominated by the Limba who live towards the north and Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) by the Mende, largely resident in the south east of Sierra Leone (Clapham, 2003:9).

After the first elections in 1968, the then incumbent, Albert Margai of the SLPP lost to Siaka Stevens of the All People's Congress (APC) but refused to hand over power. Siaka Stevens, a former police man and a trade unionist who had earlier been sponsored by the colonial government to attend a course on trade unionism at Oxford Ruskin College was later installed as president after a military coup (Abdulla, 1998:206; Clapham, 2003:7;

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<sup>38</sup> The British crown purchased large swathes of land from traditional leaders in present day Sierra Leone and resettled freed slaves in 1880, hence the name Freetown. Sierra Leone was declared a colony by the British and in 1896 a protectorate was declared that extended into the hinterlands. Sierra Leone gained its independence on April 27th 1961.

Richards, 1996:40; Smillie et al, 2000:41). Siaka Stevens ran the country with a heavy hand and stifled political opposition, mainly from the SLPP. In 1978, the president outlawed all other political parties and declared Sierra Leone a one party political system after rounds of student protests (Richards, 1996:41).

Siaka Stevens consolidated his power by brutally<sup>39</sup> fighting off any elements that threatened the APC dominance (Abdulla, 1997:207; Reno, 1998:24; see also Le-Billon, 2001:566). He employed youths who dealt violently<sup>40</sup> with people who challenged or criticized the government (Abdulla, 1998:206; Kandeh, 1999:359; see also Le-Billon, 2001:567). Kandeh, for instance, argues that the “violence and thuggery” exhibited by the APC government in the 1970s was motivated more by an interest “in holding on to power than in legitimating their dominance” (Kandeh, 1999:359).

To quell any discontent, the then government incorporated leaders of trade unions, the police and military into parliament in order to prevent any unrest and to forestall any protests on the part of the union movement against the ruling elite (Bangura, 2004: 27). University students’ protests against the excesses of the government were violently suppressed. Radical students were expelled and suspended from the university. The press was equally muzzled. In the hinterlands, district councils working alongside traditional paramount chiefs introduced during the colonial government to improve governance in the villages were disbanded. To further consolidate their power in the villages the government handpicked paramount chiefs and simultaneously fired any chief that threatened APC dominance, sidestepping traditional procedures. This resulted in village leaders owing their legitimacy to the APC order, rather than to the local people (Smillie et al, 2000:42; Archibald and Richards, 2002:2).

To stave off any political rivals, President Siaka Stevens developed close relations with Sierra Leonean Lebanese diamond merchants<sup>41</sup> as opposed to local indigenous Sierra

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<sup>39</sup> Bangura notes that the use of violence was justified by APC politicians in their political rallies resulting in a system that rewarded sycophancy as it simultaneously punished hard-work, patriotism and independent thought (2004:29).

<sup>40</sup> “Unlike violence which can sometimes be justified but not legitimised, power needs legitimation for its effective exercise. The more political elites rely on violence to silence political opponents and perpetuate their dominance, the greater the likelihood that violence would spiral out of control and consume not only its architects but society as a whole” (Kandeh, 1999:358).

<sup>41</sup> Jamil Mohamed was one of the highest ranking Sierra Leonean Lebanese diamond merchants. “Under Stevens, [Jamil] Mohammed attended cabinet meetings (although he was not a minister or official member of the government), occasionally vetoed ministerial appointments, reversed ministerial decisions and routinely violated government foreign exchange regulations. At the height of his awesome power as chief economic patron of top APC politicians, Jamil Mohammed was allowed to maintain a heavily armed 500-strong personal security force consisting mainly of Lebanese and Palestines”(Kandeh, 1999:351).

Leoneans. He feared indigenous Sierra Leoneans would pose a threat to his rule due to their cultural grounding and access to diamond money, a main source of political influence. He also encouraged ties of “patrimonialism” by engaging patron-clientelist arrangements between the Lebanese and his cronies in government. This inner clique enriched themselves by illegal mining and “in-formalising” the economy in a way that challenged the ability of the government to collect tax. At the time, formal state structures were invariably staffed by Krios<sup>42</sup> who tended to be better educated. Sierra Leoneans from the hinterlands including Siaka Stevens, who was from the North, viewed these state bureaucrats with suspicion. Stevens thus undermined the state bureaucracy and by extension the Krios who disproportionately occupied bureaucratic positions. As a result of this informalisation of the economy and state, Stevens created an “alternative state” (what Reno (1998:41) has called the “shadow state”), threaded together by ties of patronage and clientelist relationships. In this arrangement, the impression of an ordinary state bureaucracy was maintained but was overlooked in the many trading and economic transactions of the state which were handled directly within patrimonial networks headed by Stevens and those closest to him (Richards, 1996:51).

The facade of bureaucratic procedures provided a smoke-screen behind which the political elites enriched themselves from the state as they neglected core sectors of state provision such as health, education and the military, which were left to crumble (Clapham, 2003:12, 27; Richards 1996: 60). Civil servants went for several months without pay and when they were paid the pay was dished out selectively in a way that favoured regions viewed to be friendly to the government at the expense of other regions. In this way the president deepened his informalisation project (Richards, 1996:36). Most notably, Stevens consolidated control by nationalising the diamond sector. Active companies such as De Beers were bought out and the direct control of diamond production was placed under him (Smillie et al, 2000:4; Zack-Williams, 1995: 179-180). This change heralded the downward spiral of the economy. Legitimate diamond exports dropped “From a high of over two million carats in 1970 [...] to 595,000 in 1980 and fell to only 48,000 carats in 1988” (Smillie et al, 2000:42; see also Reno, 1995:132; Reno, 1998: 116; Clapham, 2003:27). Other public resources like fisheries, gold, Rutile mines,

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<sup>42</sup> The Krio are descendants of slaves who were repatriated back to Africa and resettled in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The Krio had been exposed to western school education and already knew the benefits of education compared to their fellow Sierra Leoneans. The first university in sub-Saharan Africa was built in Freetown in 1825, a Krio territory (Clapham, 2003:9). Many Krio families took their children to school and universities and as a result, it was often Krios who ended up taking bureaucratic positions in government. Billows and Miguel argues that “Freetown is Sierra Leone's only large city and its local institutions and history are quite different from the rest of the country. For instance, the chief system does not exist in Freetown” (2009:5).

and Bauxite were also simultaneously misappropriated by government officials. Hamstrung by the inability to collect revenue, the main sectors of the economy collapsed under the pressure of the resultant “fiscal crisis” (Bangura, 2004:27).

As a result, there was widespread exclusion of large swathes of the populace from the “shadow state”. This was especially the case for the youth who could neither attend school nor secure employment. As a result the middle class effectively collapsed, unemployed youth from the middle class joined the many unemployed youths in street gangs popularly referred to as *potes* in the literature and local parlance. As the situation deteriorated, many Sierra Leoneans who could afford to do so emigrated (Abdulla, 1998:233). Those who could not, especially the youth from relatively well to do homes, were “Lumpenised” and radicalised in the *potes* (Clapham, 1993: 173-174; Abdulla, 1998:207-10). By the time president Siaka Stevens handed over power in 1985 to his handpicked successor, Joseph Momoh, a former army general and a close Siaka Stevens confidant, the Sierra Leonean state was in economic ruins (Smillie et al 2000:4). Despite Momoh’s initial reformist rhetoric, the existing political arrangements continued. This was compounded by exponential inflation rates in addition to shortages of both food and fuel. On March 23 1991, a group of rebels attacked the South Eastern part of Sierra Leone that borders Liberia. The RUF comprised three sets of groups, those who had fought in Liberia under Charles Taylor’s NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia), radical “lumpens”, mostly former APC thugs who had acquired military training in Libya and fighters on loan from Liberia (Abdulla, 1998:221). The RUF terrorised and abducted people from their homes in the town of Kailahun and Pujehun, both located towards the South-Eastern part of Sierra Leone.

Muana (1997) referred to the RUF as people who despised traditional values and were bent on using violence to reverse the social order in their favour. Refuting Richard’s (1996) characterization of RUF as excluded intellectuals Bangura (2004:21) argues that the RUF leaders were drawn from the low skilled violent sub-culture of dejected youths. The RUF terrorised and abducted people including children who they conscripted into their army. By the time the government responded to these attacks, the RUF had spread to rural areas in the south and set up a camp. President Momoh responded by sending sections of the army there and recruiting more soldiers to the military. Following the recruitment drive, the numbers in the military increased rapidly, from 3000 soldiers to 14000 (Kandeh, 1999:363). The recruitment was done hastily without scrutinising the background of the new conscripts. As a result of this, a huge number of the military was



made up of the disaffected urban youth (Zack-Williams and Riley, 1993). It is from these same groups that the RUF rebels had also emerged. The efforts of the military towards ending the war were therefore undone by rogue soldiers who colluded with the rebels, a phenomenon that is widely referred to as “*sobel*,” a loose acronym standing for ‘soldiers by day but rebels by night’ (Keen, 2005:91; Bangura, 2004:30; Richards, 1996:14).

In April 1992, a military rebellion stemming from soldiers’ discontent over salary non-payment resulted in the overthrow<sup>43</sup> of Momoh’s government (Richards, 1996:9). The country was placed under a National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) headed by Colonel Valentine Strasser, a 27 year old Krio soldier (Abdulla, 1998:203). The NPRC government was welcomed by the locals dispirited by the corrupt APC hold on power. Strasser and his NPRC colleagues promised to end the war and hold parliamentary elections to bring the country back to civilian governance. They introduced military concepts to the running of government. A case in point is the monthly sweeping and cleaning of streets and other public areas like the market, burning compost heaps and clearing drainage areas; a conception that is still part of contemporary practice in Sierra Leone (field notes; see also Richards, 1996:41). Buoyed by the momentum generated after taking over, Colonel Strasser’s led NPRC government enlisted a private security firm called Gurka security to combat the rebels and regain control of the diamond towns (Clapham, 2003:7; Le Billion, 2001:577). Gurka was later replaced by Executive Outcomes, another private security firm, after their leader was killed in the conflict (c.f. Reno, 1998, Smillie et al, 2000, Cilliers and Mason, 1999). The government also made a concession of \$80 million with Branch energy, a subsidiary of Executive Outcomes, which is still in operation in Sierra Leone to date, to engage in Kimberlite mining in areas under their control (Reno, 1998, Adebajo, 2002). Executive Outcomes managed to recapture the diamond districts as the NPRC signed peace deals with the RUF in order to organise a general election in April 1996. However, on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 1996, Colonel Strasser was overthrown by his deputy Julius Maada Bio who accused him of planning to vie for the presidency contrary to the NPRC agreement<sup>44</sup>. Bio carried on with plans for national elections (Pugh and Cooper, 2004). Although the RUF and the military tried to discourage people from taking part in the elections by maiming people, especially in the

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<sup>43</sup> William Reno also makes the point that “Sierra Leone’s leaders ... faced armed opposition not only from citizens they can no longer patronise but also from army units they can no longer pay” (1997:227).

<sup>44</sup> Kandeh argues that: “After a brief period of modest restraint, NPRC leaders began lining their pockets with public funds and living opulent lifestyles that were incommensurate with their social background, official salaries and positions of responsibility” (Kandeh, 1999: 355).

South Eastern part of Sierra Leone, the locals tired and depleted by the war resolutely insisted on participating in the elections on 26 February 1996 (Richards, 1996:165).

#### 4.11 Secret societies, War and Politics

Tejan Kabbah of SLPP, a former United Nations Development Program official once based in New York and Karefa Smart, a retired World Health Organisation Geneva bureaucrat, emerged as the front runners in this election (Clapham, 2003:10). A run-off election as stipulated in the constitution resulted in Tejan Kabba being declared the winner in March 1996 (Abdulla, 1998:204; Richards, 1996:166). Tejan Kabba declared ending the war to be the primary objective of his presidency. He did not trust the army since it was predominantly comprised of the former APC government loyalists and the so-called *sobels* (Bangura, 2004:31). To combat the rebels, Kabba engaged local chiefs who recruited a militia called the Kamajor (Mende for hunter and gatherer<sup>45</sup>) through the Poro secret society. The recruitment involved initiation into the Poro society and traditional Poro rituals revolving around strict discipline, commitment and endurance; the basis of the Kamajor militia (Keen, 2005:90; Mauna, 1997:84). Later the Kamajor were referred to as civil defence forces<sup>46</sup> and worked in collaboration with the government hired Executive Outcomes<sup>47</sup>, a pairing that was successful in pushing the RUF from their major bases in the diamond rich districts (Archibald and Richards, 2002:7; Smillie et al, 2000:5-6; Kandeh, 1999:364).

Tejan Kabbah's heavy reliance on civil defence forces did not sit well with members of the military. Mounting discontent over Kabbah's handling of the war culminated in a bloody military takeover on 25 May 1997 in which Kabbah was deposed from the presidency and fled to neighbouring Guinea (Abdulla, 1998:204). The new military government reconstituted as the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) was led by

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<sup>45</sup> The Poro has historically been known to fight for the community and its members reportedly posed a significant challenge during the colonial encounter in 1898 when the elaborate structure of the secret society was used to challenge colonial invasion during the Mende rising of 1889. It is also said that they fought alongside the British in the Second World War in Burma (Keen, 2005: 90). The Poro secret society which is also found in Liberia provided a basis for civilian resistance of war lords in Liberia (Ellis, 1995:195).

<sup>46</sup> "As the security situation deteriorated across the country, and in the midst of glaring evidence of collaboration between 'sobels' and rebels, provincial urban communities organised civil defence militias to defend their towns. Most of these efforts were led and coordinated by secret society members and vigilante youth" (Kandeh, 1999:363).

<sup>47</sup> The foreign owned "Executive outcomes were more successful than the Gurkhas as they succeeded in pushing the rebels deep into the countryside. But such success came with a heavy price tag for the country. In addition to being granted a diamond mining concessions, the group also received a monthly fee of US\$1.8 million" (Zack-Williams, 1999 In Le-Billon, 2001:567).

Major Johnny-Paul Koroma. Koroma reached out to the RUF in a bid to end the war and form a new government. The AFRC released prisoners from the Pademba Road jail in Freetown and from all other country jails under the terms of the Lome peace agreement signed between AFRC and RUF (Richards, 1996:171). Though the war in Sierra Leone had not received much international press coverage, this new AFRC government<sup>48</sup> outfit was heavily condemned by the international community culminating in a UN embargo on arms, travel and trade (Ndumbe, 2001). ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States) soldiers with a heavy contingent of soldiers from Nigeria forced the AFRC and RUF to retreat from Freetown into provincial towns albeit after heavy human casualties. President Kabbah was reinstated as president on March 10 1998 (Adebajo, 2002). UN peace keepers were deployed and later UK troops were called in after some peace keepers were kidnapped in the year 2000 (Hirsch, 2001). The AFRC/RUF was defeated and Foday Sankor, the RUF leader, was arrested in Nigeria, ostensibly on his way to purchase weapons (Richards, 1996:170). A cease fire agreement was signed in Abuja in November 2000 and, subsequently, a UN Pakistani contingent facilitated the return of displaced peoples in 2001. In January 2002 president Kabbah declared peace followed by the general election in May 2002 which he won. After the war, the UN established a UN special court to try war criminals. It is significant that, unlike many other civil wars in Africa, such as Rwanda, the war in Sierra Leone did not take tribal or ethnic lines (Bangura, 2004:38).

Kabbah embarked on reconstruction work. He empowered paramount chiefs who worked alongside a local administrative body, the district councils, which had been disbanded by the former APC government, to administer rural areas (Fanthorpe 2006: 30; Archibald and Richards, 2002:1; see also Keen 2005: 67). Although the war ended in 2002 the effects were devastating and are still felt in present day Sierra Leone. It is estimated that over 100, 000 people lost their lives in the war and over half a million people were displaced. In a country of five million people (CIA 2010) that is bound to shake the stability of the society in a profound manner. In particular, so far as this thesis is concerned, the Bondo society operations have been directly affected in different ways: it is this that I now move to consider in more detail.

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<sup>48</sup> Kandeh argues that “the junta's reported \$45 million ransom demand for reinstating Kabbah's government underscored the extortionist agenda of the AFRC coup” (1999:356).

#### 4.12 Effects of Displacement on livelihood

Ironically, the war opened up space for the Bondo who have now extended their influence to the forefront of contemporary national politics. Before the war, although the Bondo still exercised some significant forms of power, in general, such powers were tied to a village context. After the war, however, displaced people have had their "eyes opened" and are now using their forms of power on a bigger stage: contemporary national politics. Most of the women who I spoke to, and who lived in the IDPs, said that living in the city had exposed them to media and general avenues of information that were not available to them in the villages. Now, according to their accounts, even the current president had visited their camps and had directly sought to persuade them to vote for him in the previous general election. This widened space of influence for the Bondo has, however, heralded some changes in the way the Bondo is run. It is now the case that many young women are being trained as Soweis. There is a proliferation of Soweis training bushes in the IDP centres. As I will discuss in other chapters of this thesis some Soweis hinted that the core practices of the Bondo have been compromised by some of the Soweis who now view the practice of female cutting essentially as a source of income in order to sustain themselves. To some extent, traditional ways of life such as those embodied by secret societies have acquired renewed significance in the post war context where accepted ways of ordering life have been disrupted by displacement. Secret societies like the Bondo provide a normative reference point in the absence of a stable political structure. Many people, as argued by Fanthorpe (2007:12), are keen to identify with those secret societies which provided them with modalities of a secure life before the war.

Though the war was officially declared over in 2002 by President Tejan Kabba, thousands of people still live in internally displaced people refugee camps to date. After the war, the population of Freetown, the capital city, increased by 217% (Sommers, 2003:27). Smillie *et. al.* (2000), for instance, note that the war caused over half a million Sierra Leoneans to be declared internally displaced refugees (2001:1; see also Richards, 1996: xix; Phillips, 1995:10). Many of the people living in internally displaced people's camp lost their sources of livelihood in the villages where they had mostly engaged in subsistence farming.

Moreover, during the war, many families lost male members of the family who were the breadwinners in their respective households. Traditionally, men were expected to provide

for their families. A good number of the women who are now sole breadwinners for their families live in Internally Displaced People's camps. These are shanties, constituting of unplanned patched up houses made of tin roofs, walls of mud and a hotchpotch of cartons, plastic, tents and anything that can stand as fabrication to keep out the elements.



**Figure 4-11: Houses in an IDP camp in Freetown**

Though the IDP camps are miserable places to live compared to their homes, where many households owned land and property, the people in IDP camps are reluctant to go back to their homes despite the fact that the country has enjoyed peace since the year 2002. Many of the people I spoke to said that they feared going back in case they would be stigmatised because of their children's or husbands' involvement in the war. Others are just too traumatised to go back having watched their families being killed in the war. Despite this displacement, women who live in these camps are strong adherents of Bondo. Given the limited economic opportunities available to the displaced, and the fact that most of the people in IDP camps are illiterate or do not have the necessary skills to compete in other areas of the economy, involvement in Bondo initiation constitutes an important potential economic resource. Accordingly, many displaced people have joined Soweï training courses or have recently completed the training to become a Soweï and are now making a living through Bondo initiation. A visit to one IDP camp in Freetown revealed a proliferation of Soweï training bushes. Indeed, as I was told by respondents, Soweï training bushes have been established in most of the IDP camps to train Soweïs in most parts of the country. In the IDP camp in Freetown that I visited, it was common to find women in their late twenties or early thirties who were either Soweïs or in the penultimate stages of their Soweï training. As already noted, the Soweïs charge a fee for initiating girls into the Bondo. They are also given foodstuffs by the parents of the initiates:

My mother insisted that I go Bondo (be initiated into the Bondo society). So my parents prepared by buying a goat, palm oil, rice and a few fowls and also saved some money for my initiation. Then, my mother gathered everything and she gave it to the Soweï and completed the society (paid all the due initiation fee and other prerequisites for eventual Bondo initiation). Then I came out of there (sic). The man that married me did not have a long lasting life so he died during the war (silence). Then we came and lived in Freetown city and I was in the society. If I did not become a Soweï what would I be doing? I did not go to school. Unless I go on top of this hill (pointing to the majestic hills that form part of the landscape of Freetown) and start breaking stones because you have to work for your children and provide shelter for them (some silence) (Interview with Matade on 11/02/09, a Soweï aged 60 living in an IDP camp in Freetown on 11/02/09).

In this context, then, becoming a Soweï is increasingly regarded as a job and a legitimate way of making a living. As I will discuss in other parts of this thesis, in addition to economic capital, the Soweïs also accrue a form of cultural capital in Sierra Leonean politics. Traditionally Soweïs were “elderly” women, at least in their 40s or older. However, with the changes brought about by the aftermath of the war, this traditionally structured way of acquiring Bondo initiation skills is breaking down. There is instead a rush to gain the credentials of the Soweï in order to secure a livelihood. This, according to my informants, was a source of tension within the society. I asked one senior Soweï how the race to becoming a Soweï affected the Bondo society. She said, cases of initiates being “over-cut” in the process of Bondo initiation could be attributed to this:

In case the Soweï misjudges and cuts too much, there will be heavy bleeding. Such cases apply when the Soweï is not qualified. Some small Soweïs are very impatient to learn the necessary skill for cutting. They want to start initiating even before they learn everything from the senior Soweï. I would normally train a small Soweï for up to three years before I allow them to operate on an initiate (sic). To be a Soweï, just like becoming a doctor or an engineer, takes a long time to train. Nowadays many women usually come to the Bondo bush to be trained on how to become Soweïs. I normally turn down those who want to be trained for the sole purpose of making money. I only take those who have a special calling. The Soweï trainees should bring 40,000 Leones (6 pounds) and also buy coconut as the starting fees (Interview on 12/07/09 with Aunty Dedebe, a Soweï aged 62 living in an IDP camp in Freetown).

The above respondent blamed the economic plight of her fellow Soweis on the recent civil war in Sierra Leone. According to her, the effects of the war have led to deterioration of standards of practice in the Bondo society culminating in harmful health effects related to FGC. In the excerpt above, though the respondent laments the deterioration of competence levels among recent Bondo Soweis motivated more by the desire to earn a living through initiation than by respect for Bondo ideology and practice, she in the same breath admits that senior Soweis benefit in this situation in the form of the receipt of training fees.

#### **4.13 Changes in Mende culture over time**

From what I have mapped so far, the Bondo and the practices associated with it, then, are neither frozen nor static. Therefore, there is need to recognise the changes within the Bondo, especially in the context of displacement and a powerful international discourse against FGC, in order to understand the practices and their contemporary meanings coherently.

Though Boone (1986:246) argued that a Soweï was an important person in the community, some of my Soweï respondents said that things had changed. Some of the Soweis told me how they at times meet their former initiates who could barely remember them. Traditionally a Soweï's task was to inculcate the mores that make one a responsible adult in the society. However, in the context of contemporary Sierra Leone where poverty and powerful anti-FGC rhetoric have real implications on the Soweï's lives, Soweis reported that Bondo initiation increasingly involved only the ritual cut and customary Bondo teachings were limited. The commercialisation of Bondo initiation has also, in one respect, had the effect of whittling down the traditional symbolic authority accorded to Soweis. As the rush for Bondo initiation continues, many Soweis even from communities that traditionally initiate mature girls, have turned to initiating young girls. Initiating such young girls, although presented by some respondents as a form of resistance to the anti-FGC discourse, was seen as problematic by older Soweis. As this respondent put it.

...for some children, once they have been initiated, if they are small, they will want to equal themselves with their elders because this is how the Bondo operates. Once you become a member, you are treated with respect by the other members irrespective of your age. So this normally leads to the young girls to start having sexual affairs at an

early age. So through that they will have hiv/aids and through that they may end up becoming prostitutes or get children out of marriage at a very young age. (Interview with Rebeba on 12/03/09, a with Mende lady aged 32: a jobless high school graduate).

So, while the Bondo conventionally takes pride in preparing girls for marriage, and ensuring stability in marriage, when young girls end up as prostitutes or get children out of wedlock, their alleged conventional aim is undermined.

Another change in Bondo initiation, which it worth reporting, is due to the advent of reformist Muslim churches. These “iconoclastic Muslim groups” have challenged some of the Bondo society practices such as masking, leading to Bondo societies in places where these groups are prevalent to “continue[s] in a modified Islamised form known as *Mori Jande* existing side by side, sometimes in the same village, with the traditional society” (Phillips, 1995:90). During my fieldwork in the same region, a respondent told me that some Mende from Kailahun who had converted to Islam tended to leave out some of the elaborate procedures involved in the Bondo society initiation (Interview with Momura on 26/04/09 on 26/04/09). According to my respondent, some Islamic people in the Kailahun region view aspects of Bondo practice as un-Islamic (Interview on 54/04/2009 with Mende man living in Bo town).

It is equally significant that in certain areas of Mende land, the Bondo leaders have been willing to include western medicine in the customary programme (Little 1951:130). Despite being initiated into the Bondo and the strong ties to tradition implicit in Bondo initiation, there is a strong desire to lead a western lifestyle like the one presented on TV among many Bondo members. It is very common for young people to sport modern styles of dress and demeanour.

The key point from all the accounts in this section, however, is that culture does change over time. This is especially the case in a context such as post war Sierra Leone, where the social situation is considerably altered. In the next chapter, I use both my ethnographic material and reported accounts on the Bondo in order to explore how the Bondo society is responding to these changes, and particularly to the concerted call for eradication of the FGC practice by international actors deploying a human rights discourse.





**Figure 4-12: Soweï council meeting at a Bondo bush in Freetown the capital city of Sierra Leone.**

Given the effects of the recent war, therefore, it is imperative to note that for Bondo society practitioners living in displaced people's camps, becoming a Soweï has gained a new significance. It is now importantly a main source of income for a number of Soweïs as opposed to just being a communal ceremonial ritual that accords Soweï's social recognition. It is, therefore, important to recognise that the debates about FGC which are discussed in subsequent chapters are not simply about the "defence of culture", they are also about livelihood. These intrinsic changes to the way the Bondo has traditionally been practiced have created tensions within the Bondo leading to situations where some Soweïs consider themselves as legitimate while criticising others for being "merchants"; interested more in what they could gain from the Bondo as opposed to embodying what the Bondo traditionally stands for. At the same time, in the post war context, the Bondo society has in different ways become part of a wider political picture and a resource people draw on for social cohesion and ordering in the fragmented or missing public sphere. In this dispensation, the Bondo society practice acquires meaning beyond the "normative" values attached to it. Indeed displacement has opened new avenues for the Bondo to access political leverage in parliamentary and presidential general election campaigns. This has led the Bondo to be widely courted by political elites, as I will argue in other chapters of this thesis. Because of their influence among women voters who constitute 56% (CIA, 2010) of the registered voters, the Bondo has emerged as an influential political block especially in electioneering campaigns.

#### **4.14 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have traced the historical and political context of the Bondo society using both reported anthropological accounts and my own ethnography in order to highlight the ways in which aspects of the recent war in Sierra Leone have impacted on the position of the Bondo society and on the ritual procedure of FGC. Most Soweis living in IDP camps are now sole breadwinners in their households after losing their partners in the war. In the IDP camps the Soweis are exposed to a wide range of new mass mediated trends and discourses, technology and access to politicians. I note that this exposure to government leaders has given the Bondo some influence especially in political campaigns and general election. I point out that the material effects of the post-war situation have had a major impact on the Bondo society. At the same time, I have observed that although Bondo practitioners claim to be defending their tradition and culture in response to the anti-FGC wave sweeping across Sierra Leone, to many practicing Soweis, such issues relates to power and economic gain in the here and now. In the next chapter, I discuss in more detail the tension between the anti-FGC movement and normative Bondo society practice, conceptualised as a contest between rights and traditions by Bondo practitioners.

## CHAPTER 5

### The discourse of resistance against anti-FGC rhetoric

#### 5.0 Tensions and contradictions within the Bondo society

In this chapter I analyze how the members of the Bondo secret society, whose central ritual is FGC, are responding to the powerful anti-FGC discourse in contemporary Sierra Leone. I start by exploring some of the key arguments in the eradication discourse before moving on to examine the different ways in which this rhetoric is resisted by adherents of Bondo secret society. As argued in the previous chapter, claims about “traditional practice” can offer a form of symbolic authority, which may be used to achieve other things (Bourdieu, 1986:47; 1989:18-19) like economic gain and forms of political influence. Those who stand to gain from the Bondo, especially the Soweis, use their positions to mobilize the Bondo society members to react aggressively against change in what they see as resistance against an attack on their “culture”. Although such resistance is marked, there is evidence of tensions within the Bondo society that may suggest that the fabric that held the Bondo society together is under threat. I use the example of a journalist who was molested by Bondo society leaders in order to demonstrate the extent to which recent events such as internal displacement following the civil war in Sierra Leone, and the concerted media scrutiny of FGC practice, have exposed some internal contradictions within the Bondo. I then discuss how Bondo members conceive and appropriate the various forms of power that are available to them. Though traditions and customs have always been sites of contest and struggle, before the advent of concerted media scrutiny into the operations of the Bondo, tensions within the society have always been safely tucked under the heavy lid of secrecy. However, in the context of these recent changes, internal contradictions within the Bondo are less easily contained. In the course of my numerous conversations with Bondo members and leaders, the general discussion often gravitated towards the question of the Bondo being “exposed”. As I was made to understand, the word *exposed* is thus loaded. It implies that the procedures of the Bondo have been revealed and the power of the Bondo has been diminished. At the same time, it implies that the secrecy, which for a long time has been the “pulling power” that attracts new members into the Bondo, has now been compromised.

### 5.1 Socio-political power dynamics in the Bondo society

In order to understand why a number of Bondo members feel “disgraced” by the media attention placed on their secret society, there is a need to understand, in more detail, the sociological significance of the Bondo society to members in places where it is practiced.

The Bondo secret society is considered by most people in Sierra Leone as the arena within which women exercise power. It, therefore, presents a stage on which women have autonomy in the running of their culturally sanctioned secret society. For instance, in regard to key Bondo operations, not even the chief will go uncensored if they are perceived to act contrary to what is generally regarded as breach of Bondo society ‘laws’. This is attested by the Soweï council PRO statement below during a focus group meeting between Soweis and NGO operatives.

Like chief D, he called Soweï J and he pulled<sup>49</sup> the Soweï from the bush. We are against any disturbance to our people [members], this is what we stand for and even die for. If he tries to remove one of our Soweis, we will stand up to him [challenge him] (people cheering). So after we finished, we went and asked him why he did a thing like that. He could not answer. He just dodged. That resulted in a quarrel. The case was taken to the other chief. We stayed there the whole day but the chief could not respond to us. But we showed him we are women. We stood our ground and even demanded he pays us back. He still owes us. He only paid half of this amount. It is still with him [he knows he still has to pay us the remaining money]. That is how we left the place. We say unity is strong. If you do something in unity, it will be productive but as soon as you fall apart, you will be destroyed (PRO comments during focus group).

From the excerpt above, it is evident that the Bondo society holds some relative power in community social relations. If they (Bondo society leaders) can take on a local chief who is ordinarily the fulcrum of power in village politics and administration and even impose fines on him, then that is a testament of some level of real socio-political importance of the Bondo . These forms of power are what the Soweis are keen to defend in the wake of anti-FGC discourses. Moreover, Bondo members are aware of the relative power the Bondo has

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<sup>49</sup> As noted earlier the word ‘pull’ in Krio means ‘remove’, ‘finish’ or ‘get out’ depending on the context. In this case the chief removed the Soweï from the Bondo bush, a breach to one of Bondo laws that non-members should not trespass Bondo bush precincts.

as a social movement. Indeed a number of Soweis I talked to especially Sowei council leaders which I discuss in detail in subsequent chapters insist that the intrinsic basis of the Bondo is not to raise income and avoid poverty. Though FGC practice has been commoditized, as I have argued in chapter four, the Bondo is still believed to play a significant role of ordering social relations in the community. In fact some of the Soweis are apparently well to do people with international business connections who can deride those who criticize what they do as ‘failures’. This came out during a consultative meeting between NGO officials and a consortium of Soweis called Sowei council in response to the suggestion, broadcast in a recent radio program, that Bondo Soweis were idlers just waiting to initiate girls:

September and October is when we will finish. After that everybody goes back to do their individual businesses in Nigeria, Dubai and other places. We all have our different businesses. We are not only waiting to initiate into the Bondo all the time... it is some of those that do not have interest in the Bondo and those ladies that are failures, they are the ones giving testimony about secret society. We all have what we do, we have our families, we are responsible, and there is no idler among us. It is those frustrated ladies that are searching for marital homes in churches, they are the ones that are behaving like that (the Soweis clap thunderously) (Sowei council PRO comments during focus group).

The PRO is keen to underscore the fact that some of the Bondo women are engaged in international businesses in “*Nigeria, Dubai and other places*” in addition to being Bondo initiators. This further suggests that Bondo is not only about directly gaining income from initiation proceeds but also a profound source of social power, at least for those who have important symbolic positions within the society. In spite of the PRO’s assertion however, a good number of the Soweis depend entirely on initiation fees as their main source of income as we have seen in chapter four. In this regard therefore what is at stake for the Soweis here, in all the claims about defending culture, is a web of interests encompassing both economic, political, Bondo cosmology (beliefs, ideas of value and meaning), wealth and social standing in the community. All these things are tied together in complicated ways such that it is difficult to decouple them. Putting all these aspects of Bondo initiation into consideration, the Bondo society therefore is in a position to defend fairly considerable social resources, both symbolic and economic.

The Bondo society is also ordained as the institution for shaping girls into marriageable women, which in itself is “a fact of political significance” (MacCormack, 1974:173). Douglas argues that in a patrilineal system of descent, wives are the door of entry to the group. Ritual is seen as “an attempt to create and maintain a particular culture, a particular set of assumptions by which experience is controlled [...] the rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body”(1966:129). The Bondo society is in charge of enforcing a series of controls over and against the individual that prepares one to change status from “proto-social to a fully social state” (MacCormack, 1980:95). In this respect, the society’s own *ideology* emphasizes interdependency as opposed to male domination (MacCormack, 1980: 95).

As discussed above, the influence of the Bondo society has increased over the years because of its relationship with political forms of power. In exploring the power dynamics in the Bondo, I employ Wolf’s (1990: 587) broader notion of power in which power is conceptualized as: 1) a person’s capability and potency in the field of power play; 2) interaction that informs social action; 3) setting the ground for others to act: “how operating units circumscribe the actions of others within determinate settings.”; 4) defining the social arena which at once privileges some actors while at the same time marginalizing others. This is the power which Foucault noted “structures the possible field of action of others” (1982:790). These multiple dimensions of power play out in the Bondo secret society, such that they open up spaces for both resistance *and* agency. The Bondo society is a domain of power with different actors laying claim to it. Even within traditional structures that uphold patriarchy, as I will argue later in this thesis, the Bondo society presents a basis from which members bargain with patriarchy in order to apportion themselves some forms of power to safeguard their well being and security (Kandiyoti,1988). My fieldwork shows that many of the Soweis perceive the nature of the power conferred on them by membership of the society in different ways. A female teacher in her early forties noted that:

The Bondo in a way gives women power because if you are a member you will be accorded respect and some other power. It is in the Bondo bush meetings that important decisions or strategies are discussed and planned, so if one is denied access to this domain, they will lose out on a lot of information that may give them some power (Interview with Josephine on 20/03/2009, a female primary school teacher ).

Another respondent, a female initiator, said that although the male society was more powerful than the Bondo because it qualifies one to become a paramount chief, the Bondo society was equally powerful because the Poro consulted them regularly on various issues. In spite of this, a number of my interlocutors said that the power Bondo bestows on women has been diluted because the society is now “exposed”. The concerted inspection of Bondo by the media has thus “changed the social field”. This recalls Terence Ranger’s discussion of “invented traditions”, in which he argued that African customs were invented and re-invented during the colonial era in order to facilitate change that would enable easier forms of governance (Ranger 1983:212). The reinvention of traditions distorted the values and powers vested in certain “traditions”, leading to situations where they were now open to different claims and interpretations. Similarly, the Bondo is now under intense pressure to abandon the cultural practice of FGC following coverage of its ‘secrets’ in the media. As a result of the concentrated media pressure and the social changes resulting from the ravages of the recent civil war in Sierra Leone, different interpretations have been offered of FGC practice by both Bondo practitioners and anti-FGC activists. The powerful anti-FGC eradication discourse thus represents a very threatening change to the Bondo, at least in Bondo public discourse, because the whole edifice of the sodality is held together by the ritual of FGC and by the accompanying oath of secrecy. The respondent cited below pointed out that Bondo society secrets had been revealed, thereby making the male society, whose procedures have not been placed under intense scrutiny, more powerful:

Interviewee: The power Bondo gives to you means that any place where there are women especially many women who are members; you have a right to go there because you are a member. So that gives you power to mix freely with fellow society members. The Poro have greater powers than the Bondo.

Interviewer: Why?

Interviewee: This is because a lot of people who have been initiated into the Bondo society do not have a secret anymore because the society has been exposed (Interview with Kadiatu on 4/3/2009, a practising Sowe ).

These sentiments were echoed by several other respondents thereby indicating that practitioners actually believed that the media *exposure* disadvantaged the Bondo in relation to the ritual powers they have access to in the community.

Conventionally, then, Bondo members understood themselves to have a form of power based on a kind of ritual purity. As Douglas famously argued (1966), “pollution” beliefs can be used in claims and counter claims to status. She noted that these claims polarize people, ascribing some to what she refers to as “margins and borders” (Douglas, 1966:122). Following this analogy, Bondo members make claims to their “pure” status whereas non-Bondo initiates and those deemed to break Bondo “laws” are pushed to the “margins”.

Interviewee: I think that Bondo members are powerful in their own way. Yeah, there is lots to it, you people, these people sometimes they (sic) feel some undue advantage; you will see the Bondo people forcefully carry and initiate somebody. We have seen that happening around, so in a way they are powerful. They are the *untouchables* (emphasis added) because when they say [...] even the paramount chief has to be in the area you know and he (the chief) supports the society (Interview with Elissa on 29/03/09, a former Bondo member, now an anti-FGC activist attached to an INGO in Freetown).

There is here, then, in the discourse of practitioners, a perceived tension between ideas of ‘rights’ and those of ‘tradition’. From the perspective of the traditional “laws” and mores that govern the Bondo, it is within the confines of accepted practice in Bondo culture to initiate someone forcefully, in cases where the victim of forceful initiation has breached these laws. However, in the context of secular law or ideas of human rights, in which the anti-FGC discourse is embedded, such an act is a violation of one’s human rights. From the perspective of Bondo society followers though, this ability to exert Bondo laws against non-members who are deemed to have breached Bondo stipulations, is a form of power they are not ready to give away.

Conceptions of power, then, are crucial here. Thus, another respondent said that the Bondo society teaches women leadership skills and social skills such as how to manage power. According to her, therefore, the Bondo precisely empowered women. She noted that Bondo was the reason why there are a number of female members of parliament, councillors and paramount chiefs especially in the South Eastern part of Sierra Leone, where the Bondo society is prevalent.

In our society we have leaders but we teach the initiates how to behave to their husbands and generally how to behave like leaders. Like us we have a lady MP from Kenema. When you put a woman to Bondo she has learned how to be a leader. She



will be able to rise and become like an MP or a female chief or paramount chief. For the paramount chief, you will have to join the Poro society. But in the Bondo we have good organization like the Soweï council and there is hierarchy in the Bondo society and we strongly believe in our leaders. We train leaders in the bush in our own way (Interview 70 on 11/02/09).

Similarly, a male respondent whose mother was a practicing Soweï observed that the Soweïs have some spiritual powers that make them feared and powerful. The respondent is a well-educated man working for an international organization intervening against the practice of FGC.

Interviewer: Does being a Soweï bestow power upon a woman?

Interviewee: Of course, it is about status too. An example is when I was growing up. *My mother, who is a Soweï, gave gifts to families of children that had been initiated. If I had wanted, if it were my choice, I would have married one of them. They were many of them and they will say oohh any one of you I want to give to my sons* (emphasis added).... So there is some power angle to it [...]. This is because one day my mother asked me this question and I thought and I think I can bring it up in some of our workshops. She said; this is the only thing that they do that scares men away. This is their own power in the community; *men consult us because they know we have this power* (my emphasis). If this Bondo goes, what do we do, how will society look at us, how will we be able to scare these men (Interview with Bamurata on 5/02/09, a human rights activist whose mother is a practicing Soweï).

According to the respondent's mother, the Bondo society is an arena where women have control over their activities and "power" recognised by men, a power which grants women a bargaining position in social relations involving men. Moreover, her advice could impact on a wider cross-section of the society in so far as she was able to inform 'policy' through the Poro patriarchal 'elites' who consult Soweïs. Like the historically influential female chief, Madam Yoko, therefore, Soweïs can thus use their positions to create links with powerful men and families in the society given the influence they have on their initiates and their kin.

With the advent of international and local pressure to end the practice of female genital cutting, the Bondo secret society has had to grapple with evident tensions and internal contradictions. Douglas argues that in the case of social systems "when the attack is

external, the outside attack fosters solidarity within. But when the attack is from within the members, the individuals can be punished and the structure firmly reaffirmed” (1966:141), a description which is apt in relation to the incidences of violence meted out on Bondo members accused of exposing the Bondo society, such as the case of the journalist discussed later in this chapter. When an affront to the practice of Bondo is perceived to be from within, those said to be responsible for accusations of revealing secrets they took oaths to protect are indeed “punished and the structure firmly reaffirmed”. The punishment is justified precisely by claims about the need to defend the integrity of Bondo (i.e. in particular by the need to “reaffirm” structure). However, in the course of executing the punishment, strategies sometimes not sanctioned by Bondo customs are employed. The overall effect of this is that though members claim to reaffirm the structure of Bondo by punishing those accused of transgressing the Bondo, their employment of strategies that violate Bondo codes of practice have the effect of compromising the moral base that sustains operations of the Bondo. This, as I will argue elsewhere in this chapter, blurs the ‘margins and borders’ of the Bondo and creates space for alternative forms of discourse, some of it critical to the Bondo.

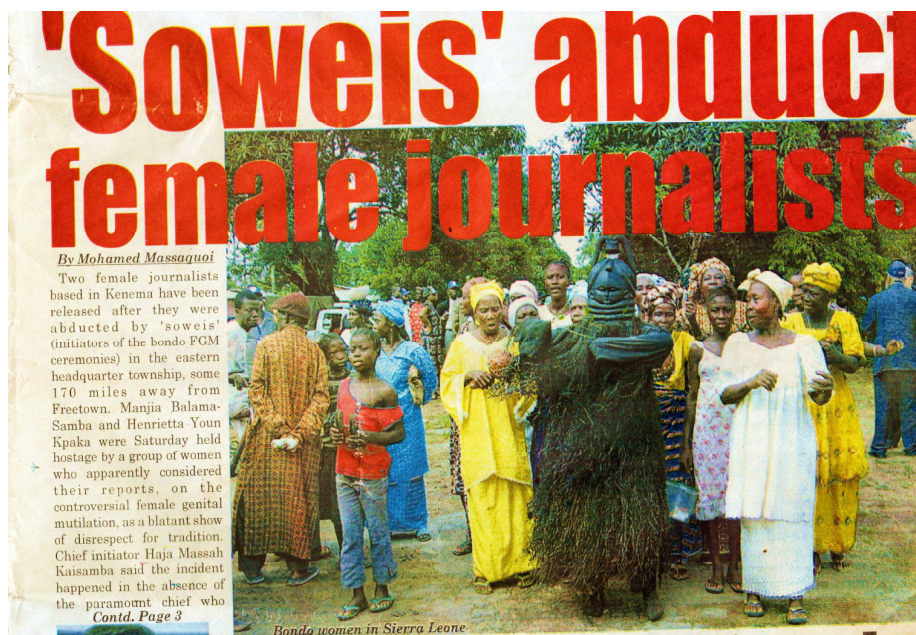
## **5.2 “Margins and borders”: the case of Bondo society**

Mary Douglas (1966) pointed out how rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience and are employed in claims and counter claims with regard to status. Douglas argues that “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have, as their main function, an ability to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (1966:3-4). This is evident in discourses of resistance by the Bondo society that are premised on the notion that the anti-FGC discourse is a foreign imposition on their culture. As pointed out, FGC has been condemned by international organizations such as the UN, WHO and developed states in the ‘West’, especially the USA, as a human rights violation. Sierra Leone is considered the second poorest country in the world according to the UN index of national wealth. As a result, its recurrent government expenditure is largely donor dependent. The UN, for example, as part of the war reconstruction established and funded a university program in journalism at the University of Sierra Leone popularly known as Fourah-bay College. The university runs a radio station called

CTN but it is commonly known as UN radio because of the high profile name of its sponsor. The radio station is quite popular because of its wide coverage. Despite its popularity, however, the UN radio is still viewed with suspicion by the local populace, especially the members of the Bondo society. This is because the station is directly linked with the UN which is viewed as responsible for igniting the campaign for change in regard to FGC. The Inter-African Committee for the fight against Harmful Traditional Practices (IAC) is a UN sponsored committee that co-ordinates organizations intervening in the practice of FGC. A zero tolerance day against the practice was set aside by the IAC for February 6<sup>th</sup> every year in order to pressure practicing communities to end FGC (Boyle, 2005). Sierra Leone has ratified the IAC and is thus bound to observe the zero tolerance day. On this day, activists organize events to publicise the message that the practice of FGC should end. In 2009, the zero tolerance day in Sierra Leone was marked by a radio program aired on the UN radio. The program was aired in the early hours of the morning on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February in 2009 while I was in the field. It started by noting that times are changing and questioned the relevance of the practice in modern Sierra Leone. In the course of the program, the presenter described some of the things that go on in the Bondo bush and concluded that they were harmful to women and thus constituted a form of violence against women. Participants in the radio program concluded that the FGC ritual was harmful and it should be done away with. The discussion on radio, in one stroke thus, contravened the cardinal oath of secrecy that Bondo members abide by and laid bare what had been kept tightly under wraps by the Bondo.

Subsequently, Bondo members in Kenema ganged up against a field journalist in the South Eastern part of Sierra Leone who worked for radio UN, and molested her. In doing this, the Bondo members, especially the Soweis, claimed to be ‘resisting’ the anti-FGC discourse, punishing anyone, especially their own members, perceived to be supporting the discourse against the FGC procedure. The molestation of the journalist was thus justified as part of a defence of the cultural traditions that the Bondo sustains. At the same, as I have argued, the Soweis who disgraced the journalist also have material interest in maintaining the status quo that affords them economic gains and power especially in political campaigns. The case of the journalist working for radio UN (who was also a Bondo member) thus reminds us of Wolf’s argument that institutions which are supposedly national or international are interlocked with “mainland [local] politics and economics” and thus form sites of struggles for “diverse contending interests” (1990:589). The victimized journalist, due to the nature of her work, inadvertently found herself

occupying a particularly sensitive symbolic space, in a complex scenario at the heart of the cultural struggles and tensions in contemporary Bondo society.



**Figure 5-1: Headline page of ‘Concord Times**

After the dust raised by the attack on the journalist had settled, I tracked her down and was able to discuss the events with her. It turned out that she had not taken part in the radio show that enraged the Bondo members. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the Bondo Soweis, since she worked for the UN radio, she was guilty by association. That is to say, she was guilty not simply of being associated with an organisation which is perceived as being critical of the Bondo, but of being so associated *while* at the same time being herself a Bondo member. She was thus seen as being a Bondo member who was (at least) facilitating the questioning of the practice which she and her co-members had taken an oath to defend and sworn never to reveal. It is revealing, thus, that she was not just aggressively attacked but was also stripped naked by the Bondo members in order to inspect whether she had actually gone through the ritual procedure of cutting. The victimized journalist was ordered to walk naked in the streets of Kenema while being mobbed by Bondo members to publicly humiliate and reaffirm her Bondo membership as she was directed to the Bondo bush for more sanctions and purification. This was done both as a strategy for making a statement against the human rights anti-FGC sentiments and also to reiterate Bondo society’s power over its members.

People like the journalist who was punished by the Bondo society despite being a member know that they should not *disgrace* (emphasis added) the society by talking over radio about Bondo secrets. That is why she was punished according to the Bondo rules. I don't feel fine the way she did such kind of thing. So I will not feel fine. She exposed the society even though as a member of the Bondo society she knows that she should not talk about it. You should not even tell your friends, even in the house, you should not talk about the society. So anybody they find [breaking this rule of secrecy] they should deal with them. They have *a right* (my emphasis) to deal with them because you [they] have broken a taboo. She should be made to shame for that (Interview with Kominta, a Bondo member aged 29 in the gara tie and dye business).

What is telling here about this response is how the respondent invokes the language of "rights" in order to justify the attack by Bondo members on the victimised journalist. This is indicative of the double appropriation of the human rights discourse by both the human rights activists and Bondo society loyalists, which I will discuss later in this thesis.

What is revealed more generally here, however, is the fact that, despite the deeply rooted and widespread membership of the Bondo, there are tensions over the meaning and importance of Bondo. In this case, the journalist, who by the nature of her job is involved in the mediation of change, found herself at the heart of issues that affect the Bondo society both from within (by virtue of her membership) and externally (by virtue of the fact that she works for a media house sponsored by the UN). She thus unwittingly found herself at the centre of a new "hybridity", in Bhabha's sense of this term: "a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha, 1994:1).

The Bondo attack on the radio reporter was widely covered by major international news channels such as the CNN's 'Inside Africa show' on the 14th of February 2009. As expected, when I finally met the victim of the attack, she was quite upset by the incident. She repeatedly said that "Bondo is not my business" and that her detractors were "digging a hole" for her by making her take the blame for the actions of the radio station. In the way that Mary Douglas describes, the Bondo initiators were keen to exert some form of punishment on the journalist primarily because, in their view, she threatened to dismantle the social barrier of secrecy. This was done to protect the "edifice that sustains the system" and galvanizes the Bondo society. Pollution ideas were evoked and she was taken

to the Bondo bush for a ritual form of purification or ‘washing’ to curb the danger her perceived action may have caused the other members of Bondo, especially the Soweis. Douglas argues that “wherever lines are precarious, pollution ideas sustain the edifice of political and economic forces to maintain the system. Physical crossing of the social barrier is treated as dangerous pollution...pollution becomes a double wicked object of reprobation, first because he crossed the line and second because he endangers the others” (1966:140). In the course of the interview, the victimized journalist was keen to refute rumours that, she had castigated the Bondo on radio so that she could be given asylum status in the USA or any other developed country in the West. However, during the interview, she observed that the intrinsic values that animated the Bondo society have been attenuated and in its place the initiators had turned the practice into a money making avenue:

Most of those ardent supporters of the Bondo like the Soweis are engaged in the society as a money making venture. The gifts and money that Soweis are given makes it so hard for Soweis to stop initiating girls. The practice is fixed in the minds of people because it is culture and has been there for ages. The members are many in number and whoever is in power, if he/she ever challenges the Bondo society, the Bondo members will mobilize their members and campaign against him (Interview with the victimised journalist on 11/03/09).

The journalist herself was clear that she was targeted, primarily, because her job in the information industry placed her in suspicion, even though, she said, she was not involved in the radio debate that enraged Bondo members. It was alleged by her detractors that she was bribed by the UN to talk about the Bondo though in reality (according to what she told me during the interview) she did not even know about the zero tolerance day:

I was initiated in a different town, so people here do not know whether I am a member...they have their own ways of mobilizing each other... even at a personal level when I go to the local club and indulge in general talk; they always think I am presenting the UN perspective on issues like FGC. They say that the UN radio discusses FGC and they are not happy about what the radio says about FGC, they say that I am defending the UN when I give my side of the story. For instance, I never knew about the zero tolerance day (Interview with the victimised journalist on 11/03/09).

When I asked other members of the Bondo why it was that the journalist had been molested and embarrassed even more than a non-initiate would have been, they said:

If the journalist is a member and she breaks the laws of secrecy which every member knows about, then she was to be punished. Maybe the reason why she behaved like that is because probably she joined when she was very young and probably, she did not like the society and has forgotten some of the Bondo laws especially those about not exposing the secrets of the society (Interview with Bowers on 12/04/09, a 25 year old Bondo member working as a shop attendant).

This incident is thus representative of a wider series of contests and struggles over cultural traditions among the Bondo members.

### **5.3 Claims of resistance: the clash between “rights” and “tradition”**

In the wake of the enactment of the continued campaign against the practice, the Bondo society has been marked by tension over how to discipline people transgressing Bondo laws. The tensions are manifested in the form of struggles over how to respond to the human rights discourse ingrained in anti-FGC rhetoric. They are also exemplified by the confusion over how to respond to breaches of Bondo laws given the divergent interests laying claim to defending culture. The outcome of these tensions is that there is an apparent clash between the human rights discourse which is the current framework that anti-FGC agents are using (Boyle, 2005) and the cultural logic espoused by Bondo members. The members are keen to protect and safeguard the interests of the Bondo society, as they always told me: “because it is our culture, we inherited it from our fore parents”. However, as argued above, the defence of tradition cannot be easily separated, in the case of Bondo Soweis, from the desire to safeguard the economic gains and forms of power accessible to them in the Bondo. While in the field one politician (a member of parliament) pointed out why the clash between human rights activists and Bondo society members tends to trigger acts of aggression:

...you live in a society where your mother is part of it, your sister is part of it, and your aunt is part of it, so you are expected to be part of it. So [but] society has changed, *they have now rights* so there are going to be some negotiations and even in the villages some children are not even forced, they are running into those bushes to join society (Interview with the above mentioned MP in the South-East region of Sierra Leone on 0/03/09 of Sierra-Leone).

According to the respondent above, Bondo practice has been integral to social and kin networks. The human rights discourse has, metaphorically speaking, changed the equation. There is now talk of child rights, consent and choice, violence against women and oppression of women being associated with FGC. The Bondo society, as a result, no longer has unproblematic status. Instead, a contest to define the practice among different interest groups is under way. This change of dynamic animates Bondo society members' claims of resistance. In the context of anti-FGC campaign replete with human rights idioms, the Soweis, as hinted by the respondent above (interview with Kominta and the member of parliament above) are equally blending their claims with discourses such as those embedded in the human rights framework.

Because the stakes are so high to the Bondo members, Soweis are willing to use force to confront the changes heralded by the campaign against FGC practice`. One Soweï narrated to me how she ended up initiating a girl who had refused to be initiated after being sensitized by the anti-FGC activists:

I was having one girl here; she was running away from Bondo. Even down to her boyfriend tell her not to join Bondo. It was one afternoon I sent some boys after her and got her for me then I joined her in the Bondo society in a hot burning sun. *Her boyfriend shake her* (ended their relationship) *for that, then I say let him shake you* (my emphasis) (Interview with mama Muna on 30/06/09, a Soweï living in an IDP camp aged 47).

In this case, the Soweï resorted to using force to get the girl initiated. She did this because, she said, she was frustrated at the girl's refusal to be voluntarily initiated after attending human rights' club workshops in her school. Forceful initiation is, I was told by other respondents, contrary to the Bondo practice. Traditionally, as noted elsewhere in this thesis, Bondo initiation was to be aspired to and a great honour to new initiates and their families. A woman was only forcefully initiated as a punishment if she breached Bondo laws. The irony in the Soweï's violent act is that part of the Bondo's symbolic power rests on the claim it makes about its role in socializing girls and enhancing their marriage prospects. However, in cases such as this, the forceful initiation led to the boyfriend leaving the girl in question. The Soweï, in this case, was clearly not particularly concerned about the future effects of her actions on the girl she supposedly "fixed" by forcefully initiating her. But the incident is revelatory of the struggle over how to manage the change proposed by the anti-FGC campaign and the extent to which the actions



undertaken in ‘defence’ of the Bondo have, to some extent, undermined the society’s ideological justifications, and particularly its claims that it is justified because it socialises young girls into responsible and progressive members of the larger community. From the point of view of many senior Bondo Soweis, there is a danger here of a loss of the symbolic power vested in the Bondo through such events.

Similar tensions are manifested in the fact that, I was told, members are increasingly anxious to initiate young girls even without going through the elaborate steps that would normally be considered a part of the process when one is initiated into the society. Thus there are cases of girls being initiated at the slightest (often bogus) accusation of breaking Bondo laws. The logic in this is that the Soweis will initiate girls before they have been “taken up” by the human rights discourse, pre-emptively making them members of the society.

A little girl was forcefully initiated on allegations that she joined the jubilation and celebrations of the coming out ceremonies. In the coming out ceremony, women know that is the happiest time and whether one is initiated or not initiated you can join the dance (sic). In the parade, town children, men and women can join in. The coming out ceremony is a time of jubilation [...] and not like they are seen now. Those who are not initiated are pulled (abducted) from these celebrations and taken to the bush, you know, for initiation without their consent [...] (Focus group 4. held at the ministry of social services in Bo on 05/04/09).

On several occasions during my fieldwork, I joined these ‘coming out parades’ in the city of Bo so that I could get a feel for the festivities. Nobody censured me because I was a man and therefore unequivocally a non-Bondo member. As I experienced it, these are parades filled with jubilation, drum beating, dancing and a general air of celebration. In the procession were small girls, women of all ages, boys and men. The women seemed to be the most animated, punctuating every dance step with ululations. From my observation, it seemed that all well-meaning people regardless of their Bondo membership status are invited to celebrate the successful initiation of girls into the Bondo society during the coming out ceremony. But what seemed to me like a kind of social unification in that context clearly conceals new tensions. In the context of these “fictitious” forced initiations, in the name of upholding Bondo tenets, a pattern emerges where FGC is used as a kind of symbolic weapon to make a statement in the setting of the anti-FGC debate, but in a way that itself contradicts the way in which Bondo practice is socially justified.

In another focus group with female initiators and anti-FGC activists, the Soweis expressed their frustrations at the way things were changing following the advent of the human rights anti-FGC discourse. This frustration has on occasions been manifested by confrontation with the police:

Even I (sic) have a case at the police for insulting a person who is not part of the society. I soktiti (abused) her and she also soktiti me. I know the meaning of that insult but the person who is not a member of the society does not know the meaning and I told her you have broken a Bondo law and she will ask what that means. But as for me and others who are in the society, you put your own law, I put my own law (enforcing Bondo laws, - my emphasis). Even before you put your own law, you have no right to call me names because I am part of the society (focus group 2 on 14/02/ 2009).

The Soweis above seemingly got into problems with the police while trying to *enforce* a Bondo law. In the course of administering this Bondo law and affirming Bondo society authority, she was reported to the police. Here, again, there is a direct confrontation with the rights-focused language engendered in the new look, donor funded Family Support Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone police that expedites cases relating to cultural practices and family issues. One elderly Soweis who was quite concerned about how the human rights anti-FGC discourse had affected Bondo operations had this to say in justification of acts of violence and aggression carried out by Bondo society followers:

Even a child if the uncle slaps him, he will take a stone because the uncle has disgraced him. The fact remains there are tears running down his face, his heart will be strong and will hit the uncle to the ground with a stone or a stick without watching where to hit you and will harm you badly. That is what is happening to us Soweis and members of the Bondo. They keep disgracing us over the radio. OK, the government is big, just like the uncle who hit the small boy, but if it continues hitting us, we are swelling with tears and when our tears cannot hold any more, we will rise up and hit back and we will hit bad (hard) just like the child who will hit his uncle with a stone or stick without caring where he is hitting (Focus group discussion with Mende Soweis on the 12th February 2009).

This respondent, then, metaphorically refers to the ‘human rights camp’<sup>50</sup> as the “uncle”, signifying the perceived gap in power between externally funded agencies and the “child” (Bondo society). In spite of the wide gulf in economic power, the respondent insinuates that the Bondo is going to fight to defend its position. This perspective perhaps explains some of the acts of aggression presented as claims of ‘resistance’ by Bondo members. However, ironically, as argued above, by acting in aggression (*without caring where he is hitting*), the Bondo members stand to lose the moral and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986: 249; Burt, 1992; Putnam, 1995) that sustains the symbolic power accessible to them (Bourdieu, 1990).

There are therefore tensions bordering on the collapse of the moral fabric that binds the Bondo society together. One of the Bondo laws, as pointed out above, is that a non-member cannot argue with a Bondo member. While in the “field” I was made aware of various instances where aggrieved Bondo members had taken it upon themselves to punish non-members who had argued with them. I talked to one of the victims of such an incident where Bondo laws were evoked to exert revenge:

I quarreled with a Bondo society member after she shouted at me. We were arguing about some money that I owed her. The woman shouted aye joo (a Bondo communication code used to mobilize members) and soon so many Bondo members gathered around us [...]. The Bondo members who had gathered around me dragged me to the Bondo bush where they demanded the Soweï in charge to initiate me. Though the Soweï said that the way I had been disgraced is not how such cases are traditionally handled, she agreed to initiate me under pressure from the Bondo society members who had mobbed around me. I started crying. In this case, the woman wronged me. She shouted at me and I shouted back then they all turned against me (interview with Jaray, a woman aged 29, a victim of Bondo aggression).

In this particular case, the elderly Soweï seems to be the only person in the highly charged context that is keen to follow the “letter” of the Bondo law. However, she was clearly brushed aside by the younger Bondo members eager to exact “revenge” through FGC, by having the woman who argued with the Bondo member forcefully initiated. The victim of this aggression was a woman in her late twenties and a mother of three. What is

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<sup>50</sup> This is a metaphorical camp that includes: the government of Sierra Leone that has enacted the Child Rights Law that outlaws harmful traditional practices on minors, the INGOs that embody the human rights discourse locally through organizing workshops against FGC and engaging the media to “expose” the Bondo and the general global call against FGC.

particularly notable in this case is the fact that the woman in question here considered herself “modern” and the aggressors “non-modern”. This was implicitly because she had not been subjected to the cut<sup>51</sup> and the Bondo initiation rituals. She said thus about the aggressor:

I too said that I wasn’t going to beg her because she is not any more modern (my emphasis) than me “it is not possible for me to beg this woman concerning this matter. Let my mother wake up from the grave and talk to me but I won’t beg. So they blocked me from doing my domestic chores. A crowd gathered outside. The people surrounded me and started singing *lyaja* (a Bondo code) in Mende. Then I started to cry to my children but they did not heed my cry, instead they decided to take me to the Bondo bush and there they tore my clothes and the lappa I had apart (interview with Jaray, a woman aged 29, a victim of Bondo aggression on 24/04/2009).

In their study of Korea’s traditional medicine and shamanism, Connor and Samuel (2001:30) noted that some of their respondents consciously distanced themselves from shamanism as a way of asserting their own claims to ‘modernity’. Meanwhile (Pigg, 1996:165) observes that “the idea of the ‘modern’ generates a sense of difference while at the same time holding out the promise of inclusion in the global cosmopolitan culture”. In this case the victim of Bondo aggression affirmed her aspiration of being included in the global cosmopolitan culture by defying a Bondo initiate’s culturally ascribed status of privilege. She thus invoked the idea of “modernity” as something in opposition to “superstition and tradition”. This attests to the fact that the definition of tradition in this context has become a site of social struggle; the challenge to that form of established authority is, it seems likely, what is upsetting initiates as much as a failure of observance. Connor and Samuel argue that “‘modernities’ do not inevitably vanquish ‘superstitions’, although this tenet is intrinsic to modernity’s world view, and those who have invested in modernity have every incentive to tell linear narratives about themselves” (2001:32). At the same time, of course, I came across well learned and versatile women in Sierra Leone who were Bondo members but did not consider themselves “non-modern” by virtue of having undergone FGC. What this reveals is that neither modern nor traditional identities are absolutely or conclusively fixed. In many instances such claims constitute talking points used in different social contexts of tension or contest. I discovered that there were,

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<sup>51</sup> I was meant to understand by my respondents (especially the young ones) that the FGC eradication discourse prevalent in human rights clubs in schools, at times positions itself as contemporary while apportioning “antiquity” to traditional practices like the Bondo society (field notes 06/05/09).

in this respect, simmering tensions between different chapters of Bondo with some regarding themselves often as more "elaborate" chapters than others. This can be seen to be the case especially when contrasting Bondo chapters located in urban areas with those in the rural areas. According to the conventional view, the different Bondo chapters should have a general homogeneity about them and about their practices. However, there are some chapters which, it was reported to me, were "detailed" or less observant of expected practice, than others. This is the case especially in urban areas where the Soweis have had to reduce the length of some initiation rituals because parents do not want their daughters to stay in the "bush" for long. This is also the case because some girls are initiated during the Easter holidays, when schools are still in session; therefore, there is only a limited time available to spend in the Bondo bush. Some elaborate cultural rituals are as a consequence left out in some chapters. Here again, one might make reference to Ranger's (1983) idea of "invented traditions". The gist of his argument hinges on ways in which change and ideas about "modernity" are brought to bear. Using the case of the colonial regimes in Africa, Ranger notes that new traditions were invented to supplant the old cultural order and thus open up new spaces for colonial rule (1983:212). In the case of the Bondo secret society, the detailed and less detailed Bondo chapters could be construed as having "invented" traditions. These "invented traditions" open up a site of contest with shifting stakes. Those who have invested in the "modernity" project have no qualms about belonging to the less detailed Bondo chapters while those whose powers are threatened by the "diluted" Bondo are keen to resist attempts at change. They do this by invoking different claims and counter claims about the 'purity' of tradition. As Ranger argued regarding the "modernity" of invented customs: "There were Africans who adapted European neo-traditional symbolism in a spirit of fashion, proclaiming their own sophistication not so much by aping Europeans as by an impressive display of their ability to keep up to date, to discern the realities of colonial power and to comment shrewdly upon them." On the other hand, there were those whose powers were threatened by such processes (such as those chiefs who opposed these "invented traditions") and were only lured by "stage monarchy to allow access to the colonial powers" (Ibid: 240). Like the colonial chiefs opposed to "invented traditions", some Soweis and especially the more high-ranking members of the secret society are opposed to less detailed Bondo chapters because they threaten the perceived and real power accessible to them through the Bondo society. These Soweis fear that they might not be able to articulate their conventional forms of power in the new arrangement. The new dispensation has, in these respects, created a lacuna in which the power to define what is appropriate practice in the Bondo is

contested. Thus, some members claim to be closer to the Bondo power base since they were initiated in a more detailed Bondo chapter than others:

When I join you into the Bondo society, it is not like those Freetown Bondo where you join today and tomorrow you are out. My own Bondo that I join, you will be there for one month. Inside that month I will tell you what will be with you and how you will be with your husband and how to live with him and his family and how to take care of him (Interview with Marve on 30/06/09, a Soweï aged 47 living in a chiefdom neighbouring Bo).

This is, thus, indicative of the struggles over the definition of proper practice inherent in the Bondo society and of the way in which such struggles have been amplified or shaped by experiences of urbanisation, displacement and the emergence of an internationally sponsored anti-FGC discourse. These internal contradictions are manifested in the way Soweïs talk in the name of defending tradition and culture, cross-cut by their concerns to safeguard the personal, political and socio-economic interests that the Bondo entails for them.

#### **5.4 Religious Revivalism and Islam**

A further level of tension is evident in the contest over the elaborateness and extent of the Bondo initiation ritual in relation to more formalised religious belief systems. A case in point is the relationship between Bondo membership and the Christian revival movement dominated by charismatic churches that have generated a lot of interest among Sierra Leoneans. In the post war context, people have been drawn to such forms of Christianity as part of the process of reconciling themselves with the trauma of the recent war. A number of new Christian converts have since denounced the Bondo society. They openly talk about and chastise the Bondo society when giving testimonies in church, thereby breaking the Bondo law of secrecy. One respondent, lamenting the effect of charismatic churches on the Bondo, said:

Some people are now talking openly and putting the secret out. Some of them when they change to Christianity, they would talk everything about the society. I don't feel fine the way they do such kind of thing, the problem is that they expose the society even though some of them are members of the society who know that they should not

talk about it. I will shame for that so I will not feel fine (interview with Kadhie, a woman in her 40s trading in the palm oil business in Bo on 21/04/09).

Analogous tensions are also played out in relation to the Islamic faith. The advent of reformist Muslim groups has challenged some of the Bondo society practices such as masking, leading to 'altered' Bondo societies in places where these reformist Islam is prevalent (cf Phillips, 1995:90). I talked to a history university professor from the Mende community and he had this to say about changes brought about by some sections of Islam and Christianity:

There also religion influence on FGC and here I am talking about Islam and Christianity. However, Orthodox Islam as we are told is now strongly against it although this practice is widespread in Muslim countries like Sudan and Arabic countries. We are told they are now strongly against it. There is a branch of Islam which is strongly against it and it is having some influence particularly in the Kenema and Kailahun area in the South Eastern part of the country, Islam is much stronger in that region (interview with Momoh, a male university professor from the Mende ethnic group).

I interviewed one man who was originally from Kailahun but is now living in Bo. He narrated to me how Soweis in Bo had been forced to strike a compromise when he recently initiated his daughters because he had invited Soweis from his rural home in Kailahun to take part. He said that the Soweis in Bo struggled to come to terms with those from Kailahun because the Kailahun Soweis had infused orthodox Islamic teachings into the way that they initiated. As a result the Soweis had to agree to ignore some of the Bondo rituals which their counterparts considered un-Islamic:

Like some of the Soweis who arrived from Kailahun for my daughter's initiation; before this time, they were part of the whole traditional set up of the Bondo. However, because of the doctrine, the Muslim doctrine, they have now amended it to their own Muslim way, so that they no longer practice hard core initiation. Some traditional practices are left out. They have changed this thing under the doctrinal act. They are now doing it in a very mild way, very mild way, you know. Now they are doing it in a very mild way, you know, just taking basics (emphasis added). They have not forgotten but they are no longer part of the hard line. They are modifying and modernizing it (Interview with Momura on 26/04/09 on 26/04/09).

Here again, Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity seems relevant. He argues that though "cultures in the rural/urban, North/South may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; they also display the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to "translate" and therefore re-inscribe the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity" (1994:6). Therefore, from the perspective and context of the Orthodox Islamists in Kailahun, although the Bondo society is seen as being in tension with what some orthodox Islamic groups stand for in Kailahun, they have adopted some of the Bondo practices which they deem are not discontinuous with their faith. They thus "display the cultural hybridity of borderline conditions" by integrating their orthodox Islamic ideas with traditional Bondo practices. Instead of completely denouncing Bondo, they have influenced their members to leave out the "hardcore" Bondo procedures and only adopt "mild" ones perceived to be in keeping with the orthodox Islamic ideals. This is captured in the italicised statement of the respondent above. In line with Bhabha's argument, the underlying state of affairs in the modern day world is, therefore, one of hybridity and various forms of ambiguous accommodation.

This logic is however, turned inside out in general FGC discourses. Islam has been cited in many quarters including by my respondents as endorsing FGC (cf Mazharul and Mosleh, 2001). Indeed when I queried my informants about the origin of FGC many referred to a story about the Prophet Mohammed and his jealous wife as the genesis of Bondo. The story centres around jealousy and sabotage on the part of the prophet Mohamed's first wife. When the prophet married a second wife (the story goes), the first wife became envious of this new competitor. Out of her jealousy, she decided to cut her competitor so that the prophet would not desire her. However, when the prophet realized that the new wife had been cut, he decided it was a good thing and ordered that all Muslim women be cut:

Mama Khadija was the wife of the prophet Mohammed. (May peace be with him) you understand? After they were married, mama Khadija did not bear children. So she married a young wife for Mohamed. After she married this girl to the prophet the prophet liked her more than his senior wife. So one day, the prophet went on a Jihad and Mama Khadija took the young wife and put her in the (Bondo) society. When the prophet returned, the young wife told him what mama Khadija had done. The prophet said it was good and thus the prophet endorsed the Bondo. Khadija did the initiation out



of jealousy and she thought the prophet will dislike the small wife (Interview with Songeta on 06/02/09, a senior Soweï living in an IDP camp).

My respondents were unable to cite any verse in the Koran to substantiate this story but they strongly believed in it. This refers us back to El-Tom's (1998:168) argument about the role played by the interpretation of religious edicts in shaping ideology. It could be argued, of course, that although the Soweïs who gave me this story used it as a justification of the FGC practice, the story is implicitly critical of the practice: it seems to tell a story in which women become the agents of their oppression at the hands of men – a kind of proto-feminist story. However this is not how any of my respondents perceived the story, instead the narrative was generally employed as a scriptural endorsement for the basis and legitimacy of FGC.

Tensions within the Bondo are also inflected by differences among the ethnic communities that practice Bondo. Of all the seventeen tribal groupings in Sierra Leone, only the Krio do not have the Bondo society. It was evident from respondents' remarks that some tribal groupings felt like they were the ones who practiced the "correct" version of Bondo. One respondent blamed the concerted pressure to abandon the practice of female genital cutting that culminated in the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007 on other ethnic groupings that initiate very young girls. The Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007 outlaws harmful traditional practices. In the act, cultures deemed to be harmful are considered illegal unless an age of consent is established. One Soweï said:

For us the Mende, we always initiate mature girls; we used to measure the maturity of a girl ready to join Bondo by putting a coin under her breast. If the coin does not fall, then she is ready to be joined. If the coin falls down that means she is still young and not ready for initiation. It is the Themne people who initiate very young girls. These people have reduced our power seriously because what they do is not right (Interview with Ayatta on 11/03/09, a Soweï living in Bo).

A native Mende man who worked for an international non-governmental organization based in Sierra Leone confirmed that there are modifications being made by different Bondo chapters even among the Mende. He described some of the Mende as "typical" and differentiated them from those who practice Bondo in relatively urban settings.

We have typical Mendes who go through all the rites, but there are others who do not especially in the urban areas where the girls will be in the bush for three to five days

and then released from the initiation bush to their homes [...] Even the cutting of the clitoris, they (non-typical Mende) don't remove everything but the typical Mende, they remove everything. So there is some amount of modification in some quarters (interview with Kolomenta on 16/07/09, a middle aged Mende man human rights activist).

When I asked the respondent above how the Bondo society still maintained the image of sisterhood that sustains the Bondo ideology of solidarity and sodality in spite of these regional and ethnic tensions, he said that these are contested areas with different claims as to who is more suited to be a 'certified' Bondo member. Some of these claims are so divisive that in some chapters, they simply will not grant you access to Bondo bush meetings if you are considered to have "lesser Bondo qualifications". However, he said, under the pressure of the human rights discourse to end the practice, Bondo members have taken to accepting differences in practice so long as the cut that symbolises the Bondo society is upheld. As we saw Douglas arguing previously, when a group perceives itself as being under 'external' attack, this can have the effect of creating conditions for a new kind of unity, despite existing internal tensions:

The general attitude is that; let them do what they feel like they want to but as long as they go through that particular cut. They see it like people bringing in innovations. Initially they were opposed to it but gradually they have come to accept it (emphasis added). They have their code that they use if you are not a member, they will definitely know you are not a member if they use it and you do not respond. Like in my case, I went to Kailahun, can you imagine, I went to the Poro initiation bush and they could not let me into the bush. They asked me a question and when I could not answer it, they told me no. Even if you are initiated to the Poro society, that does not warrant you to be here. They told me to go back to town (interview with Kolomenta on 16/07/09, a middle aged Mende man, an anti-FGC activist working with an INGO).

The examples discussed here – the rural urban tensions, the tensions over religious revivalism and Islam – brings to the fore an important point. To some extent they challenge the implicit dichotomies – modernity/tradition, local knowledge/global rational science, community/individuality – that have structured the debate over female circumcision. In the case of the victimised woman molested by Bondo members, for example, her claim to be modern sits alongside the fact that some Bondo members are more educated or cosmopolitan (i.e. can claim more complete ownership of these

discursive signifiers of modernity) than her. Similarly, the claims that the Bondo is un-Islamic by orthodox Muslims in Kailahun have not led to a complete eradication of the Bondo society but rather to a new, hybrid practice. The same argument could be extended to discourses within Bondo about “detailed” or “less detailed” chapters. The Bondo is, therefore, a complex and contradictory social field that cannot be analysed in simple dichotomous terms. There is thus a need to unpack the complex story of the Bondo society.

### **5.5 Un-packing the complex story of FGC: the case of the Bondo society**

In the case of the Bondo as captured by the respondent above (interview 52), the detailed Bondo chapters did not seem to have major qualms about accepting initiates from less detailed versions of Bondo as long as they had undergone “the cut”. Though this is indicative of the possibility of change (the respondent talks about the Soweis, recognising some changes as “*innovation*,”) the change envisioned by the Bondo does not extend to the practice of FGC itself. It takes specialized training by the Soweis to perform genital cutting as I pointed out in the previous chapter. Getting rid of genital cutting would, one can assume, affect the symbolic significance of the Bondo, and thus also the personal economic<sup>52</sup> and social gains that some Soweis accrue through fees paid for initiating girls into the Bondo. It could also be argued that eradicating genital cutting would render the Soweis training and symbolic aspects of the Bondo society void, it represents an attack on a particular form of cultural capital. This clearly feeds into the struggles over definition and meanings invested by different actors in the secret societies. However, the key point here is that the concept of power can be recognised as having fluid and multiple dimensions. The Soweis, on the one hand, welcome certain “innovations”, while still maintaining the symbolic power accrued from the Bondo society. Conversely, on the other hand, those from lesser detailed chapters are excluded from some of the secret society functions as was the case with respondent 52 above. This attests to the different ways in which actors employ claims about both traditional and modern practice as symbols of power within the Bondo. It further highlights the complexity of the negotiation towards change as manifested by instances of the appropriation of modernity (innovations) towards a counter modernity (exclusion of less detailed Bondo initiates) as

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<sup>52</sup> Though the money acquired by Soweis through Bondo initiation is not ‘big money’ (i.e. it is not life changing), in the context where it is a form of sustenance, it is worth fighting for. The key thing, though, is the social recognition and network (‘social capital’) that those involved accrue by being Soweis.

pointed out in the above excerpt. In regard to change, one of my respondents speculated that the future of the Bondo society looked bleak because the members were disagreeing over things which they had previously agreed upon:

Interviewee: I think the practice is going to collapse. It will surely collapse. The Bondo is like a pile of wood tied together by a rope then the [if the] rope is cut down, the piles of wood will scatter, so is the case with the society. The campaign has brought differences in the society in the things that they believed together so the society will scatter because there are differences now... (laughter) yeah you heard that when the white men went to Nigeria, they are the ones who made “things to fall apart<sup>53</sup>” yes, it is like this, only as long as some people have started to cross the carpet, the campaign at the end will be successful and the [Bondo] society will collapse (Interview with Lekabu on 29/03/09 a male aged 54 a local councillor [civic government official]).

Whereas the Soweis insist that there is a lot to be learned in the teachings of the Bondo bush, some respondents thus argued that as a result of social changes and with a large number of potential initiates attending school, there is no longer much to be learned by joining the society. This particular respondent (a primary school teacher) while discussing about the Bondo society, said:

In any case they don’t teach much in the Bondo since the time spent there is too small. Joining Bondo now is just to be counted as a member not much learning goes on there anymore. In the time of our grandmothers, they used to stay over three months, which was enough time to learn something, other than becoming a member; I don’t think there is benefit any more (interview with Fuambai, a primary school teacher Bondo member).

In spite of the tensions and the changed landscape of the Bondo society, the accounts above testify how senior Soweis reframe and accommodate *innovations* in ways that seek to fortify the existing power structure of the Bondo society.

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<sup>53</sup> Apparently the respondent was making reference to Chinua Achebe’s popular novel “Things Fall Apart”.

## 5.6 Conclusion

The various tensions and negotiations discussed in this chapter suggest that the issue of FGC as practiced by the Bondo society in Sierra Leone cannot be simply conceptualised in terms of the dichotomies occasionally presented in the literature (cf Lightfoot-Klein, 1989; Price, 1997; Koso-Thomas, 1986; Gordon, 1991; Edelman et al, 1999). In the case of Sierra Leone, FGC highlights a complex and contradictory dynamic with different contending actors. The issue of the Bondo society and instances of resistance to anti-FGC rights discourse provides a basis from which to examine the link between “ideology, public-policy and social change” (Walkowitz, 1982:1)<sup>54</sup>. Indeed the dynamic brought about by Bondo instances of ‘resistance’ points us to the wider relationship between state and society in which actor’s social and political interests are at stake (c.f. Ignatieff, 1981; Walkowitz, 1982). As the metaphor of the uncle and child, used by one of my respondents, makes clear, the Bondo society members feel that they have to respond to what they consider to be a sustained attack stemming from ‘external’ anti-FGC sentiments. They are thus ‘pushed into a corner’ and have resorted to acts of violence justified as a ‘defence of culture’. In this formulation, tradition becomes invested with an urgent, renewed meaning, and needs to be defended by all means including acts of violence and defiance of secular law, leading to the forced initiations and confrontations with police. There is a need, then, for anti-FGC activists to appreciate that behind the claims for defence of culture by Bondo practitioners there are far-reaching social, economic and political interests at stake in the practice. Plain condemnation of the practice tends to push Bondo followers deeper into ‘defence of tradition’ position as opposed to changing the culture of FGC initiation. However, as a result of the changed context mapped in this chapter, the Bondo has also been thrust into a multiplicity of tensions which cannot be understood simply in terms of a modern/tradition dichotomy in spite of the Bondo adherents’ occasional recourse to this distinction. What is emerging as Bondo society adherents grapple with these changes, as I have shown, is that there are

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<sup>54</sup> Walkowitz’s book explores the ideological assumptions in Victorian Britain that motivated the metaphor of pollution as it was apportioned to prostitutes during debates around the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Act) that sought to outlaw prostitution. Under the CD Acts, people’s private extra-marital activity became a subject of state control. They became, a ‘staged social drama’ controlled through ‘techniques of power’. The CD acts led to massive protests from different interest groups spanning both the state and society. She says, “The acts became a battleground where diverse and competing groups vied with each other for social and political power. The repeal campaigns reveals how social groups mobilised over sex, how they articulated their demands and how they impressed their view on a popular audience [...] A staged event, a social drama largely manipulated by the police and judicial authorities” (1982:5).

instances of adjustment and innovation made in regard to the practice, some of which lead to hostilities between Bondo society practitioners. This state of affairs has heralded tensions and power struggles in which, what is at stake, specifically, is the ability to define what is acceptable or not, which is in itself a form of symbolic authority. In the next chapter, I will move on to analyse more closely the link between the Bondo society and contemporary politics in Sierra Leone.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Politics and the Bondo Society**

#### **6.0 Bondo hegemony and its impact on politics and on FGC eradication**

The close relationship that the Bondo enjoys with some politicians has meant that the Bondo has come to play an increasingly important role, in certain respects, in hegemonic projects aimed at consolidating political power in Sierra Leone by political parties and other political actors. It is the complexities of this relationship which I want to explore in this chapter. In the face of international pressure to end the practice of FGC, politicians and Bondo members have resorted to deliberate ambivalence, socio-legal resistance and collaboration in different fora. This, I point out, is partly because as a donor driven economy, the state of Sierra Leone is under pressure to comply with donor aid preconditions that require countries in which FGC is practiced to show efforts towards its eradication. I also argue that, in post-war Sierra Leone, whereby key sectors such as education, which would normally serve as a kind of ideological state apparatus, are still undergoing reconstruction, state operatives act ambiguously in regard to the question of FGC when dealing with the Bondo, because it partly fills this role. In the context of contemporary Sierra Leone, the state actors still need the Bondo to legitimize their power, while they also need the international community's economic support. In this chapter I analyze how this new development is negotiated.

#### **6.1 Bondo and Politics**

Before the onset of the slave trade and colonization, secret societies were the main political units of governance and organization. This cultural practice has survived both the former and the latter. In fact, secret societies were used in some ways to foster the operations of the major forces of social change that visited Sierra-Leone in the early years. According to Rodney (1970), corrupt chiefs wrongly invoked the secret society rules in order to capture people for sale as slaves. The trade had become lucrative to the local chiefs to such an

extent that they used trumped up Bondo and Poro charges to capture victims for sale. According to Little, writing during colonial occupation of Sierra Leone in the 1950's, the colonial authorities also used the secret societies to enhance governance. The colonial government levied taxes such as the marriage tax and Bondo license fees through secret societies and local chiefs.

It is arguable, therefore, that the Bondo has always been close to the centre of power, especially in villages where the paramount chiefs always seek the support of Bondo. The relationship between the Bondo and the chief is a reciprocal one, as we have seen. Forrest notes that "Local chiefdoms in Sierra Leone have played linkage roles between rural communities and the national political structure that strengthen the chiefs' rule rather than broadening the base of power of the centralized system" (1988:430). The Bondo generate income for the chiefs through marriage levies and license fees. Conversely, the Bondo turns to the chief to enforce some of their rules and taboos on those who defy them. Though the Bondo have their own ways of seeking retribution through their potent medicines, they occasionally employ the chief's power to enforce their laws. Paramount chiefs have historically co-opted the Bondo since the times of the powerful female paramount chief, Madam Yoko (1884-1906). The close connection between the chief and the Bondo has, over time, evolved into "a given" such that any opposition to Bondo is seen as foreign. A number of respondents pointed out the link between the chief and the Bondo:

If anybody sensitizes people against the practice, the Soweis, will rise up and go to the town chief or the paramount chief. They will tell the chief, this is what the Whiteman or the black man has said. However, before we decide to leave it [FGC initiation]; we have come to you our chief and elder for consultation. What will you advise us about this issue? The chief will most likely refuse and advise them against it. After all, he benefits from the Bondo levies. These traditions benefit him in one way or the other. They will say we do not have a hand inside the White people<sup>55</sup>. It is the white people who came with that idea and we don't support it (Interview with Alusine a Mende man living in a village in the Bo area).

Although the Bondo is managed and controlled by women who take different positions in the society, the local chief endorses the secret society after due levies (marriage fees, Bondo initiation licence fees) have been paid before initiation can commence. It is also

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<sup>55</sup> Here, the respondent is insinuating that they do not support the idea because it originates with foreigners. In spite of the fact that we have white Europeans and white Lebanese Sierra Leoneans, in the local context, the word 'Whiteman' refers to Europeans.



customary practice that before the coming out ceremony, the Bondo members have to cook a very tasty meal and present it to the chief before they proceed with the coming out ceremonies. This is meant to symbolise the respect and appreciation which characterises the reciprocal relationship between the chief and Bondo. All prospective Bondo initiates, irrespective of their age, have to pay “marriage fees” before they are joined into the Bondo society. The chief’s governance council consists of senior Bondo Soweis who are routinely consulted on weighty matters affecting the chiefdom. Therefore, the chiefdom position and the Bondo society are interdependent on each other.

From the foregoing, it is clear that it is in the chief’s interest to safeguard Bondo society activities because of the benefits the chief draws from them. One respondent, a daughter of a chief told me that:

Paramount chiefs are also traditional leaders and have to be informed about everything that is arranged in their chiefdoms...everything is culture. The Bondo Soweis have an agreement with the paramount chief; they seek permission from the paramount chief before they put Bondo. The chief actually, gives license to the Soweis, all girls initiated have to pay some marriage tax to the chief before they are initiated. This is irrespective of their legibility to marriage. The Bondo society works in close consultation with the chief, they seek the chief’s permission so that in case something goes wrong in the course of initiation, the chief will be able to give an account of it. You have to “greet” the chief, ask for his permission and put your case forward (interview with Umuon 14/04/2009 a daughter of a paramount chief aged 35).

Ten other respondents gave me similar explanations as to how the chief’s position and the Bondo society reinforce each other. This highlights the central place of the Bondo in the socio-political operations of community life in local settings, which are governed by Chiefs. It is such close links to political actors across the political landscape, from local chiefs to incumbent presidents, that gives the Bondo influence from village settlements to urban cosmopolitan settings. In these different ways, then, the secret societies have been central to governance historically in the country, and to the consolidation of political power in ways that have strengthened the position of the Bondo in relation to political actors. However, such relationships have been changed and, in some respects, deepened in recent years, and given the widespread appeal of the Bondo among a significant number of female voters, the Bondo has emerged as a dominant force in its own right in modern

Sierra Leonean politics. This relationship between the Bondo and local forms of political authority has other significant aspects. For instance, the Bondo secret society and the Poro are the main forms of community organization ordering social life. As a result, Bondo initiations in one way or the other involve everybody in the village. This therefore, as I have argued, imbues the Bondo with social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and also provides members with access to politically significant symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1990). As highlighted in previous chapters, the secret societies are organized by a set of taboos and rules that keep members in close-knit unity and foster communal participation. Secret societies are integral to leadership roles in Sierra Leone. You have to be a member of one of the secret societies before you can become a chief or acquire any significant leadership position (field notes). It is common to have women as paramount chiefs, especially among the Mende and Sherbro. The chief's position is very important not least because he forms the main link to the central government, is in charge of keeping law and order in the villages and upholds the operations of secret societies. The chief is therefore central in shaping political opinion from below.

The ideology of secrecy is thus integral to community organisation and politics in Sierra Leone. Simmel has argued that “in larger groups, secrets are needed because everyone is so different” (2008:158-188). Simmel's point is that the secret becomes a factor in shaping and ordering relationships. It is thus not simply shame which provokes anger at interrogation into the Bondo, but a sense of the need to protect an ordering aspect of social life. However, institutional secrecy causes tension because without the secret, the society becomes unstable. Secrecy is an inseparable appendage to the institution of chieftaincy which simultaneously plays a central role in village and national politics<sup>56</sup>. MacCormack, writing in the 1970s, for instance, noted that chiefs in Sierra Leone are “people of influence in one or more of the secret societies” (1974:174). The position of chief, especially that of the paramount chief, commands a great deal of respect and power even in the context of contemporary Sierra Leone. During my stay in Bo; I experienced the significance accorded to the position of a chief when the paramount chief of the area I was living in passed away. The whole city of Bo, which is the second largest town in Sierra Leone, came, literally, to a standstill (field note 17/03/2009). The link between secret society membership and the access to these leaderships position, as well as the central place of secret societies in ordering social life, makes politicians gravitate to secret societies.

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<sup>56</sup> For a detailed account of chieftaincy see Phillip (1991) and Fanthorpe (2005).

A number of Bondo society members thus insisted and recognised that the Bondo has an important role to play in accessing political power in Sierra Leone. It is important to recognise, that for respondents this was often understood in terms of magical or ritual power: the ritual knowledge accessible to the Bondo was seen as the main link between power and politics. The Bondo was seen as having the capacity to imbue a hopeful politician with power:

Even the president that wants to gain power or wants to be somebody, you have to undergo spiritual cleansing. Yeah, you can't be president in this country if you are not a society member. It will never be (interview 23 on 07/02/2009).

Geschiere (1997) argues that any allusion to ritual and cosmology can have both critical and conservative aspects. Allegations about the use of magical power can make political actors appear unchallengeable. For Bondo members, at least, this discourse shapes opinion and gives the impression that political actors are beholden to them. The essence of the discourse is the perception that for an individual to become a powerful leader, they need to pursue the Bondo society which will imbue them with ritual blessings to improve their leadership chances. This discourse wins social power for the Bondo in that it makes it important for them to be wooed by political hopefuls. At the same time, of course, it may be said to mystify power in the sense that Geschiere implies and certainly allows politicians to maintain power. Their positions will be seen as inaccessible to anybody apart from those ritually sanctioned by the Bondo. These ritual accounts and beliefs, therefore, constitute a kind of societal idiom about contemporary social and political life in Sierra Leone. The mystification embedded in ritual knowledge thus positions the Bondo as integral in the acquisition and consolidation of power. Overall, the link between the Bondo and politics is so real in the day-to-day life of the people that the former can be said to have real significance in contemporary post-war Sierra Leone politics. This, added to the social capital accessible to the Bondo as a potential means of mobilising voters, has led to a situation whereby the state openly co-opts the Bondo members despite signing international treaties that seek to eradicate FGC. It is the nature of the contemporary relationship between aspiring politicians and the Bondo which I will now go on to explore.

## 6.2 State co-optation and the project of legitimization

In their study of Korean beliefs about healing powers and modernity, Connor and Samuel (2001:32) have argued that in Korea, as in other places, popular culture became a defining claim in nationalist discourses: “the politics of culture as defined by new middle-class intellectuals merged with early nationalist agendas in the belief that the defining essence of a “people” was to be found in their folk traditions” (see also Bauman and Sawin, 1991). Connor and Samuel further note that in Korea, “ancient shamanic practices were infused, retrospectively with nationalistic spirituality, a theme revived by Korean Folklore” (2001:33). In Sierra Leone, nationalism is similarly conflated with the activities of secret societies. Accordingly, politicians not perceived as supporters of the people’s culture, especially the secret societies, may jeopardize their own careers.

Political campaigns in Sierra Leone are hotly contested. An electoral candidate needs to have good organization and mobilization skills in order to rally people to his side. There is no better place to harness human resource for mobilization and organization than in the secret societies. As argued before, the Bondo employs secret codes only known to members for mobilization. In an immediate sense, other modes of mobilization accessible to the Bondo are their songs, dances and masquerades which form a key part of any public spectacle.

One can, therefore, approach the Bondo using Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital. Following Bourdieu, “Cultural capital has three forms of existence. It exists, first, as incorporated in the *habitus* (the internalization of the objective structures of the environment in the form of practices.); and is to a large extent created through primary pedagogy, that is, in (early) childhood. Second, cultural capital is objectivized in cultural articles. Third, it also exists in institutionalized cultural institutions and is expressed in terms of certificates, diplomas and examinations” (see Bourdieu 1977; 1979 in Siisainen, 2000:11). In the case of the Bondo secret society, the *habitus* could be generally construed as the teachings inculcated on young girls through Bondo education and through observing how women in their environment are expected to behave. See Figure 6.1 below.



**Figure 6-1: [Sierra Leone] Women, who had themselves been circumcised, teach young girls how to sing, dance and cook**

Since over 90% of women are members of the Bondo, it is possible that the many habits and practices young women learn but take for granted are inspired by the Bondo, long before they even become Bondo society initiates. According to Bondo ideology, the pain of initiation (including that of the FGC procedure) is a symbolic representation of the fact that they are fully socialized to take on adult responsibilities. Well-socialized Bondo members are, in the long run, meant to instil stability in the community through stable marriages and by bringing up children in accordance with cultural prescriptions espoused by secret societies. Individuals learn cultural models through their everyday practices (Strauss and Quinn 1997:155). FGC is thus seen as being symbolic of the gendered knowledge that is passed on to new Bondo initiates after years of socialization by kin folk. This gendered knowledge generally creates a framework through which social life is ordered. The new Bondo initiates are incorporated into the secret society bound by oaths of secrecy. In this setting, it is within the Bondo society that the Bondo members create intensive social networks which become significant for politicians seeking to woo voters.

Bondo thus can be seen to play a significant role in the development of *habitus*. Secondly, however, it has a role in relation to social capital. Bourdieu argues that “Social capital [...is...] a resource that is connected with group membership and *social networks* [my emphasis]...The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent ... depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize” (Bourdieu 1986, 249 in Siisainen, 2000:11). Bondo members are particularly well networked, in this sense, and regularly meet in Bondo bush meetings that are spread across different hamlets in order to

discuss matters affecting them and general “Bondo business<sup>57</sup>”. One of the main teachings in Bondo initiation is keeping contact and networking with other members:

I was taught in the society bush to be close to my other Soweis and join hands together for the society to be successful (interview 2 with Sowei aged forty living in an IDP camps).

As a result of this networking ability, the Bondo is widely courted by politicians. Bourdieu goes on to note that the second characteristic of social capital is that it is based on mutual cognition and recognition of values, goals and aspirations (see Bourdieu, 1980; 1986; 1998). According to Siisainen, mutual cognition and recognition are the means with which symbolic capital/character is acquired. Once symbolic character is internalized, it is transformed into symbolic capital (2000:12): “it is symbolic capital that defines what forms and uses of capital are recognized as legitimate bases of social positions in a given society” (Ibid). Following Siisainen, we can argue that politicians in Sierra Leone align themselves with Bondo as a way to legitimate their position, especially after a long drawn out civil war when the holding of political power was in flux. In that respect, the contemporary, post-war situation has altered and, arguably, deepened the already well-recognised relationship between the Bondo and political actors. The effectiveness of symbolic capital, according to Siisainen, depends on real practices of communication (2000:13). Due to the widely networked communication channels available to the Bondo, the society can influence political discourse. It is therefore instructive that in the case of Sierra Leone, the Bondo society becomes a key political “weapon” in a “political battle” to borrow the language of the respondent below.

We are all trying to use it [Bondo society] here for political gains thinking that if you support it that will endear the women to your political camp. The population of women is more than men especially in the rural areas. It is generally believed that by supporting it, we are bringing women on board in a way that will reflect women’s decision. The rural women are the ones to capture in a political battle (Interview on 0/03/09 with a sitting member of parliament).

From the foregoing comments, it can be seen that any politician staking a claim to leadership, endeavours to have the Bondo society on their side. This scenario leads to a situation where gaining access to the Bondo society becomes a fight between rival political

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<sup>57</sup> During my many interactions with Bondo members, I realised that aspects touching on ‘Bondo secrets’ in the course of an interview were obfuscated by the euphemism ‘Bondo business’.

candidates. The Bondo consequently becomes a site of struggle with politicians using it in different ways. Some seek to use relationships with the Bondo society in order to create propaganda against their rivals while others endeavour to entice the Bondo by promising resources, in order to expand their popularity. Thus, many Sierra Leonean politicians since independence in 1961, such as Prime Minister Sir Milton Margai, have sought the support of the Bondo to bolster their political careers, and this has obvious and significant implications for any campaign against FGCA UN affiliated IRIN news bulletin of 2005 noted that “When the president's wife [Patricia Kabbah] sponsors the circumcision of 1,500 young girls to win votes for her husband, you know you've got a problem persuading ordinary people and the government that female genital mutilation (FGM) is a bad idea. And when the woman who is now Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Women's Affairs, threatens to "sew up the mouths" of those who preach against FGM, you realize that you are facing a really big uphill struggle”.

All of this was further demonstrated in the 2002 general elections when a presidential candidate lost the vote after Bondo members mobilized against him. The candidate in question, Karefa Smart, was married to a white woman who is said to have opposed the Bondo by calling for FGC eradication. This angered the Soweis who accused Karefa-Smart of betraying them:

Interviewee: Karefa Smart (a former presidential candidate) and his wife had the intention to put a stop to Bondo and Poro society. People rejected and he eventually lost the election.

Interviewer: why?

Interviewee: Karefa Smart and his family were members of the Bondo and the Poro, why should he put a stop to our society in Sierra Leone? That is the reason why we striked against him and spoilt his property.

Interviewee: Just call any Soweï and she will tell you what Karefa-Smart went through. For his sake, there was no market. We blocked the road for him not to pass. All this was organized by the Soweis. There was also a song sung by the Soweis against him. It went like this “no to you business, ya na Soweï e business tei go” (meaning Bondo is not your business but Soweï’s business). I don’t think Karefa Smart will ever win any election again in this country. Karefa and his wife were about to challenge the women even when his mother, grandmother and sisters were

members of the Bondo society. His father and grandfather were members of the Poro society. He was also a member of Poro. People said that what came out of his mouth should never be repeated.

Interviewer: Why should Karefa's wife be interested in ending the society?

Interviewer: she was a white woman and not a member of the Bondo society that is why. She was trying to abolish it but she did not succeed. The Soweis mobilized the people to strike against them for what they had said (Interview with Soweis aged 47 living in an IDP camp).

Another respondent indicated that Karefa-Smart had initially placated the Bondo members who in return campaigned passionately for him. This was during Karefa-Smart's first period as a politician in the 1960s during which he served as an acting prime minister (1965-1970) before he joined the World Health Organization (WHO) as an assistant director general in Geneva, Switzerland. He returned to Sierra-Leone to contest the 1996 and 2002 presidential elections. Due to his long history in domestic politics, the Bondo society members had hoped that he would support their society and were thus ready to campaign for him to win the election. According to my respondents, they were surprised when his wife turned against them by condemning FGC. In the 1996 presidential election, Karefa-Smart came second after winning 40.5% of the presidential votes cast. Ahmad Tejan-Kabbah (the eventual winner and president of Sierra Leone from 1996-2007) had 59.5% of the presidential votes. However, in the 2002 election when Karefa-Smart and his wife talked more explicitly about eradication of FGC he only managed to secure 1% of the votes compared to Tejan-Kabbah who got 70.1% of the presidential votes cast. Karefa-Smart's push to end the FGC practice was thus used against him by his opponents. Bondo society members actively mobilized to campaign against his presidency. According to one respondent, the Bondo members violently demonstrated against the presidential candidate and attacked his home before destroying most of his properties. This was done with the express aim of showing their anger against his opposition to the Bondo society:

Karefa-Smart, we were initially so much in love with him (sic) for him to win the election. We don't know if they cook cassava leaf<sup>58</sup> for him or soup, then he said he doesn't want Bondo. The white woman that he came with said she doesn't want to hear about Bondo. Then we said, [asked her] is that so? She said yes. Then we said,

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<sup>58</sup> Cassava leaf is one of the most popular cuisines in Sierra Leone. The suggestion here is that he was enticed by good food such as cassava leaf to turn against the Bondo society.



ok wait. We mobilized and we go after him for three good days. We the Sampas (Bondo dancers) were in line dancing and mobilizing. We checked at his office, then we removed him out and we say no more opposition of Bondo (interview 23 with Soweï aged forty living in an IDP camp).

Several respondents told me more or less the same story about Bondo “resistance” against Karefa Smart.

One respondent narrating about the presidential election of 2002 had this to say:

When Tejan-Kabbah came to see the Soweis, his wife told us that by God’s power if her husband takes power, she will make sure that women’s rights come up in this country (my emphasis). We said (sic) is that true? She said yes. She said, I promise you people, you will join society and everybody in the world will know. Indeed, when Tejan-Kabbah became president, Bondo children, me that is sitting here, I put fifty-three initiates. They were coming with them and hooting car horns. He said we put (sic) more and more and more. Then they booked a park and they sat all over the park. We put so many initiates until we got tired. We went to another town and put again. For a long time he came with the Soweï picture. Tejan-Kabbah’s wife came with plenty (sic) Bondo children. She did everything by herself. She said she was going to pay us. She bought dresses for the children. When the time came, the (sic) population was too much. Like this our sister, she put a hundred and fifty, the other one there put two hundred [...] We went to Waterloo where they had set some new Bondo bush and initiated many; we went to Clay where another Bondo bush donated by Tejan-Kabbah was built. Therefore, we were happy about Tejan-Kabbah and the society. We play for him [entertained him] like he was our Christmas. When the Soko men arrived from the village they came and played with their society (interview with Fatmata on 07/02/2009 a Soweï living in IDP camp aged 40).

What is revealed here, so far as the wider discussion in this thesis is concerned, is the extent to which the issue of women’s rights is conceived differently among different groups. Within the context of a human rights discourse, women’s rights are associated with the principle of choice in sexual and reproductive matters, individual autonomy and gender equality, while for the Bondo members, women rights are seen as entailing the extension of the activities of the Bondo society premised on communal/group engagement.. For the Bondo members, the Bondo society is an arena where they exercise power and are accorded respect and esteemed status, especially the Soweis. Thus a 2002 newspaper

article by Inter Press News Agency reporting on a protest demonstration against anti-FGC activists quoted a respected Soweï who said: “Anybody who does not respect our society does not respect women” (2002, May 11). It is through the Bondo that women have access to both social capital and symbolic power. As Dellenborg (2004:81) has noted: “in contrast to Western belief, excision in the context of secret societies forms the foundation of a certain power base, especially for older women.”

In the subsequent 2007 Sierra Leone presidential election, Tejan-Kabbah’s previous co-optation of the Bondo had raised very high expectations among the Bondo folk. However, his appointed successor Solomon Berewa, commonly known as Solo B, was not enthusiastically supported by the Bondo in the 2007 presidential election despite the support of the incumbent president. It is said that the Bondo members did not vote for Solo B because Kabbah had reneged on one of his campaign promises: the construction of better houses for the Soweïs living in refugee camps when he came into power. When Kabbah eventually became president, he did not build any new houses for his Bondo society supporters living in IDP camps as promised.

Another issue raised was that Soweïs were not paid the monies they expected for the mass initiation drives masterminded by president Kabbah’s wife Patricia. As noted elsewhere in this thesis, Bondo Soweïs charge initiation fees when initiating girls into the secret society. Normally a Soweï would charge at least ten thousand Leones, a bag of rice and some litres of palm oil to initiate one girl. After the mass Bondo initiation, the Soweïs were looking forward to making significant profit on the related initiation fees. At the “going rate” of ten thousand Leones per initiate, the Soweï above who said she initiated 53 girls into the Bondo, for example, would have received 530,000 Leones. Instead Tejan-Kabbah offered only three thousand Leones per initiate without any additional payments in kind of rice or palm oil. As a result, although Tejan-Kabbah enjoyed massive support from the Bondo during his campaign for the presidency, he could not transmit his popularity to his successor so that his SLPP party would retain power in the 2007 election. The then main opposition party APC learnt of the disgruntlement among Bondo members with Tejan-Kabbah and fashioned a campaign that positioned the APC as sympathetic to the Bondo society. A few months before the September 2007 elections, the Child Rights Act had been passed in parliament. The Child Rights Act of 2007 was contentious because section 33 (1) of the act initially had a clause outlawing FGC. The section was later rephrased after angry protests from Bondo members and several members of parliament. The parliamentarians said that if the bill was passed as it was it would have ended their careers as politicians.

The new section 33 (1) now states that “No person shall subject a child to torture or other cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment including any cultural practice which dehumanizes or is injurious to the physical and mental welfare of a child”. The APC spread propaganda to the effect that Tejan-Kabbah’s SLPP had introduced a law in parliament that affected Bondo activities negatively. This propaganda, coupled with the disappointment of the Soweis, was a significant factor in the failure of the SLPP, paving the way for the ascension of the APC to power. Many of my respondents explained this history to me:

We initiated so many but they did not pay us as we expected. When Ernest Bai Koroma (the current president) comes, he will not come empty handed. He will come and give us money. Like me in the A.P.C, I was the queen patron among Soweis during the campaigns. Ernest Bai Koroma (the current president of Sierra Leone) entered hear. He walked on foot and talked to us. He did not oppose our society<sup>59</sup> (emphasis added). He did not even talk about our society. He gave us money and asked us to help him. We cooked so much rice and ate. As for Tejan-Kabbah’s wife when she was full (sic) ready to leave power, Tejan-Kabbah should have talked to us in that good manner but he didn’t (my emphasis). He took power and gave it to Solo Berewa (Solo B). Solo B vied for presidency but he did not do what Ernest did. When Ernest came, he gave us money and we danced for him. We gave him power. He will never talk bad about our society (interview with Salmata, a Soweis living in an IDP camp aged 46). Tejan-Kabbah sponsored many women to come for initiation in our Bondo bush and he built us Bondo bushes and also promised that if he won, he will build better houses for us. I tell you, the Bondo we initiated here was so great, even me, (sic) I became tired. My eyes were dark because of too much work. So we feel bad that we did all that and he did not deliver what he promised. We feel bad. He gave us only three thousand [Leones] per initiate where we normally receive twenty thousand or more when we initiate one girl (Interview 49 focus group with Mende Soweis in Bo).

Similar sentiments were expressed by several other respondents. Although, as we have seen, there is evidence that politicians in postcolonial Sierra Leone have always courted the Bondo – as in the 1970s when the then Prime Minister Dr. Margai promised to send government nurses to the Bondo bush initiation to attend to medical emergencies – Tejan-Kabbah’s involvement with the Bondo was the high point of this appropriation of Bondo

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<sup>59</sup> In the 2007 campaign President Koroma’s party APC made every attempt to dissociate their party and politicians from the Child Rights Act. Indeed in their campaign, they spread word that it is SLPP that had come up with the law. This of course made SLPP very unpopular with the Soweis and Bondo members.

for political gain. It transformed the secret societies into an “apparatus” to expand the state’s ideology (Althusser, 1970) as I will argue below. This is especially the case when you recall, as I pointed out in a previous chapter, that Tejan Kabbah recruited the civil defence forces (CDF) during the war through the Poro secret society while he sidelined the national army. Most respondents narrated Tejan-Kabbah’s involvement with the Bondo in glowing terms. Despite the fact that the Bondo members were disappointed because Tejan-Kabbah did not deliver on his campaign promises to them, they still regard him as the president who heightened the stature of the Bondo in political discourse in post-war Sierra Leone. However, they did not trust that his party would continue to support the Bondo because of his unfulfilled promises:

For example like the former SLPP leader Tejan-Kabbah, everybody knows that he was the leader and he had power. Tejan-Kabbah, we the people are for you today and even tomorrow and we are for you forever (interview 43 with senior Bondo Soweï aged 55 living in IDP camp near the capital city).

This history makes clear the extent to which the Bondo has acquired significant political stature, to the extent that the society was seen as having effectively brought down a presidential candidate. In what follows, I seek to elaborate on this relationship by mapping the way the Bondo is perceived and employed by state actors in post-war Sierra Leone. I accordingly conceptualize the Bondo as having a role similar to that of the “Ideological state apparatus” propounded by Althusser (1970).

### **6.3 The Bondo as a form of “Ideological state apparatus”**

What I have traced so far is the extent to which state actors in Sierra Leone employ the Bondo in search of political power and legitimacy. Weber (in Ikenberry, 2006:56) argued that “there are systematic incentives for rulers to organize power in ways that establish or preserve the legitimacy of government institutions and decision making [...] and cultivate belief in their legitimacy”. In order to grasp this complex situation adequately, I will first explicate further the place of secret societies in post-war Sierra Leone in order to make clear the basis on which the Bondo is employed as a form of ideological state apparatus.

A number of commentators on the war in Sierra Leone viewed the collapse of traditional practices as part of the reason why during the war, children not well socialized through secret societies, turned into murderous rebel soldiers. Fanthorpe, for example, says “The

secret societies have retained a high political profile since the close of the civil war. Conflict-induced displacement was especially traumatic for rural people due to their lack of written guarantees of property and identity...But since the cessation of the conflict, the priority for most Sierra Leoneans has been the re-establishment of the familiar political order based on “primordial” loyalties and secret societies” (2007:12). As noted elsewhere, secret societies such as the Poro were also used to recruit the *Kamajosia* soldiers, later referred to as civil defence forces (CDF), and were actively employed to defeat the RUF during the war (cf Richards, 1996). This is the background, then, to the context described above. As the government continues rebuilding efforts and aims to create cohesion for effective governance, the Bondo is employed in expanding the state’s legitimacy and shaping local discourses especially through its networking abilities. In the context of post-war Sierra Leone where key sectors such as the media were compromised by previous regimes in a way that created mistrust in the populace while education institutions had collapsed, the Bondo became a key component in articulating political discourse. With an education system in tatters, the Bondo was employed by the state as an “apparatus” to legitimise its power and extend the state’s ideology as Althusser (1970) propounded. The state’s main ideology here was that of reconstruction and re-building trust with an aim of entrenching its legitimacy in a country fractured by civil war. Given this background, I now move on to examine how global discourses on FGC interpenetrate with political discourse on the Bondo in contemporary post-war Sierra Leone.



**Figure 6-2: School building destroyed during the war .**

#### **6.4 Intersection of Bondo political discourse with global perspectives on FGC**

I have, up to this point, sketched out the relationship between the Bondo and political actors in the Sierra Leonean context, and particularly since the civil war. We have seen the extent to which such actors make use of the Bondo both in order to mobilise potential supporters and in their search for legitimacy. Such a situation, of course, creates ambiguities because the same actors also need to also recognise and respond to globalised discourses of rights and modernity (Robertson, 1992; Gill and Law 1989:478). The government of Sierra Leone depends on international aid to sustain government operations. Most of the aid comes with conditionalities attached by the donor organizations. Moreover, Sierra Leone has ratified CEDAW and the Maputo convention treaties, both of which call for a ban on FGC. Following the enactment of the anti-FGM law in the USA in 1996, donations, especially from US affiliated agencies, were tied to commitments towards efforts to eliminate the practice of FGC (Boyle, 2005). This condition was bound to be problematic to politicians who came to power riding on the wave of Bondo popularity. Despite the lack of formal education among most Bondo members, a host of Bondo operatives keep them informed about what is happening in the wider political context in Sierra Leone through regular meetings and networks.

In his study of global culture and images of the world, Robertson (1992:398) has argued that there is an increasing homogeneity in the quest for “modernity”. Globalised images of an ideal society and the implied patterns that a society should follow in order to be seen as part of globalised modernity have a sameness to them. This is expressed through metaphors of what the appropriate structure of the world should be: “the legitimacy of societal actions, attributes and trends has increasingly become an issue that is cast in global terms like ‘global public’ and ‘world citizenry’ which have become part of contemporary public discourse” (Robertson,1992:398). It is precisely in relation to such shifts that practices such as FGC have come under scrutiny from both international and local actors culminating in a powerful anti-FGC discourse. With such anti-FGC rhetoric tied to the provision of aid, the government of Sierra Leone has to be seen to be doing something in regard to the practice.

In the year 2000, Equality Now, a USA based International Non-Government Organization (INGO) created a fund to finance grass-root activism against FGM, of which Sierra Leone was a beneficiary. The fund publicised anti-FGC rhetoric and moved discussion of the

FGC procedure into a wider public discourse in Sierra Leone through workshops, seminars and the media. In 2002, after anti-FGC activist and author Dr. Koso-Thomas delivered a seminar paper condemning FGC, it was alleged that the government was about to ban the practice altogether. Bondo society members, led by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Shirley Gbujama, demonstrated along the streets and presented a petition to the president. The president was forced to publicly allay these fear by saying that “he himself was ‘from a traditional background.’” The Bondo members mobilized to protest against the condemnation of FGC:

During Tejan-Kabbah’s reign, Bondo women went to state house because they heard rumours that Kabbah wanted to abolish Bondo. They mobilized and went to the state house. That was in early 2002. The president had to come out of state house and tell the women that it was not true that he wanted to abolish Bondo. A former female minister, Theresa Koroma, the then deputy speaker of parliament joined in the mobilization process. They said they were protecting their culture. They wanted to hear the story about abolishing Bondo from the president himself. The opposition (political parties) jumped on the opportunity to make the president unpopular. Paul Kabbah (a relative of the president) was in the UN and the president’s wife was in the UN too. The UN was fighting Bondo. The president came out and publicly declared to the Bondo women that even him (sic), his mother was a Soweï. This calmed down the tensions (Interview 8 with a Bondo member aged between 30-35 working in the media sector).

What is revealing in the account above is that the protest shifted, from demonstrating against the renowned anti-FGC activist Koso-Thomas, to challenging the president and accusing him of instituting a ban against the procedure. According to this respondent, the Bondo members were able to petition the president to make a claim of allegiance in view of the rumours that the government wanted to abolish Bondo. According to the respondent, this appeared more urgent given the fact that the president’s relatives were working with the UN. To the locals, the UN is an organisation most associated with the discourse against Bondo. Evidently, the issue of FGC has been transformed from a local rite of passage (Van Genneep, 1966) to one of global interest with global actors like UN and countries like the USA supporting the discourse against the practice. Given the place of the Bondo in politics as I have noted above, government state actors are faced with a dilemma in instituting policy. In what follows I explore some of the ambiguities of this situation, using the conception of “state softness” as this plays out in Sierra Leone.

### **6.5 The dilemma of state actors: the case for “state softness”**

The relationship between Sierra Leonean political actors, on the one hand, and local/international actors, on the other, can be conceptualised using Forrest’s (1988) model of state softness in African nations. Forrest (1988) argues that political actors, in their respective countries in Africa, face difficulties in the quest to achieve autonomy in order to implement less palatable government policies (see also Fatton, 1986:63). Forrest (1988:423) maps the impediments in the trajectory towards state hardness among many African states. He notes that: “National leaders remain indebted to grass-root actors who helped them get into leadership positions through political campaigning. This results in patron client relationships which end up straining efforts towards autonomy by state leaders. In other words, leaders risk bearing the brunt of their local level supporters’ disaffection in case they make hard policy decisions”. To maintain the status-quo, he argues, “societal actors and groups” endeavour to keep local institutions independent as opposed to integrating them into the “formal, centralized politico-administrative system.” Relatedly, he argues, leaders often suffer from a crisis of legitimation. Ordinary citizens do not believe that their leaders have their best interests at heart; “they do not effectively employ legitimating ideologies”. This impedes effective administration and governance. Though under the circumstances in Sierra Leone, the Bondo might be an accessible means of extending the state’s objective of legitimising its power, it is arguable that this relationship cuts both ways: the Sierra Leone state is bound by the impediments that result from relying on social actors or groups to gain and consolidate power. In return for their support, the Bondo expect the state and political leaders they lay claim to, to support their operations which include the cultural practice of FGC in spite of donor aid conditionalities and the ratification of international conventions like CEDAW and Maputo. This lends credence to Robertson’s (1992:400) assertion that the market economy constitutes a medium through which universal world images may be perceived. However, Robertson argues that though the market economy may represent a “universalistic, potentially global social interaction and exchange”, it may represent a “dangerous intrusion on traditional forms of sociality and solidarity” (Ibid). This certainly describes the case of Sierra Leone. International discourse on FGC shaped by world images of an FGC free world endeavours to “restructure global change” in Sierra Leone through “normative” (international treaties) and “material dimensions” (making efforts to end FGC a precondition for receiving donor aid). Conversely, in doing so, they affect “traditional forms of sociality and solidarity” as



constituted by the Bondo society and put ‘soft’ states like Sierra Leone in an contradictory position. State actors find themselves in a dilemma given that they are still beholden to the interests of their local level supporters and are thus hampered in steering the state to “global modernity”. Political actors have thus resorted to employ “traditional modernity”. This is a strategy that is propagated by ambivalent tendencies. In order to keep the balance between appeasing traditional actors, and Political actors are therefore placed in a situation where they are required to behave in an ambivalent manner. It is this ambivalence which I consider next.

## **6.6 Ambivalence as a political practice**

Following Merton (1976:18), ambivalence can be understood as a social device, “for helping people in designated statuses to cope with the contingencies that they face in trying to fulfil their functions.” In Sierra Leone, given the context sketched out above, ambivalence has evolved into a central strategy employed by politicians in order to retain power. The “role-relations” (Nuckolls 1996:117-118), politicians operate in, are such that they have to appease the Bondo members and also assuage themselves to the demands of the donors who have placed conditions in relation to the ending of FGC as a basis for granting donor funds. By “role-relations” Nuckolls conceptualizes a situation where one reconciles contradictory beliefs in a particular subject position in order to perform a given task effectively within a particular cultural context (Ibid). Nuckolls specifically discusses a situation in which people have different conceptions of values depending on their worldviews, some of which are opposed to each other. The result of these inconsistencies, he argues (following Weber) is a paradox that is resolved by compromises which eventually leads to new knowledge systems sustained by the tensions inherent in attaining a cultural goal. Stated differently, no culture is an “open and shut case” (1996:30). This neatly describes the situation of government leaders in Sierra Leone. Even among Bondo members, as we have seen, especially the Soweis, there are vested and contending interests. This “conditions” the strategies employed by politicians in the quest to legitimate their rule in order to govern effectively. The result is a resort to ambivalence. A 2009 newspaper report sums up this ambivalence displayed by politicians in regard to the issue of FGC. It says “A recent Sierra Leone Child Rights Bill dropped any mention of FGM at the last minute, and politicians – including President Ernest Bai Koroma – baulk at the mention of the subject. When I asked President Koroma – whose country receives more aid

per person from Britain than any other donor recipient – about his position on the practice [of FGC], it was the first time I saw the usually affable leader lost for words. Unable to reach for his usually ubiquitous wide toothy smile, he meandered awkwardly through an answer: "Let people in civil society deal with this issue<sup>60</sup>." The ambiguous response by the president when confronted with this question by referring to an unspecified "civil society" signifies the complexities of this issue. Remember also as respondent (interview 24) above said, the incumbent president enlisted Soweis' support but never at any time "opposed the Bondo society", indeed he used to give them cash handouts, in a way that could be read as implicitly approving the Soweis' activities, whenever he visited them, in spite of having enacted the Child Right's Act. At the same time, this ambivalence can be perceived as manipulation. Within Bondo ranks, there are those who see this dithering as a contributing factor to the recent somewhat cynical treatment of the Bondo by politicians.

Below are some accounts of how Bondo members perceive politicians.

The politicians sign treaties where they say that they are going to stop it yet they are the same ones who say they are going to support us. That is why we are treating them like black plastic bag (my emphasis). Because, how can you stop someone from where she is surviving from, when you know you don't have anything to give them. After we've helped you to win your election, instead of you helping us, you turn around to suffer us (sic). That is stupid (interview with Sonyampa, a Mende Soweis age 38 living in an IDP camp).

The Bondo members support politicians who approach them. However, as soon they win the election, they forget about us. They don't keep to the promises they make. Then, soon you will now hear them campaign against the Bondo saying they should demolish the Bondo bush and that we should stop practicing our culture. They soon forget all the promises they have made. That is why we have stopped encouraging politicians into our Bondo bush, we have said to all Soweis not to encourage politicians into their Bondo bushes. I swear to God we are suffering because we do not have the upper hand (emphasis added). We don't have enough and when we

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<sup>60</sup> See Genital mutilation: Women fight Africa's taboo. By Katrina Manson in Sierra Leone. Friday, 27 February 2009 accessed from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/genital-mutilation-women-fight-africas-taboo-1633423.html> on 02/06/2011.

See also "SIERRA LEONE: Genital Mutilation: Women Fight Africa's Taboo." [http://www.fgmnetwork.org/gonews.php?subaction=showfull&id=1237917951&archive=&start\\_from=&ucat=1&](http://www.fgmnetwork.org/gonews.php?subaction=showfull&id=1237917951&archive=&start_from=&ucat=1&) on 2/6/2011. © 2003 The FGC Education and Networking Project.

have, all we think of is about our children. We want them to have good education like other children (Interview 45 with Mende Sowe aged 58 living in an IDP camp).

The excerpts from the respondents above draw our attention to the way the issue of Bondo is “used” to suit different interests, and in a way that is often felt to be far from those of the women who are members of the society. On the one hand, as has been shown above, Bondo members are quite capable of exerting pressure on politicians as captured by the statements in italics: “...That is why we are treating them like black plastic bag”. However, they also act from a position of relative limitation as noted by respondent (interview 45) above. What is crucial to recognise in this respect, is that the Bondo members primary influence on politicians is exercised during electioneering, after which their power in relation to politicians is more constrained. Though the Bondo women frame the terms of interaction and are in possession of symbolic power that is sought after by the politicians, their power is also curtailed by their weak economic situation. When it matters, the Bondo society women are limited due to their poverty. This situation makes it easier for the politicians to manipulate relations with the Bondo society in their own interests. They do this by making them believe that they are protecting the interests of the Bondo while simultaneously signing treaties and laws that the Bondo society consider unfavourable to its interests.

In light of the international media scrutiny on FGC, politicians try to hide their tacit support for the Bondo so that they do not upset the international donors on whom they rely for funds. In such cases, the politicians in addition to employing a kind of “double speak” also make use of surrogates to endear themselves to the Bondo society members. They will thus use their wives or female relatives, who are invariably Bondo members to seek the support of the Bondo, just as the late wife of President Tejan Kabbah did when he sponsored mass Bondo initiation, while allowing themselves to appear detached from the interests of the society. This is an equivalent tactic to President Koroma’s dismissal of FGC as a matter for “civil society”. This scenario, therefore, brings us to the question as to how the dynamic of ambivalence lends itself to governance such that political actors are hesitant in pursuing state hardness by instituting policies deemed unpalatable to the Bondo.

## **6.8 Patronage as state security: The Bondo as a security issue.**

As will be clear, the relationship between the Bondo and the state is complex with several other dimensions, some of which I will consider here. For example, there have been instances of aggrieved people suing the Bondo when they feel that their rights have been violated. However, on many occasions, such cases have been frustrated or thrown out of judicial hearing. Most cases involving the secret societies have to go through a state counsel who decides whether or not the case can be heard in court. From the accounts of some of my respondents, it is clear that the state counsel has thwarted cases implicating members of the Bondo society either by endlessly deferring the cases in question or by having case files go missing. Some cases, moreover, are dismissed outright on the grounds that they might infringe state security. One human rights activist who underwent Bondo initiation but has since denounced her Bondo membership had this to say:

The state council endorses cases that are to be prosecuted. However, when it comes to Bondo cases, if the Bondo issues are not family related, then that is not a case, even though there could be a life threatened. This also applies in cases where there is a wounding. No criminal charges are pressed. This is our frustration and dilemma even when we have spent so much money from the donors to reform our system (interview 62 on 19/03/09 with a human rights activist aged 48).

In spite, then, of the impact of the human rights discourse and the ratification of international treaties to uphold women's human rights, public officials "shield" the Bondo from prosecution as a way of repaying the support Bondo gives to the government. This is a key factor slowing down the momentum which human rights activists hope to achieve as they strive to attain social change concerning the FGC procedure.

Another example of how the state counsel frustrates cases became evident to me when I was invited by a human rights activist to attend a court hearing regarding a woman who had been forcefully initiated by the Bondo members against her will. To make a statement, several activists from different organizations arranged to converge at the local court in Bo dressed in black. The activists sat on one side of the court room and filled the court such that there was no space for others to sit down. Relatives of people who had other cases were forced to stand outside the door to the court or peer through the court window in order to follow the proceedings. Several different cases were heard that day but when it came to the Bondo case in question, the court prosecutor announced that the case could not proceed because the plaintiff's file was missing. This was despite the fact that lawyers for the complainant had been assured that the case would proceed since it had been adjourned

several times before (Field notes 29/02/2009). Such events are one outcome of the ambiguity discussed above; the lack of a consistent stance against FGC at the national level. As noted above, though the state frames the terms of negotiation, it lacks “state hardness” (Forrest, 1988) to implement “tough” policy prescriptions such as upholding other women’s human rights when such rights conflict with the operations of the Bondo society. The states’ ambivalent position thus means that it is unlikely to enforce any anti-FGC law in a rigorous way

The vague and ambiguous wording of the law touching on FGC subsumed under the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007 is another outcome of the tensions and contradictions in this situation. The net effect of this scenario is a stand-off between the anti-FGC campaigns and Bondo followers such that it becomes hard to measure the effectiveness of the anti-FGC campaign on the target group. The multiple legal ambiguities arise out of the fact that, in addition to the fact that the law is vaguely constituted (no child shall be subjected to harmful traditional practices without consent); there is remarkable ambivalence in implementing the law itself. Implementation and dissemination of the law has mainly relied on the human rights discourse revolving around the question of consent. However, proponents of FGC and Bondo supporters equally appropriate the human rights idioms by alluding to their communal and individual rights as reasons to carry on with the FGC practice, as we have seen. Boyle and Preves (2000) have pointed out the importance of law in eradication efforts. In this case, however, although the Child Rights law has foregrounded a concept of human rights, implicitly against FGC, implementation of the ban against the Bondo ritual cutting is hampered by the number of stillborn cases in which the Bondo stands accused. However, despite these frustrations in capitalising on momentum generated by the law that criminalises initiation of minors, it is true that this legal measure has, as predicted by Boyle and Preves, opened up spaces for human rights activists to engage with the practitioners in some respects.

## **6.7 Patron-client relationship as state co-optation of the Bondo**

State patronage masked as security can also take the form of a patron-client axis. Scholars have indicated that “rulers enjoy legitimacy when the values that they espouse correspond with the values of those they rule” (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990:290). Ikenberry and Kupchan further argue that socialization and normative orientation into new hegemonic forms is most likely to occur shortly after war (1990:292). Studies have indicated that in

patron/client relationships, the political powers employ a strategy of “accommodation with and acceptance of the traditional conservative classes” to legitimize their rule (Fatton, 1986:63). Below I explore the case of patron-client arrangement in regard to the state and Bondo society.

Most of the forms of political co-optation that morph into patron-clientelist arrangements are made possible, at least in part, by the way in which locals conceive of power. As noted before, it is not easy to ascend to political leadership positions without first becoming a member of either the Bondo or Poro. Once one gains a political position, normally after being endorsed by the secret societies, the Bondo or Poro members lay claim and “ownership” to the politicians in power. They accordingly conceptualize the politician as a patron who in turn reciprocates by handing down cash rewards, giving the members tokens of appreciation and recognition and most importantly, by supporting the activities of the secret society. It is by virtue of this relationship that a patron also lays claim to the support of society members in political campaigns. The more clients a politician has, the more secure his political position becomes. (See for example Watkins and Swindler (2007)). This largely explains why the government, in one way or the other seeks to ‘protect’ the Bondo and is so ambivalent in relation to eradication campaigns. Thus, for example, a 2008 newspaper<sup>61</sup> quotes a government minister saying the government is committed to banning FGC, and yet in 2009 cases of human rights violation such as that of the journalist who was molested by the Soweis that I discussed in a previous chapter, have not led to any criminal prosecutions. For their part, whenever the Bondo Soweis sense a lack of support from politicians, they feel aggrieved and accuse the later:

“Some politicians want to get support from us and others [politicians] just want to spoil” (focus group 4 with Mende Soweis on 05/03/09).

Similar kinds of relationship have been discussed in other African contexts, such as the case of the marabouts in Senegal who play a significant role in shaping the “social field” of politics in that country (Fatton, 1986:67; Forrest, 1988:429). Marabouts in Senegal, just like the Bondo in Sierra Leone, have a large following in the villages. On the basis of their

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<sup>61</sup> See online news article titled: *Sierra Leone government to ban female circumcision: minister* which says “The new government in Sierra Leone has vowed to outlaw female circumcision... The social welfare minister Haja Musu Kandeh said the government ‘has an expressed commitment to ban the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM).’ She did not state when the ban would take effect... But several FGM practitioners were swift to criticise the upcoming ban. ‘It is our culture and we should be allowed to continue it,’ circumciser Mamy Vandí said. Another is worried about losing her livelihood. ‘This is how I make my living. If they take it away from me, I shall be a pauper overnight,’ she said. Source: AFP - 5 February 2008. Accessed on 28/5/2011 from <http://www.forwarduk.org.uk/news/news/172>

position, they can, therefore, improve a politician's prospect among village voters or destroy it. They command a great deal of respect which they use to shape opinion and political discourse in the rural areas (ibid).

In another focus group meeting held with Bondo members, Soweis and human rights activists, it was clear that the Bondo members felt slighted because they had not been consulted before the law on harmful traditional practices was enacted. The initial Child's Rights bill was changed and re-worded after it emerged that there was going to be a serious backlash from the Bondo secret society. The original bill expressly outlawed FGC but was massively opposed. It is only when "eradication of FGC" was conceptualised as Child Rights that the bill passed into law. The changes, therefore, represent evidence of the effectiveness of a form of resistance to the efforts to end the practice of FGC:

Even the president Ernest Bai Koroma (current president), knows we have changed a lot of people to his side in this country and have supported his government over time. Now it is your turn Ernest Bai Koroma. Why are you going to sign the paper outlawing this thing? Mind you, you met us doing this thing (the Bondo society business). Then, now they say, if we say no, maybe they will put us in prison? Is that what you mean? (Focus group 3 on 14/02/ 2009 in Bo comprised of Bondo Soweis and human rights activists).

The Soweis' anger was sparked when the focus group facilitator (a human rights activist) told the Soweis that they might be prosecuted in court if they initiate young girls because it was now against the law (Field notes 14/02/2009). My sense was that this development caught the Soweis by surprise because they assumed that the government would necessarily support their society. The comments above seem to indirectly address the president by reminding him that he needs to return the favour they showed him.

In another focus group meeting held at the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children Affairs in Bo, members unanimously agreed that the main obstacle to dealing with violation and the infringement of human rights in relation to FGC was a lack of political will to deal with the secret societies' aggression. The focus group was attended by "stakeholders" (mainly members of various NGOs in Bo intervening in human rights and gender issues). Also in attendance were ministry officials from the Social Welfare and Gender matters office in Bo. The objective of the focus group was to map out strategies to deal with the increased cases of Bondo and Poro aggression. Only two weeks before the focus group, a girl had been raped on the pretext that she had said negative things about the

Poros and therefore warranted punishment. The unfortunate girl was seated pensively in a parked jeep that belonged to an NGO that had “rescued” her. During the focus group, male officials (all of whom were Poros members) lamented the fact that the Poros society had been tarnished by the incident. They insisted on the respectability of the Poros society and condemned government officials who were protecting the perpetrators of the crime by not allowing the case to go to court.

After the focus group, while having “small talk”, many of the people in attendance made clear to me that they felt that this case was a litmus test to highlight the fact that the human rights discourse was not just empty rhetoric but could guarantee security. They vowed to pressure the state counsel to prosecute the case and charge the offenders. However, by the time I left the “field”, six months after the focus group meeting, the case had still not been prosecuted (field notes) as the respondent below confirmed to me.

The case of the girl violated by people claiming to act on behalf of the Poros is moving very slowly. Part of the reason why the case has died is because the state counsel says it involves the secret society. Issues to do with secret societies and other integral cultural practices are normally handled with care (interview 66 on 16/08/2009 with an NGO operative intervening in FGC issues in Bo).

Three other respondents gave me similar reason as to why cases involving the secret societies are treated differently from other cases. Below is an excerpt of an interview I had with a policeman working in the Family Support Unit where such cases are first reported.

Interviewee: Even the magistrate or the lawyer might be a member of that culture. He/she will not like to expose their society, even though they are, you know, these are professions. That is why normally, we refer to the state counsel for advice.... For us, whereas the police have charged the case, it will go to the court, then the case can be referred back to the state counsel, in case they need advice on it (Interview 59 pg 171).

The policeman, in addition to hinting at lack of political willingness to prosecute cases involving secret societies, also cites the conflict of interest relating to most government bureaucrats, many of whom are members of the major secret societies.

As noted above, the Bondos, through their networking and mobilization skills, have social capital to court voters in political campaigns. The state also “co-opts” the Bondos to shape local discourses, as it endeavours to achieve a form of hegemonic control (Gramsci et al,



1971) and as a kind of “ideological state apparatus”, legitimizing its rule, especially in the context of post-war Sierra Leone. In the context of a war ravaged and displaced people, the secret societies represent a form of “primordial loyalty” which offers the promise of social stability. However, all the power and influence the Bondo has accrued and enjoyed has received a “reality check” following the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007.

### **6.8 Double appropriation of the “rights” discourse: the case of Bondo society**

Wide reading of the Child Rights law brackets FGC as a harmful traditional practice. This is due to the presumed negative health effects and complications associated with FGC that have been extensively documented in anti-FGC literature (Jones et al, 1999; Toubia, 1994; Kun, 1997; Yount and Abraham, 2007). Though the law does not explicitly ban FGC, it will be considered unlawful if performed on a minor. This law has caused shockwaves across the Bondo society. In the course of my fieldwork, most of the initiators I met were exasperated at the changes orchestrated by the Child Rights Act. To Soweis, outlawing of FGC would mean a significant loss of income, social prestige and political influence. Anti-FGC campaigners have since designed their campaigns in line with the Child Rights Act. They are now asking the Soweis to allow girls grow to the age of majority and give their consent before they can be initiated into the Bondo. The logic in this campaign rests on the fact that as the girls attain majority age they are likely to encounter the general discourse of “rights” a significant amount of education highlighting the risks of FGC is now being carried out in schools and colleges. From the point of view of those working to change the practice, it is hoped that by the time the Soweis get ready to initiate the girls at eighteen years, they will refuse to be initiated as a result of these education campaigns. The FGC reform agencies are, therefore, engaged in a kind “double discourse” in their eradication campaign. Probably because of the polarised atmosphere marked by Bondo aggression towards the anti-FGC discourse, reform activists now face a “double bind” situation. Their response is to appear to be giving ground to the people defending the FGC practice by accepting the possibility of girls being initiated at the age of eighteen and above. However, in practice, anti-FGC activists hope to use the space provided by possible acceptance of this principle to provide young girls with reasons as to why they should not be initiated into Bondo. In this way, they hope to end the practice and bring about social change. This “ambivalent” strategy seems to be more acceptable to the many Soweis who are, of course, not privy to the hidden agenda of the reform agencies. To them, the face value of the idea that they can initiate girls, but only those who have attained majority age is tolerable. After all, historically girls used to be initiated in readiness for marriage, girls initiated then were mature girls who could grasp the teachings and meanings associated with being a Bondo initiate.

This new development has, however, not gone completely unchecked by followers of Bondo. Indeed, since the inception of calls for FGC eradication in the early 1990s spearheaded by people like Koso-Thomas, a section of Bondo society Soweis saw the need

to strategize in order to counter these developments. A group of Soweis mobilised fellow leaders to form a national organisation for Soweis. Christened the Bondo Sowei council, this organization has grown in stature over the years and is now designated as the alternative voice to counter the discourse on FGC eradication. Prior to the enactment of the Child Rights Act, the Sowei council was instrumental in prevailing upon political actors to expunge the wording FGM from the original bill. With the enactment of the Child Rights Act, the Sowei council's role in resisting change has become even more crucial. Threatened by the changes the new law proposes, the Bondo Sowei council is mobilizing its members who come from different parts of Sierra Leone to challenge the law through a mixture of resistance, negotiation and collaboration. In the next chapter, I analyse the discourse of the Sowei council in order to decipher how the Sowei council coheres its membership across different regions of the country as it seeks to "protect" its influence in post-war Sierra Leone.

## **6.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have mapped out the complicated relationship between the Bondo and the political actors in post-war Sierra Leone. I began by noting the historical basis of Bondo influence on politics since pre-colonial days; the Bondo (alongside the Poro) were the main forms of community organisation. This position was further cemented during the colonial era in which the colonial government's indirect rule employed some aspects of the secret societies in conjunction with village chiefs to collect tax, including marriage fees paid before Bondo initiation and Bondo licence fees. This close connection between chiefs who are the main link to central government and the Bondo society has over the years built the "political" profile of the Bondo society. I went on to discuss the ways in which, contemporarily, the Bondo has come to play a role as something akin to an ideological state apparatus, especially in the fragile context of post-war Sierra Leone. I have also pointed out how state softness gives the Bondo a context in which they can make or break political careers. Nevertheless, faced with financial pressure to service the recurrent budget the government has had to make "unpopular" choices such as the enactment of the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007. FGC has thus become a site of struggle between national politicians, international actors who want the FGC practice banned and the adherents of Bondo who stand to lose their symbolic power as the anti-FGC campaign makes strides towards achieving social change. In spite of the influence and close connection with power

that the Bondo society has accrued over the years, the recent enactment of the child rights law threatens to change the cultural landscape in ways that will impact negatively on the Bondo. The situation creates ambiguities and contradictions in various directions – not just in the “double Speak” or evasions used by politicians, but also by the eradication campaign itself. As we have seen, activists have increasingly sought, not to attack FGC itself, but to push for a change based around a legally defined age of consent. On their part, the Bondo have strategized to resist changes proposed to FGC. I note that these strategies of dealing with the changes the Child Act portends are organised by a meeting together of Soweis from different parts of Sierra Leone constituted as Sowei council. It is this Sowei council that I explore in the next chapter with a view to understanding how it co-ordinates and coheres its vast members as they negotiate change through instances of resistance and collaboration.

## CHAPTER 7

### Sowei Council and the Politics of Collaboration

#### 7.0 Sowei council and the anti-FGC discourse

As pointed out in the previous chapter, the Sowei council positions itself as a medium for counter discourse to the anti-FGC rhetoric channelled through the media, NGO-sponsored workshops and in more general public discussion. This is especially the case following the enactment of the law that prohibits initiation of minors into the Bondo society. The changes brought about by the Child Rights Law have been met by acts of resistance and aggression that are articulated and given publicity by the Sowei council. In a sense, then, the Sowei council is deliberately trying to match the media strategies of those opposed to the practice (especially INGOs/NGOs activists), by giving the adherents of Bondo society a “formal” public presence. Accordingly, the Sowei council, just like anti-FGC activists, engages the media and is open for invitations to conferences and workshops where its spokeswomen articulate the “Bondo side of the story on FGC” in Sierra Leone. One key point of contention from the Sowei council’s perspective is the perception that concerted “exposure” of FGC in the media constitutes a form of abuse. This perceived attack has been met with anger, violence and aggression by Bondo loyalists. Indeed, as I argue below, the idea of being “*exposed*” in the media has been turned into a kind of symbolic call to arms in order to galvanise members by the Sowei council. This chapter, therefore, seeks to examine the different ways through which the Sowei council coheres the group and presents a common front in their claims of resistance against the impact of anti-FGC discourse and changes brought about by the Child Rights Law in particular.

#### 7.1 Origin and organisational structure of the Sowei council

The Sowei council was borne after a brain-storming workshop held in 1993 at the Yin Yu building in Freetown spear-headed by, amongst others, the prominent anti-FGC activist and author, Koso-Thomas. In that workshop, to which key Bondo society officials were invited, the Soweis said they would not stop the practice. Faced with accusations of harmful health effects and human rights violations associated with the practice, the Soweis in attendance saw the need to rally their fellow Soweis across Sierra Leone to

form an umbrella body in order to articulate their position and “defend” the Bondo against the challenge posed by people like Koso-Thomas. Koso-Thomas, according to one Soweï council member, was a Krio and therefore “knew nothing about the Bondo”. The Soweï council was thus conceived as a mouth-piece for the articulation of Bondo society concerns and as a means of fending off criticisms levelled against the Bondo society. At the same, clearly, it was developed in response to a perception that the means of making such a case in the Sierra Leonean public required a new kind of organisational approach.

During my fieldwork, I attended a consultative focus group meeting organised by a high profile international organisation bringing together NGO officials interceding in FGC issues and the Soweï council. The aim of the focus group was to engage the Soweï council on the implications of the Sierra Leonean Child Rights Act. I learned, in this context, that the Soweï council was registered with the Ministry of Social Welfare. The council also has a clear organisational structure comprising twelve different locations in Sierra-Leone. This is attested by the response of a Soweï I interviewed in Bo

Interviewer: Why did the Soweï council register with the ministry of social welfare?

Interviewer: Oh well, yes because anything that you do you have to make the government know. The social welfare usually represents the government to the people so they just have to register, so that they get the awareness and give us licence (interview 26 on 03/03/09).

The respondent above seems to suggest that the Soweï council registered with the ministry to legitimate Soweï’s engagement with the government. The government in this context should be read as encompassing any entity that intersects with Bondo society activities like the powerful rhetoric against the FGC practice. The italicised statement “*so that they get the awareness and give us licence*” appears to indicate that the Soweï council’s aim is to articulate Bondo society activities in public discourse with an express aim of endorsing such activities. Another respondent, a human rights activist argues that the Soweï council was registered with the ministry of social welfare because of Bondo’s involvement with key politicians.

Interviewer: the Soweï council is registered with the ministry of social services, how did that happen?

Interviewee: It was registered as a CBO (community based organisation) or as an organisation which has to do with helping women [...] it is the ministers who have

promoted Bondo in this country in social welfare (Interview with Elissa on 29/03/09, a gender rights activist woman aged 36 working with an international organisation).

The Freetown Soweï council is vested with the role of coordinating the membership of the Soweï council across the country. It is mainly charged with articulating public responses to issues pertinent to the Soweïs. Any binding decisions are arrived at after careful and engaged consultation with other Soweï council chapters from different parts of the country (Field notes). For instance in a different focus group in which a group of human rights based NGOs approached the Soweïs in regard to making a public declaration to stop initiating girls below the age of eighteen years, the Soweïs in question stated that they had to contact all the members of the Soweï council from all regions in Sierra Leone before agreeing to such a deal. One of the participants said

That is why we should have declared saying we are not speaking on behalf of the Soweï council. On that we have to hold a separate meeting and send messages to the 12 zones of the Soweï council, we can't just take decisions on behalf of them without their knowledge (Focus group 4 discussion with Mende Soweï's in Bo and NGO officials. Focus group held on the 12th February 2009).

The Soweï council is, therefore, structurally organised around a consortium of Soweïs from different parts of the country, especially those living in the capital city. The leadership comprises a Soweï council president, vice-president, a public relations officer (PRO), an organising secretary and a treasurer. The headquarters of the Soweï council are at a location in Freetown next to what is said to be the oldest Bondo bush, having been in existence, reputedly, for over a hundred years. There are Soweï council branches all over the country which are normally located in designated Soweï council member's homes. The age of the leaders of the Soweï council, I was told, ranges between 48-72 years. A number of the Soweï council leaders were said to be literate and experienced in canvassing. Many are used to attending workshops and symposia on the issue of FGC in various contexts. The spokesperson of the Soweï council said:

From 1993, when the Soweï council started, it is just that I have forgotten the pictures at home, I should have showed you people, the time that we went to state house, we told Koso-Thomas to stop talking about Bondo (Soweï council PRO).

Though the objective of the meeting I have described was to deliberate on the implications of the Child Rights Law on the Bondo, this came immediately after a

Soweis' protest in Kenema (South-Eastern Sierra Leone) hardly two weeks previously. The protests in Kenema were marked by pandemonium. As discussed in chapter five, the show of resistance against the anti-FGC message culminated in a local journalist, thought to be the presenter of the FGC zero tolerance program on radio, being humiliated in public.

In the course of the meeting, the Sowei council PRO was in charge of proceedings. She was a confident and well spoken lady of middle age. She started off by introducing officials of the Sowei council present at the meeting and referred to some of the objectives of the Sowei council:

In 1993, we formed the Sowei council. It was formed for occasions like these where everybody will be found. We will all be able to support each other in times of funerals and other things. It is not just about the Bondo all the time, so that was why we formed the council then to take over all control over all things (my emphasis). In 1993 we attended a seminar at the Yin Yu building for seven days. The Chinese doctor told us what he wanted and we in return told him what we wanted. But because our people are now part of this, they are now trying to fine tune it again (the Child Rights Act of 2007). They are trying to destroy everything because they like telling more than what they should do. They did not call us. We were just hearing it on radio. We were going to these radio stations to respond. I heard a program on CTN/UN radio [according to the Bondo members, it is this program that led to Sowei members in Kenema to harass one journalist who works for CTN/UN radio] and I went to their offices at the campus<sup>62</sup> and told them that I wanted to respond to that program (Transcribed record of the events).

As I argued in chapter four, the advent of the war and of anti-FGC campaigns is seriously changing the way in which FGC is practiced. Parents increasingly initiate very young girls, partly as an act of "resisting" the anti-FGC discourse, but also in order to save on the cost of initiation as noted by the respondent below.

The Bondo has changed such that now unlike in the olden days, some parents initiate young girls so as not to be blamed by their ancestors in case they do not initiate their daughter if FGC is outlawed. It is also thought that initiating young girls is cheaper

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<sup>62</sup> CTN studios are located at the University of Sierra Leone - Fourah-Bay College . The radio station was donated by the UN as part of post-war reconstruction funding for a new faculty of media studies and communication at the flagship Fourah Bay College .



than initiating mature girls when it comes to dressing them up in the coming out ceremony. The young girls are the ones who have exposed the society but girls who are mature have some sense and they do not reveal society secrets (Interview 46 on 18/02/09 with Soweï aged 36 of Mende origin but living at an IDP camp). If you initiate a kid, they [parents] are afraid of the expenditure that is why but if she is grown up, they have to spend lots of money (proceedings of Soweï council consultative meeting),

The Soweï council thus seeks to co-ordinate and “control” activities of the Bondo society in light of opposition from anti-FGC activists but also in the context of these changes to the political economy of the practice. It has come to be seen as something akin to a “safe-house” from which the female initiators respond to criticisms levelled against their practices. Such responses take on different forms including passive resistance, violent protest, as well as forms of collaboration. To effectively “defend their culture” or “resist” the anti-FGC rhetoric, the Soweï council endeavours to appeal to its members by claims about tradition. This is done by the Soweï council insisting in their discourse that they represent the sole “authentic” voice of the Bondo society. Indeed as some of my respondents told me, the Soweï council is central in administering Bondo sanctions.

If we get to know someone who has come spying into the Bondo bush, before doing anything we will first report the matter to the chief and the chief will call the family members and tell them that your child has offended the society. If the family wants peace, they will come with the child who visited the bush when she was not allowed because she is a non-initiate, then they will be asked to pay money to the Soweï council. Normally the Soweï council is the last/ final stage where they will pay (Interview with Sonya on the 01/07/2009, a Soweï aged 47 living at IDP).

They also dismiss any other information in the media about the Bondo unless it has been sanctioned by them. The emergence of the council thus raises questions, not only about relations between the Bondo and non-members, but also about authority and control within the Bondo itself. In what follows I explore different ways in which the Soweï council seeks to cohere its membership and present itself as the representative and defender of the Bondo tradition across Sierra Leone.

## **7.2 Soweï council strategies of enhancing group coherence and co-ordination**

Owing to the differences in the way that the Bondo society is organised across different regions, the Soweï council officials frame their language in such a way that these crosscut regional differences in order to enhance co-ordination. Thus, much of the discourse in the Soweï council gravitates around issues of tradition, culture and ancestry. The position of the council is presented and legitimated as “authentic”, “local” or “African” in regard to FGC and Bondo society operations. This is done in such a way that any information from the radio or, indeed from anti-FGC actors such as Koso-Thomas, is represented as misguided or as, in some respect, “inauthentic”. At the same time, of course, appeals to traditional authority or “authenticity” are also appeals about internal unity. The question, then, is how does the Soweï council manage the regional differences in the way the Bondo is practiced in order to present itself as the legitimate voice of the Bondo “resistance”, while at the same time mobilising effectively against the powerful international discourse regarding FGC practice? I suggest that this is done through the generation of what has been called common knowledge (Chwe, 2003), and through the interaction and interpenetration of discourses through networks. Below I will use various scholarly arguments about symbolic communication in order to conceptualise the strategies of the Soweï council.

Chwe’s (2003) analysis of what he calls “common knowledge” shows how collective action takes place, and the extent to which individuals offer to participate in something precisely because they know that someone else is also participating in it. He points out that public rituals, close reciprocal interactions, networks and repetition in discourse are crucial elements in shaping “common knowledge”. Using the example of corporate bodies, Chwe argues that multinational companies pay huge amounts of money to advertise in the most popular TV broadcasts. The logic of paying premium prices in order to secure an advertisement slot in such TV shows is that they are effective translators of “common knowledge”. In the same way, Chwe points out that the key texts of public ritual, such as national anthems, are punctuated with repetition, which also serves to generate common knowledge. Such aspects of “common knowledge” creation are evident in the Bondo Soweï council operations and discourse. For instance, the Soweï council PRO’s opening statement during the consultative meeting appeals directly to the notion of a common knowledge:

This place we are meeting is called K. This is where the women live and base. There is no woman living in this area that does not know this place. I am the PRO and my name is P. I am also called W. In the council, we are here with our president and the vice-president is living at XY (the members clap). We also have our chairlady madam B, our assistant PRO, our organizer, the treasurer and a dignified Soweï council member aged 72 years (people laughing). So all these people belong to this place (Soweï council PRO).

One can see here how these opening statements are aimed at creating a sense of common knowledge which is, in some respects, binding on those addressed. Members are supposed to feel that all women know this place and therefore if as a woman you are here, you are part of the larger picture that encompasses all women. Implicitly, therefore, those women who are not there or do not know the place are “missing out” or are positioned outside of a form of necessary knowledge or shared understanding. Ironically, the meeting was being held in Freetown, home to the Krio (the only community in Sierra Leone that does not have Bondo society culture).



**Figure 7-1: Aerial view of Freetown and next are Soweï council members in a meeting held at a Freetown ‘Bondo bush’**

Nevertheless, the PRO was keen to underscore the fact that all women were in league with the Soweï council and, therefore, that the council was where women belonged: that every woman knew the Soweï council headquarters. As she says “it is where the women live and

base". In a sense, then, the Sowe council PRO is appealing to the "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006 [1983]) of Sierra Leonean women. By positioning her "creation of common knowledge" thus, her message becomes compelling, inviting the listener to subjectively immerse themselves in the community of Bondo society women (c.f. Ferguson, 2009). This common knowledge thus created is intensified and diffused through networks to consolidate coherence and coordination. Networks are fostered by linguistic codes to "blend idioms" into "condensed symbols" (Ansell, 1997:361-362; Turner, 1986: 29). For example, as we have seen throughout this thesis the idioms of "disgracing our society", "defending our culture" and "exposing" the society are frequently used by Bondo society adherents to structure the discourse of "resistance" against the anti-FGC discourse. Below is one of the many instances the idiom of disgrace and expose are applied to justify defence of culture.

Interviewer: Why are there seeming tensions and differences within the Bondo such that some members are being punished in spite of them being Bondo members?

Interviewee: You know Bondo is a place of peace and unity and once you join the Bondo you take an oath to keep the society secrets intact. You should not reveal the society secrets even to your husband so it is not right that the NGOs are talking about it and they are discussing and exposing it over the radio, so the women will go against the people who disgrace them even if you are a woman and a member, they will not spare you (Interview with Rebeba on 12/03/09, a Mende woman aged 32).

As is evident in the excerpt above, these idioms have been condensed into statements against public discussion and portrayals of the Bondo by the mass media. I will discuss this in more detail below.

According to Ansell, linguistic codes structure different social interactions and relationships based on underlying presumptions about how different people relate to each other (1997:361). As noted in chapter four and also attested by the respondent below and several other respondents, the Bondo uses communication codes only discernable by members.

When I joined the Bondo we were taught to be friendly to each other and to respect elders. We sang new songs, songs of different occasions, coming out songs, early morning songs, fishing songs and so forth. Every song has a meaning. We use songs to talk to each other. The songs are in such a way that only members will understand

what they mean and react to it. For example if the women cry out ayee joooh, it is a call for members to come up to address an issue which needs urgent attention. We also dance different dances which have different meanings which I will not tell because they are secret (Interview 4 on 18/03/2009 with Bondo member, a primary school teacher, aged between 50-55 years).

This type of coded language is what Ansell (1997) calls “restricted codes”. Such codes are characteristic of discourses among close-knit communities in which community members have “access to the same fundamental assumptions” (Douglas 1982:22; Ansell, 1997:362). Accordingly, these discourses continually make reference to traditional norms, taboos and practices in a way that marginalizes those not cognizant of the restricted codes. Ansell also identifies another form of communication which he refers to as elaborated codes. He notes that elaborated codes are more abstract and open to different interpretations; they foster communication with people outside the close-knit group and “[are] therefore less directly regulative of social behaviour than restricted codes” (Ansell, 1997:362). I will deploy the concepts of “restricted” and “elaborated” coded communication to analyse and discuss the Sowe council’s strategies of co-ordination and its apparent collaboration with NGO operatives in the wake of the effects of the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007 on the Bondo secret society.

The operations of the Bondo society are ordained by ritual and oaths of secrecy only accessible to members. This is what Douglas (1982:22) referred to as “tacit knowledge”. Douglas argues that communities “high on ritual” have restricted codes of communication, which enhance communication and unity within the group but marginalize those outside the group. In this line of thinking therefore, the Bondo is engaged in a continuous social process of communication through their codes of secrecy that fosters social cohesion and co-ordination. Accordingly, the Sowe council employs restrictive codes that allude to the common knowledge of the sacred symbolism and dance ensconced in the Bondo society to further enhance coordination and cohesion. This is done in order to reinforce group unity and to supersede the regional differentiations in the ways in which the Bondo society is practiced. The excerpt below from the proceedings of the NGO/Sowe council consultative meeting attests to this:

The meeting starts off with a song in Mende, the women comprised of Bondo Sowe council notables, the Sowe council president who is from the Themne ethnic group, the Sowe council P.R.O, a Mende speaker and other officials dance to the song by

shaking their shoulders vigorously. The song continues and it has a message to the effect that Bondo is very important because it teaches so many things in addition to other ceremonies like washing of the skin or the hands for ritual effect. Then the Soweï council president says “let us be aware that wherever we are God is with us, so for anything, even if you are alone, just beware that God is with us through our fore fathers” (proceedings of Soweï council consultative meeting).

The Soweï council therefore galvanizes its members through both religious references and through the physicality of dance, and in the process establishes itself as the legitimate representative of Bondo society issues in public discourse. For instance the comments by the Soweï president allude to a shared ancestry which has underlying meanings and intensions both secular and spiritual.



**Figure 7-2: Soweï council members during a demonstration carrying banners written in Krio.**

A similar invocation of the ancestral spirits occurred during a speech by the Soweï council treasurer. Here, the invocation is used to frame anti-FGC reformists in attendance from the INGO that facilitated the meeting, as “outsiders”<sup>63</sup>:

The great, great grandfather and the great great grandmother have been doing it. It is just like when a child is still breastfeeding and you don’t just stop...May God bless the white man. “White man”<sup>64</sup> sitting here, may God bless you. If you are

<sup>63</sup> It is generally believed by many Bondo adherents that calls for eradication of FGC were brought about by foreigners, symbolised by the term “white man”. The “white man” in this context refers to Europeans especially those they see working for international organisation like the UN (field notes).

<sup>64</sup> The mixed race man was not amused to be called a white man and the convenors did not care to correct the Soweï who was referring to him in this way.

thinking about something good for us, let God help us (people talking excitedly). *These are the real Soweis around here.* These are the elders. It is part of our culture...if God has sent you [the white man] to say that we stop this society, then we are very troubled (Sowei council treasurer).

Here it can be seen how a key member of Sowei council was able to define the organisation itself as the authentic voice of the Bondo society by invoking the idea of an unbroken ancestral tradition. Her reference to this tradition is implicitly divisive, distancing the anti-FGC activists (represented, in the context, by the five officials of an international organisation that facilitated the meeting), not only by the implicit suggestion that they need to be informed about the realities of the tradition, but also by the allusion to their ontological status as “white”.

The “white man” the respondent refers to was actually a mixed race Sierra Leonean and not a European or American. He was born in Sierra Leone (to a British mother and Sierra Leonean father); he went to school in Sierra Leone and still lives there with his family. However, because of his colour, he was singled out by the respondent above as the epitome of the anti-FGC discourse. The logic in this reference is that it is only the Sowei council which should be involved with Bondo matters of whatever nature because this is their tradition. The respondent says “If God has sent you to say that we stop this society, then we are very troubled”. The speaker appeals to a form of common knowledge (i.e. that interference in the affairs of the Sowei council should be “resisted”). The framing of discourse in this manner offers an opportunity to form idioms that resonate with Sowei council members. At the same time, the “white man” is used to symbolise the discursive camp of anti-FGC campaigners. Resistance to the anti-FGC campaign is thus represented as a trope that resonates with the wide membership of the Sowei council, drawing on all the “four corners” of the country. Simultaneously, of course, such appeals involve a kind of claim to authority, on the part of the speaker, *within* the Bondo context: that she, and those she represents, are the “real Soweis around here”.

### **7.3 Symbols as condensation of meaning: the case of Sowei council**

According to Clifford Geertz, culture is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and

attitudes towards life” (1973a:89). He further points out that “The concept of culture I espouse ... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.” (1973b:5). I will follow Geertz’s conceptualization of symbols as representations of “forms by which men communicate” in general conversation and the symbolic meanings attached to such discourse through time. Accordingly Swidler argues that “Perceiving culture as meaning embodied in symbols focuses attention on such phenomena as beliefs, ritual practices, art forms and ceremonies and on informal cultural practices such as language, gossip stories and rituals of daily life”(2001:12). According to Ansell, these informal cultural practices of daily life that are compounded into symbols and sentiments as we have seen in the Bondo society language of “defending our culture from being *disgraced* and *exposed*”, are referred to as “condensation of meaning”<sup>65</sup> (1997:359). Accordingly condensed meanings are compelling in that they override “competing political loyalties” (ibid). Symbols and symbolic appeals, therefore, can create a kind of centre of identity towards which members can gravitate. Symbols are powerful, therefore, when they link the particular to the universal in a simple but yet influential way (Ibid: 373). In the case of the Sowe council, safeguarding Bondo secrets that are under “threat” of being exposed and disgraced in the media intersect with the Bondo society discourse of resisting internationally sanctioned efforts to eradicate the practice of FGC. More famously Victor Turner termed these symbolic appeals “dominant symbols” because their meanings can be interpreted in ways that capture different facets of an issue in a way that coheres responses (Turner 1986:50).

Therefore, in the case under discussion, as we have seen, the concept or idea that played this role was that of the potential threat of an “exposure of the Bondo”. The threat of exposure was a powerful rhetorical tool that ensured the commitment of the Sowe council members to the course of “defending their culture” against the anti-FGC discourse

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<sup>65</sup> In his analysis of the realignment of the French working class through the French trade unions’ general strike between the years 1887–1894, Ansell argues that the different trade unions’ coherence and realignment was achieved through the use of compounded symbols and sentiments that focused on the wider aspirations to be achieved by the strike. The general strike was presented as the main symbolic form through a multi-trade organ called *bourses du travail* that offered the different trade unions “basic support services from job placement to training” (1997:359). The “organizing power” of the symbol of a general strike was thus blended into the corporatist discourse embedded in the *bourses du travail*. The *bourses du travail* acted as kind of a convergence point for the different trade unions. He says that “the *myth* (emphasis added) of the general strike connected all the ‘noblest, deepest, and most moving sentiments’ of the working class together into ‘a coordinated picture’”(ibid).



(cf Ansell, 1997:360). One can see, in this respect, how the PRO repeatedly mentioned the issue of the media exposing Bondo secrets. Instructively, all the Soweï council members who talked during the consultative meeting referred to the same process of the Bondo being “disgraced” and “sabotaged” by being exposed in the media. The underlying message in these statements is the implicit idea that the Bondo society, which is wrapped in a set of shared secrets, oaths or knowledge, must be collectively defended from media “exposure” precisely because it is under threat:

What I am saying is the scandal, when people organize radio programs and they are aware of the fact that we have a council. They should call on us. But every morning they just organize radio programs about Bondo issues. Is Bondo the only thing? So please let them stop organizing programs about us over the media, even the things that they show about us they are all lies. They are just sabotaging us. They are just to destroy us. Let them stop televising what we are doing on TV they are all lies they are just doing it to spoil everything (Soweï council PRO).

The symbolic appeal to the threat of exposure was, therefore, potent in enhancing coordination and coherence. For example, the PRO above points out repeatedly that the media has an implicit agenda of revealing secret Bondo practices, with the express aim of sabotaging the society. In underscoring this point, she implicitly calls for members to unite and forestall this act of sabotage. Here again, one can see how such appeals cut both ways – presenting the Bondo as under pressure from a threatening external force, but by the same token, demanding the allegiance of members in order to defend the society against this threat.

Besides the use of the language of “exposure” as a kind of condensed symbol, the Soweï council has started to create a wider series of symbolic markers of membership such as printing of Soweï council T-shirts and banners to unite its members and enhance its networks.



**Figure 7-3: Soweï council members holding a banner during a public demonstration**

During the focus group meeting, the vice president remarked that:

If there is any problem, they should call on us as a council, that is why we have the Soweï council, we have our Soweï council T-shirts (emphasis added), we have them, if there is any problem, they should call on us, as a council we are so many that if we have a meeting we have to rent chairs because this is the headquarters. We are appealing for you [NGO officials present in the consultative focus group] to help us so that they can stop this radio programs (Soweï council vice president).

It is notable here that the speaker underscores the sheer number of Soweï council members but also the extent to which they operate in a distinctively “modern” way, an organisation which “rents chairs”, prints T-shirts and has a structured, organised headquarters. What is revealed here, as I’ve argued elsewhere in this thesis, is that there is no simple dichotomy between “modern” and “traditional”; claims of traditional authority can be mediated in very “modern” ways and can involve new kinds of mobilisation and organisation.

#### **7.4 The Soweï council and collaboration strategies**

In the Soweï council focus group, which was tellingly financed by an international organization, the Soweï council leaders subtly appealed to the government and the international organization to help them co-ordinate their members on some of the issues that they agreed on such as the importance of only initiating mature girls. In other words,

the Bondo representatives were willing to reach a provisional agreement with the facilitators from the international organization, which was that there should be no outright call to ban the practice of FGC; in return they were ready to compromise on the age at which initiations were to be carried out. The Soweï council, therefore, proposed to “collaborate” with reform activists to support the initiation only of girls who had attained majority age. By forming such alliances and talking the language of collaboration, the Soweï council operatives are creating “elaborated codes”<sup>66</sup> which are not as restrictive as Bondo codes. Elaborated codes, because of their abstract nature as pointed out above, open up space for the creation of different networks and different interpretations with the anti-FGC campaigners. As I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, getting the adherents of Bondo society to accept the idea of an age of consent in the FGC practice is a major milestone in efforts to end the practice. However, on the part of the Soweï council leaders, this is a challenging issue to “sell” to some of its members (such as those from the Fula, Themne and Limba ethnic groups, where initiation has conventionally involved younger girls, as pointed out earlier). Ideally, the Soweï council would have issues to do with the Bondo kept “under wraps,” as opposed to being subject to public discourse. However, this scenario is untenable in the current state of affairs where debates surrounding FGC are prominent both nationally and internationally. Faced with this scenario, creating strategic links with FGC reformers seems to have been accepted as an option on the part of the Soweï council. Nevertheless, the issue of the age of consent is bound to be a sticking point to ethnic communities that traditionally initiate very young girls between the ages of 4-12 year and this, in turn, threatens Bondo cohesion. There is therefore need to explore how the Soweï council seeks to cope with these divergent challenges and their efforts to create unity even in the context of what would appear as conflicting goals.

Though I have argued that the Soweï council enhances group coherence by creating and appealing to forms of “common knowledge” (Chwe, 2003) and by tapping the social capital and networks available to the Bondo through an appeal to “restricted” codes, this alone will not ensure unity. The Soweï council officials need to effectively dovetail their strategies of enhancing coordination and coherence with the expectations of their members if they are to sustain unity and co-ordination amid the changes brought about by the powerful anti-FGC rhetoric. After all, people are not swept away by ideas only on the basis of them being presented as “common knowledge” (cf Klandermans, 2004:368). In

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<sup>66</sup> As pointed out earlier elaborated codes are more abstract and can thus be used to reach a wider network since they are not confined to a given group that shares particular or esoteric social understandings, as would be the case for “restrictive codes” (Ansell, 1997:362).

many instances, people, in addition to common knowledge, also employ their own agency to adapt to different situations. The Soweï council thus need to legitimize select preferences as common knowledge. Such legitimized common knowledge has then to be subsequently “internalized” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Tumeola 1995; 2007). The common knowledge thus given prominence and legitimized has to be promoted so as to strike resonance with the vast followers of Bondo Soweï council across the country. In the particular context of Sierra Leone, what is given preference and significance is the traditional practice among dominant ethnic groups like the Mende of initiating mature girls. This is the spirit also captured by the Child Rights Act embraced by the NGO seeking to collaborate with the Soweï council. Such signification is done through elaborated codes.

Once common knowledge has been legitimated it then has to be diffused and spread out to all group members so as to mobilize actors into collective action. This is done by “restrictive” and “elaborate” codes as I have pointed out above following Ansell (1997). “Restrictive” codes enhance bonding (they consolidate networks through shared community ‘tacit’ knowledge) as I have argued, while “elaborate”<sup>67</sup> codes encourage interaction with other people who fall outside the close knit Bondo society. Thus, the consultative meeting between key members of the Soweï council and NGO operatives discussed here, can be considered a context in which “elaborate” codes are developed. By meeting the NGO officials the Soweï council hoped to level out the differences that were cropping up within the group concerning the Child Rights Act. The Soweï council, as noted, struck a compromise in urging its members to initiate only mature girls as opposed to young ones on the condition that the reform campaigners dispense with the explicit campaign to eradicate FGC. This, as I have argued in this thesis, is a strategy that employs a double discourse on the part of anti-FGC activists in order to bring about “enduring” as opposed to “fleeting” change. However, in the context of this compromise with campaigners of the Child Rights Act such as this NGO, some members within the Soweï council, especially those from communities that have historically initiated young girls, made clear their disagreement with this position. Such disagreements obviously represented a challenge to the Soweï Council’s goals of internal cohesion and coordination. The tension arising from collaborating with NGO agents can be attested to by comments of the PRO, who herself comes from the dominant Mende ethnic group whose position on initiating mature girls is said to have been adopted by the Soweï

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<sup>67</sup> In the literature on network theory, elaborate codes are also referred to as ‘sparse networks’ (Hansen, 1999:107) or weak ties (Granovetter, 1973:1363-1366).

council. However, as evident in the comments below, this position has not gone unchallenged:

Let us forget about this Bondo issue for now. We do not encourage initiation of very young girls. I got angry over that with another Soweï, we nearly quarrelled. I told her these things are not good. Why don't you allow these children to go to school, all of these are not good. I do not accept them, we do not support such. Some people say we are jealousy because they have plenty of girls to initiate (Soweï council PRO).

From the excerpt above, it is clear that the compromise with the NGO emphasis on an age of consent is interpreted differently by different actors. To the PRO, initiating very young girls and keeping them for extended periods in the Bondo bush interferes with the girls' education and is, therefore, not supported by the Bondo. However, one gets a hint in this speech, of the internal tensions that such a position creates. Hence the speaker reports that she and other members of the council have been accused of having an ulterior motive, and as being motivated by jealousy at the prospects of someone else accumulating money from Bondo initiation fees<sup>68</sup>: "*Some people say we are jealousy because they have plenty of girls to initiate*". In the same breath the PRO acknowledged that achieving group cohesion on the politicized issue of age of consent was not an easy task.

This is what we go through. But when we are trying to tell our people, they are very difficult to handle but if we work together, maybe there will be some control, maybe we should have gone into agreement with pen and paper...that is true (PRO Soweï council).

In the above comment by the PRO, there are undertones to the extent that, the working relation being forged by the Soweï council with NGO, though premised on the objective of protecting the Bondo in light of the discourse of eradication, it also raises questions of power and "control" that is contested by other members of the society. Moreover, these efforts have been politicised by some members, who insinuated that the compromise should include financial offers and employment opportunities by the reformists in order to enable the Soweïs to engage in other economic ventures and reduce reliance on initiation proceeds:

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<sup>68</sup> Implicit in this way of reasoning is the fact that, as noted before, parents prefer to initiate young girls because it is affordable. Nevertheless, if the Soweï has 'plenty of girls to initiate' she will accrue more money due to the sheer 'volume' of work that is required of her.

If you want to win a child, you have to encourage her/him, provide provision so that you will be able to win the child without him/her disturbing you, so if they want to stop my enjoyment, the thing that I live on, they should try to encourage me, I will take the encouragement and stop (Sowei council member from Mende speaking region aged 38). As for the Soweis council here present, there is not just a single day that we have initiated a child at age 7 years or below. Not a single day (people laughing, probably because what she is saying is a big lie). We are not saying we are going to stop initiating into Bondo, but since the law says to stop initiating young children, we are behind them. But they should try to make us happy a bit. Most children of these Soweis are educated but there is no job. But if you can do something for us by saying ok we are not going to remove this thing [Bondo initiation] from them, but you could establish a place where we can be doing something and then you could be monitoring us. That is what we need (people clapping) (Sowei council member Mende ethnic group aged 46).

The respondent above hailed from the dominant Mende ethnic group which has the highest population of all ethnic groups in Sierra Leone and are also said to be the first ethnic group to practice the culture of Bondo society in Sierra Leone (Rodney, 1970). As noted, the Mende traditionally initiate mature girls. Soweis from this ethnic group are, therefore, ready to collaborate with the government to initiate only mature girls so long as the FGC procedure as practiced by the Bondo society is not banned and Soweis are left in peace to do what they do. In the context where many parents prefer to initiate girls when they are young in order to save on the cost of initiation, the Soweis respondent above will require some form of compensation from NGO operatives that will provide them with an alternative way of sustaining themselves. This is the political process the Sowei council have to grapple with as they collaborate with the NGOs.

If today they said we should stop initiating little children, I will only accept if they can help me out and assist my children and also give me a better place to live. I live in a camp and my roof leaks. If they should help us with that, we would stop because if you initiate a kid, it is cheap for the parents. They [parents] are afraid of the expenditure that is why they bring young girls for initiation. If she (Bondo initiate) is grown up, they have to spend lots of money but if she is a kid you give 20,000 Leones and a bag of rice with 2 lappa [loincloth] cotton and you have to pay for Sowei with that cash. Then if they have driven my child out of school for fees, I will just pay [My child won't have to be excluded from school because of lack of fees, I

will use the Bondo initiation fees to pay my child's school fees]. I can sell half bag rice and if I have garri [ground cassava flour]...we could be managing as long as the school is going on [As for food, I will sell the rice and use the money to buy foodstuff. We can use the garri to survive so long as my children are going to school]. But if now you are saying to stop... it is left with what you decide [it depends on how much you (NGO) decide to give us]. But for me, the society is getting interesting (people laugh and the Soweis break into a song) (Sowei council member).

This excerpt underscores the political process entailed in the strategic collaboration the Sowei council seeks to initiate with NGO operatives. The respondent above points to the economic difficulties some of the Soweis experience, thereby underlining the economic and political interests some of the Soweis have in the Bondo society. The politics has therefore to be negotiated if the NGO collaboration strategy by the Sowei councils is to be effective in enhancing coherence and coordination within the Bondo.

## **7.5 The politics of age of consent**

For elaborated codes to be effective in spreading the discourse that is given prominence, the Sowei council has to be careful as to how their ties with NGOs will resonate with Bondo society members without alienating and marginalizing some of them. On their part, the NGO members present in the consultative meeting were quite measured in their message. To begin with, they disassociated themselves from the people who were making comments in the media about the Bondo society. They then made it clear that the Child Rights Law does not talk about banning the practice of FGC but that such procedures should only be carried out on girls who have attained majority age. This seemed to create an amicable atmosphere that made the Sowei council members ready to listen to what they had to say. The Moderator of the consultative meeting, a male native Sierra Leonean working for the NGO that sponsored the meeting said:

My mother was a Sowei, my grandmother, her mother and my whole descendants and even my sisters are in Bondo. So I have an interest in what you are doing. That is why I don't think we have had any problem with Soweis so far. It is because, we know how to discuss. But let me say the reason why we are having this meeting. There is a law that deals with the rights of the child. This law is saying that if a child

is under 18 years, she should not be initiated. But to say stop Bondo issue, that it should not be practiced in this country, there is no law about that (sic). Let nobody give you false news that you should not initiate into Bondo. It is the age that matters (the Soweï council members break into a song). So our message is not for stopping anybody from practicing their culture. Human rights say you have a right to practice your culture. However, when the culture violates rights, more so the child rights and women's rights, we do step in (NGO consultative meeting moderator).

The respondent above, who seemed to be quite adept at the art of negotiation, is also trying to approach the debate in a way that could allow the Soweï council to underscore the fact that what is in contention is the age of consent and not the FGC procedure as such. This is done so as to enable negotiation and to also tone down the highly charged discourse of resistance by the Soweï council. As I have noted elsewhere in this thesis, the human rights operatives engage in a double discourse as a strategy of negotiating change to the practice of FGC. Several years of condemning the ritual practice has not led to the desired change and has thus resulted in a change of tack. Though the members of the Soweï council are relieved that the practice is not outlawed, the idea of initiating only mature girls is a cause for concern given the hard economic times that some of the Soweï council members are undergoing. One Soweï council member said the following in regard to the initiation of young girls below the age of majority:

If they bring a kid for initiation, now that I have gotten these ideas, we could even ask the parents if they have not heard about the law but if there is no place for the parents to learn this law, I will close my mouth and tell the parent to bring their child for initiation...(Soweï council member).

What the respondent here alludes to, is the fact that though they will accept the age of consent for Bondo initiation, they will not hesitate to initiate young girls if parents bring their daughters to them. Clearly, if the speaker here agreed "ethically" with the proposal, she would take the responsibility of "educating" parents who have not heard about the new law. In her case, instead, she will "close her mouth" and carry on with the initiation, after all she needs "work". Indeed, one of the main responses I got from Soweïs when I asked them why they initiated young children, especially those from communities like the Mende who traditionally initiate mature girls, was that if the parents brought the children, this represented an economic opportunity which was hard to refuse. One even went as far as plainly stating that she did this mainly because of money:



You know a parent comes to me with their culture to me to initiate their children into the Bondo, they are the ones willing. I don't force them to join them, so I will initiate the children and join them in the society. I am making money by doing that, I need money for food, for my children's school fees, so do you think I will say no and not initiate the children [...] It doesn't affect me because I didn't ask their parents to come with their children, I have no problem with that (Interview 44 on 16/03/09 with Soweï aged 40 living in IDP camp).

Such actions have to be understood, then, in the context of the poverty which many Soweïs face. This also attests to the way efforts at negotiating change in light of the Child Rights Act are politicised and opened up to different interpretations. Besides the international organisations, the Soweï council also engages the government in negotiating change while at the same time seeking to consolidate the group. For instance, during the consultative meeting the Soweï council president said:

I cannot only speak for myself but I have to speak on behalf of the council. If the government should call upon us, all of us could attend and they will say what they want. That is not fear but it is good if they came here and said that they want to meet with us the Soweï council. Believe you me, you will see all of them and we can all sit down and they can tell us what they want to tell us and we can also tell them what we want (Soweï council president).

As I have argued in this thesis, the government of Sierra Leone co-opts the Bondo society as part of its efforts to legitimate itself. The respondent above suggests that if the government has passed the law about age of consent, the government should call the Soweï council so that the message can be passed to all of its members. The Soweï council president clearly implies that if the message in the Child Rights Act is communicated this way, the Soweï council will have more control over group cohesion. The Soweï council's President's remark is thus, in part, about the internal politics of the Bondo, and about who gets to speak on behalf of Soweïs. By claiming for themselves the right to decide what forms of practice are legitimate the council claims a profound kind of authority, even as it claims to be defending Bondo practices and tradition. As a result, other discourses in the Soweï council from marginal communities like the Limba and Themne that have historically initiated young girls will be illegitimated. The Soweï council will seek to establish the abstract concept of initiating girls of majority age as "common knowledge" for Soweïs, and in so doing present themselves as the agency best placed to speak for the

Bondo and at the same time, best placed to manage those communities described by the PRO as “difficult”: *“This is what we go through. But when we are trying to tell our people, they are very difficult to handle but if we work together, maybe there will be some control”*. In summary, it is widely argued that organizations and groups oscillate between restrictive codes (bonding) and elaborated codes (reaching out to other groups outside the “inner circle”) as they strive to achieve group cohesion and transform social capital into collective action (Ansell, 1997; Ishihara and Pascual, 2009; Atkinson, 1985; Woolcock, 1998:175-6). However, it is also argued that collaboration with other groups often works vertically. For example, in the case of the Soweï council, policy actors who are instrumental in proposing the discourse of initiating only mature girls work within a given framework. For instance, as we have seen, it is in the government of Sierra Leone’s interest to appease financial aid donors including the USA through its agencies such as USAID who have tied provision of financial aid to efforts to end the FGC practice (Boyle, 2005) so as to get the much needed financial assistance. The same applies to the international organization that facilitated the consultative meeting. Though the policy actors are better placed to help the Soweï council to achieve better co-ordination and coherence, their objectives, especially those of the donors, are in many respects contrary to those of the Soweï council.

By this I mean that if the Soweï council forms strong forms of collaboration and co-ordination in which key policy actors like governments and donors<sup>69</sup> infiltrate the Bondo and shape their discourse, they may end up in excluding some members of the Soweï council, like those from minority ethnic groups that traditionally initiate very young girls, who will be marginalized by the dominant discourse of initiating girls only when they attain majority age. The potential fallout might have negative effects to the symbolic authority (Bourdieu, 1986) claimed by the Soweï council.

However, from the perspective of reformers, friction within the Soweï council will consequently set the stage for change to the procedure of FGC. Though it might be premature to say that the Bondo society has lost its coherence because of the Soweï councils “strategy” of collaboration with NGOs, there is a tension here. For instance, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in July 2011 officially entered into a pact with the Soweï council to train and sensitise Bondo society women on issues of “gender based violence, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and the United Nations Security Resolution

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<sup>69</sup> See for example this newspaper article in which the United Nations Population Fund in collaboration with the United Nations Peace building Office in Sierra Leone courts the Soweï council (accessed from <http://allafrica.com/stories/201107042220.html> on 16 July 2011)

1325” (Concord Times Freetown, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2011)<sup>70</sup>. Such collaborations are, in many respects, unequal affairs: UNFPA has “run away with the agenda”, if you like. The Bondo adherents are no longer able to simply emphasise the “defence of their culture” but now have to grapple and incorporate into their “vernacular” abstract and rarefied terms like “security resolution 1325”. This realisation therefore, raises the question as to what kind of agency do the Bondo society women exercise? It is this to which I turn in the last section of this chapter.

## 7.6 The question of agency

I have analysed above the close link between the Bondo and political power in Sierra Leone. However, this proximity to power, if closely analyzed, does not directly improve the material living conditions of the women said to be king makers when it comes to presidential elections. Although, as argued in this thesis, Bondo society initiation provides Bondo practitioners with a means of livelihood, the money raised from initiation is a pittance; it is sufficient, only for “hand to mouth” subsistence. In spite of the influence they can exert on the socio-political front, some Bondo members are still reliant on petty handouts from politicians who only turn to them during electioneering exercise or use the Bondo to get votes and acquire power. Opinions are divided as to whether the Bondo gives women some agency or not. Abusharaf (2001) and Dellenborg (2004) have highlighted the forms of power and authority in ritual life wielded by women in traditional settings similar to the one under discussion. However, in the case of Sierra Leone, the main question is what kinds of agency are made possible by the relationship between Bondo society and political forms of power?

Even with their influence in socio-political community life, the forms of power enjoyed by the Bondo are in the realm of symbolic authority as opposed to explicit power over political decision making. From the accounts of the Soweis and Bondo members given throughout this thesis, it is clear that the women have an agenda of their own in protecting the social capital, the limited forms of economic capital and the symbolic power available to them in what they claim is a “resistance” against moves to dismantle “their culture”. However, even senior Soweis who have personal economic and political interests in the Bondo have not been able to employ the symbolic power available to them in order to

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<sup>70</sup> See news article entitled “Sierra Leone: UNFPA Launches Soweis Associations ”on the online news portal “AllAfrica.com” (Accessed from <http://allafrica.com/stories/201107042220.html> on 16 July 2011).

acquire political power akin to that held by male politicians in government. Equally noticeable is the fact that a majority of Bondo members live terribly impoverished lives. Gorelick's analysis of structures of oppression might shed light on this issue. She says, "The most fundamental social relations occur "behind the backs" of the actor. That is, much of the underlying structure of oppression is hidden, not only by means of ideology but also by means of a contradictory daily life" (Gorelick, 1991:463). Thus, the Bondo, as noted in this thesis, is used to expand the hegemony of the state by shaping local discourse. In return, the people in power give the Bondo the illusion that they will reciprocate their support when in fact they do not have autonomy to do so, given that FGC practice is widely condemned internationally. The social and economic conditions of the Bondo are thus shaped by factors far beyond the local context. This is what Smith (1987) termed "extra-local determinants". In her other work, Smith points out that "In contemporary global capitalist society, the everyday world (the material context of each embodied subject) is organised in powerful ways by trans-local social relations that pass through local settings and shape them according to a dynamic of transformation that begins and gathers speed somewhere else" (Smith, 1990:6). Smith refers to these trans-local social relations that carry and accomplish organization and control as "relations of ruling" (1990:6). In the case of the changes proposed to the new law, it is debatable what the impact of the changes will be on the Bondo society. One key feature though, is that in spite of the tension and heat raised by claims of resistance on the part of Bondo adherents, is that the consciousness of Bondo members has been raised. This is evident from the different forms of strategies employed by the Bondo society as they negotiate change, of which the development of Sowei council is the most explicit example. Indeed the rupture caused by the recent war, as argued in chapter four, has ironically pushed Bondo activities to the fore in contemporary Sierra Leonean politics. Perhaps if the Bondo society women experience a rupture<sup>71</sup> in the "normal life" which is currently and predominantly ordered by Bondo society ideology, new possibilities for critical thinking may be opened to them. Nevertheless, the Bondo as currently practiced privileges some women, especially those in leadership roles at the expense of others. Similarly, the Bondo defines women primarily in terms of certain prescriptive bodily expectations and regimes, indeed, in a sense it seeks to inscribe "womanliness" onto bodies through FGC, and to inculcate a certain femininity desirable by the community. Non-members and those with diverse views other than those

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<sup>71</sup> It is worth noting also that, despite the recent war in which a lot of people were displaced, to a host of Bondo members, especially those now living in IDP camps, the displacement and 'rupture' to their normal life, opened up space for the Bondo society to stake a claim in Sierra Leone national politics. This, I have argued, culminated in the Bondo being used as an ideological state apparatus in post-war Sierra Leone. As a result, Bondo society gained influence in politics especially in election politics.

espoused by the Bondo, as noted in this thesis, are often silenced to a significant extent. The Bondo, therefore, is still aligned with a patriarchal order that oppresses women. In this way, as Gorelick has argued “ideologies of oppression are often internalized while the underlying structures of oppression are hidden” (1991:459). The Bondo mask the underlying forms of oppression through ways that accord some women pockets of power and influence while in the actual sense, most have not attained a lasting form of power, or real material benefits in their lives.

On a positive note, although the Bondo society has not translated its symbolic power into improved economic material conditions for most women, the perception of new challenges has led to greater self-organisation among Bondo members, as attested to by the formation of the Soweï council which is a meeting point of “all<sup>72</sup>” Soweïs nationally. In addition, the Bondo in some ways is a political force in its own right as it is directly involved in shaping opinion. As the members continue to interact, the Bondo society followers might discover ways of challenging hidden structures of oppression and change their conditions thenceforth. For instance, as the Soweï council engages in collaboration through the use of elaborated codes (Ansell, 1997), they may well “realise” that despite government promises to reciprocate their support during elections, the government lacks the autonomy to “reciprocate” meaningfully. Once this “abstractness” is revealed, it will be interesting to see what the Bondo women will do. It is most likely that the Bondo will not deal with political actors in the same way since the “arbitrariness” discovered will effectively change the (unwritten) “terms and conditions” upon which the cooperation between the Bondo and politicians is based. This dovetails with Mies’ assertion that the “hidden relationships [of oppression] can be discovered (and are discovered) by the oppressed themselves as they begin to interact and *collectivize their experience* (for example, through consciousness raising) and start to change their situation. *For the very act of trying to change the structure tends to bring the nature of the system of oppression into bolder relief*” (Mies 1983 in Gorelick, 1991:465).

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<sup>72</sup> Ideally, all Soweïs are supposed to be members of the Soweï council. However, it is hard to coordinate all members in a country where over 90% of Bondo members live outside of Freetown, given the limited “budget” at the Soweï council’s disposal. As a result, there are Soweïs who are not Soweï council members while others are very fluid with their membership claims. Accordingly, they will align with the Soweï council when it suits them but when it does not, as in the case of the Soweï council convincing its members from regions which have traditionally initiated minors to only initiate mature girls, such Soweïs will disassociate themselves with the Soweï council (field notes).

## 7.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the Soweï council, which is an umbrella organization for Soweis in Sierra Leone, coheres and coordinates its group by the use of linguistic codes (both restricted and elaborated). I note that by integrating restricted codes with the symbolically loaded claim that the Bondo is being “*exposed*” and “*disgraced*” the Soweï council has managed to mobilise its members into collective action. However, in the face of a powerful anti-FGC rhetoric that is now embedded in aid programs and national governance, the Soweï council has resorted to a form of ambiguous collaboration, especially in response to the Child Rights Law which does not explicitly outlaw FGC but rather insists on issues of consent. This has led me to consider the question of agency in relation to the Bondo. I conclude by noting that, in spite of anything else, the fact that Bondo society women are interacting more self-consciously and that it is possible that this could represent a moment at which wider structures of oppression become more recognisable to those involved. It is not impossible that they may yet come to talk critically about the hidden causes of oppression that have hitherto left them impoverished even in the midst of the apparent influence granted to their society.

## CHAPTER 8

### Conclusion and Recommendations

#### 8.0 Conclusion

The primary objective of this thesis was to explore the debates around FGC, and the intersection of these with local and national power structures in post-war Sierra Leone. The state's affiliation with the Bondo society was explored in the context of criticisms of the presumed harmful effects of FGC, the linking of international development aid with FGC eradication and against the backdrop of the post-conflict context of generalized poverty and broken social support mechanisms. In this environment, secret society membership remains a key source of social capital and an associated small, but important, avenue of economic opportunity.

This study revealed that the Bondo is actively courted by members of the political classes in Sierra Leone because in places where it is practiced (among 90% of women in the voting population from 17 ethnic communities out of the total 18 ethnicities in Sierra Leone); the Bondo is a depository of gendered knowledge, and a key context in which members accumulate cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Initiates who successfully acquire the Bondo initiation are accorded social regard. They are also considered for leadership and are seen as being more highly sought after when it comes to marriage. As I have shown, much of Sierra Leonean social life revolves around the ethos of a number of different secret societies. In these respects, then, the Bondo provides access to significant symbolic capital and represents an important form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1990; 1986). As a result, politicians woo the Bondo in order to appeal to their networks of membership, and this is crucial in accumulating votes during an election campaign. In return, the Bondo consolidate their symbolic capital and receive token favours from politicians they have supported. They are, in this respect, largely perceived as king makers. Those Bondo society members who occupy leadership positions do enjoy a significant form of power. The situation is, therefore, a profoundly ambiguous one. The Sierra Leone state co-opts members of the Bondo society in spite of the international condemnation of FGC which is a central procedure in Bondo society initiation.

This relationship between the Bondo secret society and political actors has gained more prominence following the decade long civil war in Sierra Leone. The war led to a massive displacement of people and a general and profound social trauma on the people. Given the fact of a partly collapsed state, in which key sectors of government such as education, health and even the military were undermined, “primordial” ways of ordering community life such as secret societies (Bondo and Poro) became even more significant than previously. Many people who had witnessed the horrors of the war returned with new enthusiasm to secret societies such as the Bondo, from which they could reconstruct some sense of community, stability and meaningfulness in the context of displacement. Meanwhile, the newly elected post war leaders sought the Bondo society to expand the state’s objective of attaining a renewed hegemony. I have argued that they thus “employed” the Bondo as a something akin to an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1970) to legitimize their rule and enhance social cohesion in order to facilitate easy governance.

It is therefore not enough to look at the issue of FGC as practiced in Sierra Leone by the Bondo secret society using dichotomies (traditional/modern, backward/progressive etc.) because the procedure of FGC as practiced by the Bondo society interpenetrates community life in multifaceted and complicated ways. There is thus much more that is associated with the Bondo that grants some women (Bondo members and its leaders) pockets of significant forms of power irrespective of patriarchy. FGC at least in the context of Sierra Leone that I studied is, therefore, not experienced as, or understood as a straightforward patriarchal oppression of women.

Additionally, this study has demonstrated that the concerted anti-FGC discourse by both local and international actors, partly as an outcome of the US law in 1996 (Boyle, 2005), has challenged the Bondo society’s coalition with state actors. New tensions thus emerged in the run up to the passing of the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007, especially in respect of an initial clause banning FGM<sup>73</sup>. As reported above, this clause was expunged from the act and in its place section 33 (1) of the Child Rights Act was installed. This section states that “No person shall subject a child to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment including any cultural practice which dehumanises or is injurious to the physical and mental welfare of a child,” and is generally interpreted as outlawing FGC on minors.

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<sup>73</sup> This is how FGC was referenced in the initial Child Rights Act bill.



This new development has, as a result, led to instances where political actors use a language of ambivalence, or what I have called “traditional modernity”. This oxymoron captures the ways in which political actors shape their discourse to appease both the Bondo society members and the international donors who are both crucial to the operations of government in different ways. This, as expected, has not been simply accepted, especially by the Bondo society adherents, who have responded by acts of aggression and violence, in the name of a “defence of culture”, but also with forms of ambivalent cooperation, such as was discussed in the previous chapter. On their part, the FGC reformists have increasingly shaped an equally ambivalent or “double discourse” premised on the issue of consent. In this formulation, it is accepted that the Bondo can initiate girls into the society but only if the girls have attained majority age. It is expected, thus, that with the programme of sensitization being carried out in the country, and the growing recognition of an idiom of human rights, the girls will not agree to be initiated when they finally attain the age of consent.

Furthermore, this study has highlighted instances where the relationship between the Bondo and the state has led to hesitation and foot-dragging in dealing with acts of violence that border on crime. The law enforcement agencies are slow to prosecute cases involving the secret societies. This is justified on the grounds of needing to safeguard state security. However, in spite of the “protection” the Bondo receives from state actors, the reputation and cultural capital enjoyed by the Bondo has been affected by the extent to which forms of violence have been justified using the Bondo discourse of a “defence of culture”. The thesis also underscores the point that the working relationship between the Bondo and political actors has slowed down the momentum of the reform movement and has limited the appeal of a human rights discourse. This was evident, particularly, in cases where human rights infringements were not expedited through the due process of the law and, therefore, the conception of such rights did not resonate with victim’s lived experience. The situation is, thus, one that is marked by tensions and contradictions at every turn.

At the conclusion of the thesis, then, I wish to return briefly to what is, perhaps, the central question: what type of agency do the Bondo society women exercise?

Having mapped this complicated context in which the Bondo society of Sierra Leone operates, I want to conclude by suggesting that one way of conceptualising this agency might be by employing Kandiyoti’s (1988) conception of patriarchal bargain. In her study

of the Jola in southern Senegal, Dellenborg (2004) concludes from her findings that the main defenders of the custom of FGC are women, and especially older women. This is contrary to some accounts in the FGC literature (Gordon, 1991; Hosken, 1993; Levin, 1980, Walker, 1992, Walker and Parmar, 1995) who claim that FGC is perpetuated by men as a statement of male dominance over women. In fact, Dellenborg noted that many young men are actually against FGC. She argues that in the Jola context female circumcision is “a strategy for women’s empowerment” (2004:14). This is especially the case because the custom of female genital cutting is relatively new to the Jola having been adopted fifty or so years ago. Contrary to the former practice, where Jola women depended on their relations to husbands for ritual status, FGC provided women with more space to exercise power and express themselves. Dellenborg notes, “Now with a new form of female secret society connected to Islam and to female circumcision, women are no longer dependent on their relations to men for ritual distinction” (Ibid). Similarly, Abusharaf (2006:215) notes that within pre-colonial hierarchies of power, Sudanese women enjoyed significant control over ritual. She pointed out that within the domains of the FGC ritual; women exercised “female agency and female solidarity in positive social terms” whereby they had “freedom to exercise cultural rights and wield authority in ritual life” (2006:218).

These are examples, as noted in my literature review chapter, of what Kandiyoti (1988) points out as ways in which women may pursue forms of bargain arrangements with patriarchy in their communities in an effort to improve their life chances. She says: “.... These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts” (1988: 275). I would argue, then, that the analysis of patriarchal bargain in sub-Saharan Africa as propounded by Kandiyoti (1998:274-278) is applicable in the case of the Bondo secret society. Thus, for example, Bondo leaders are highly regarded in the society by both men and women. In a focus group of Mende Soweis in Bo, one Sowe in the focus group who is also a member of the Poro in the capacity of *mabole* (as described in the history and context chapter) said:

Now I am in a position where I can be invited by the senior man at the Poro who does the initiation (of boys into Poro), they call him Manjoe. When he comes out, though other women are not supposed to see him, he and other Poro leaders will stand in front of my door. They will greet me and praise me a lot.... Then he will come to my house. When he come from the bush, he will call me and explain to me

(what he wants). I will go, you understand? I will pass on my own ceremony so that he too cannot have any problem in the course of initiating boys into the Poro. Then I will come back home, me and the big manjoe (sic), he is the eldest among the Poro. When they have initiated in the Poro and then trouble<sup>74</sup> wants to come his way from the children, he will tell me and I will go there. Whether they are young children or big men and something is about to go wrong, they will call on me for help or call upon the other “doctor”<sup>75</sup> to assist him, we call them Soweis (focus group 4 on 05/03/09 with some old Mende Soweis aged between 58-69).

This is indicative of the central role some women hold in the community (cf Ferme, 2001) as is also evidenced in other parts of this thesis. The Poro is arguably the most powerful traditional force ordering social life in which the Soweis respondent above and many others in her capacity play a fundamental role. For a woman to have a central role to play in this powerful male institution, is suggestive of the forms of power and influence women also have in this patriarchal arrangement through prior participation in the Bondo. This form of regard is also extended even to “ordinary” Bondo and Poro initiates, who exhibit mutual understanding and respect for each other:

We show the Poro people respect by bowing, in return the Poro people show us respect too by lifting their head and shaking hand, (Interview 6 of 12/03/09 Bondo member aged 22, a high school graduate).

Another instance of patriarchal bargain can be seen in the institution of the chieftaincy, the main governing body of any formal settlement in the rural or village areas. As discussed in chapter 4, some of the Bondo laws are enforced by the chief. In reciprocal fashion, the chief also relies on the Bondo to consolidate his chieftaincy. One respondent, a daughter of a chief told me:

The secret societies are very central to the running of the chieftaincy. Besides the tax they generate; the chief occasionally consults with the Soweis on issues relating to women in regard to governance. The Bondo fosters harmony and unity in the chieftaincy in a way that makes it easy to govern. The chief talks on behalf of the

<sup>74</sup> From the respondent's account, trouble while in the Bondo or Poro bush comes in the form of ill fate. Since parents entrust their children to the Bondo/Poro leaders, it is incumbent upon the latter to protect the initiates from any possible harm (Field note 09/03/2009). It is common for Bondo/Poro bush entrance doors to be decked with charms that are supposed to detect any form of malevolence in order to protect the initiates housed in the bushes. See also Little (1951:228-229).

<sup>75</sup> The senior members of Bondo, especially the Soweis, are well versed in traditional herbal medicine referred to as “leaf” in the local context. The word doctor here refers to a traditional herbal healer. It is common for such herbalists to be called traditional doctor in the local context.

Bondo<sup>76</sup>. The Bondo binds the chieftdom (Interview 16 14/04/2009 chief's daughter aged 40, a copy typist by training).

What is revealed in such examples is the kind of ambiguous but occasionally “symbiotic” relationship which the Bondo, as an institution, enjoys with key structures of power such as the chieftaincy. As argued elsewhere in this thesis, the Soweis exercise some power based on their knowledge in traditional healing herbs (cf focus group 4 above). This knowledge is sought after by both men and women across the society including powerful men such as chiefs and other leaders. This thus makes the Soweis a force to reckon with in traditional life where the Soweis are consulted in order to provide ritual healing to some affliction (cf. Boone, 1986:6).

The Soweis' power also manifests itself in the extent to which they are revered by their initiates and by extension the parents and families of the initiates. While in the bush, the Sowe is charged with the responsibility of ensuring the well being of initiates, and this entails a mutual trust between the Sowe and the kin of the initiate. Since going through the Bondo initiation is such an important step in a girl's life, the Sowe is thus placed in a position of power not only with respect to the initiate, who will be transformed from a “child” to an “adult” free to mingle with any Bondo member and be regarded in the community, but also to her relatives and friends, both male and female. It is these forms of power that some women have access to as a result of this particular bargaining with patriarchy. The Soweis prepare girls to be socialized into the wider community way of life by shaping them into the community's desired form of femininity. In return, the Soweis get access to various forms of respect and are able to have some purchase on political power in the ways that I have described above.

It is also worth noting, however, that despite having female paramount chiefs in communities that maintain the Bondo society, such as the Mende and Sherbro, the female chiefs have first to renounce their membership in Bondo and join the Poro. They, therefore, have to “bargain with patriarchy” in this subsequent sense, by symbolically transforming into “surrogate men” in order to attain the powerful position of paramount chief. Since, despite the seemingly independent space for women, the Bondo society still falls within a

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<sup>76</sup> Secular power through paramount chiefs is occasionally employed to enforce the Bondo laws (field notes).

kind of patriarchal control, the women access the forms of dignity and respect noted above through bargaining with the patriarchal order<sup>77</sup>.

## 8.1 Recommendations

As a final, practical point, I would therefore make the case for eradication advocates to recognise and explore the complexities I have pointed out above in their campaigns, in conjunction with the use of a human rights discourse, in order to capture the attention of practicing communities. In other words, following Lundquist (2004), FGC reform actors at various scales must get inside the mindsets of supporters of FGC and tailor their change agenda in ways that capture the imagination of practitioners. Though my analysis of the Bondo in relation to the Sierra Leone state is significant, I do not pretend to have uncovered all aspects of the Bondo (economic, political and social) in this thesis. The role of ritual in the economy, in particular, warrants further study. As it is in my thesis, the economic aspects associated with the Bondo mainly account for hand to mouth subsistence. This does not explain the keen interest of people generally regarded as successful female entrepreneurs in the Bondo. Another aspect of Bondo that could be explored further is the issue of commodification of the Bondo and the effect of this commercialization on community understandings concerning the Bondo society and its practices. How can the reform discourse insert itself in the spaces created by the impact brought about by the commoditization of the Bondo analysed in my thesis and how will this affect eventual social change in the culture of the Bondo?

In bringing about change, anti-FGC actors need to pay attention to the fact that there are sections of women, especially those in leadership positions, who have keen vested

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<sup>77</sup> It should be added here that such ambiguous negotiations with a patriarchal order have a long history in Sierra Leone. In her analysis of Mende female chiefs, Day (2007), for example, highlighted instances of “patriarchal bargain” employed by a female chief who ruled between the years 1885–1914 called Nyarroh. Nyarroh used her gendered position as a woman to broker peace between warring clans during the colonial period. She also simultaneously used her position as a peace negotiator to create powerful alliances with the colonial government to consolidate her position and gain political advantage. Day (2007) says: “Though women chiefs operated within and alongside existing patriarchal structures, women exercised a type of autonomy in parallel spheres of influence and, as a mediator accepted as such by both the Mende chiefs and the colonial government, Nyarroh operated outside the confines of the rules generally set for male chiefs.... Nyarroh’s position at the intersecting boundaries of gender opened the way for her to make new rules and, perhaps more quickly than others, to see the way of the future. In the existing structure of alliances and clientship, Nyarroh fearlessly inaugurated a clientship relationship with the new and potentially most powerful, certainly the richest, overlord of all, the Colony Government” (Ibid: 436). In general, as I hope to have made clear, although accessed through a form of patriarchal bargain, the power available to the Bondo society can at times be useful in challenging positions and decisions not acceptable to them or to expand the influence of the members.

interests (social, economic and political) in maintaining the status quo in relation to the FGC procedure and the Bondo society more generally. However, as I have shown in my previous chapter, the fact that women in the Sowe council are getting involved in the processes of negotiating change, is a pointer in some respects, to their willingness to support and secure such changes. It is necessary also to recognise how discourses of exclusion, marriageability, power and secrecy in relation to members of the Bondo make blunt condemnation of FGC a mistake. In this respect, I would recommend that eradication campaigns unpack these discourses to decipher the layered and complex embeddedness of the Bondo society in relation to political and social structures with a view to framing their agenda in ways that will resonate with the people who practice FGC in Sierra Leone.

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