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Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *editor*
University of California, San Diego



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*To the Founders and Leaders
of Africa's New Churches*

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not considered the political leaders of the community, although they hold their own specialized forms of knowledge and positions of power. The Sisala of northern Ghana have this sort of complementarity between men and women built into their cosmological and social systems. While some societies in northern Ghana prohibit women's participation in divination, the Sisala respect and encourage women as diviners. It is accepted that women can perform this revered function, because divination is a mechanical rite. Women diviners are generally past the age of childbearing, and derive cure rather than prestige from joining the divinatory cult. Through the cult they develop spiritual powers of leadership, but are excluded from the political-jural domain. Similar cases of exclusion may be noted in the indigenous churches, where women are endowed with expressive or ceremonial authority in contrast to the male elders who remain in control of the political sphere.

Kilson similarly outlines the importance of women's mediumship among the Ga of Ghana. The medium works alone and under the priest's authority at annual festivals. The knowledge held by the medium is esoteric and governed by principles of secrecy. Kilson uses a biographical approach to stress the centrality of mediumship as a source of ceremonial control for women. While the Ga medium is an awesome figure, she is not a political leader and is subject to the control of priests. She is an older woman who, even outside of her mediumship, retains the conventional association of women with healing, mysticism, and nurturance.

Overall, the first section of this volume introduces the changing state of African religion as a topic and the position of women in African religious groups as a way of looking at the basic social organization of a given group and an index of processes of change and revitalization. All of the discussions in this section stress the mystical power of women through mediumship and ceremonial authority, as opposed to a direct political contribution. Nonetheless, the studies reveal the complexity of the relationship between priests and priestesses and offer a necessary background for looking at larger structural changes in contemporary African religion.¹

¹The concept of independency widely used in the literature (Barrett, 1968; Barrett, 1971; Sundkler, 1961), assumes that indigenous churches are independent with respect to missions. This mission-centered orientation is in many instances misleading.

1

Sande: The Public Face of a Secret Society

Carol P. MacCormack

INTRODUCTION

Sande is a women's secret society that initiates girls into womanhood and makes them eligible for marriage. Since social grace, good health, fertility, successful childbirth, and nurturance are not matters to be left to nature but are conditions and events caused by Sande wisdom, rites, and practical expertise, it is an institution that continues to assist women throughout their adult life. It is secret in the sense that it owns knowledge so valuable that it must be guarded against debasement and transmitted only in ritual situations to initiates properly prepared to receive it.

When asked about the origins of Sande, women in Sierra Leone either say that it has always been there or suggest that it might have come from the north. European travelers on the Sherbro shore during the first half of the seventeenth century observed in some detail Sande's organization and its initiation rites. The account which Olfert Dapper published in Amsterdam in 1668 differs in no important detail from Sande organization and initiation today (Dapper in Fyfe, 1964, pp. 39-40). Where Sande was an important, pervasive social institution in the seventeenth century, it has not dwindled to a wispy relic today but thrives in the very heart and soul of contemporary culture. An estimated 95% of the women in the provinces of Sierra Leone are Sande women (Margai, 1948, p. 228). Even women who have migrated into Freetown, Sierra Leone's major urban area, continue in active association with neighborhood Sande chapters, needing the companionship and social support in life-crisis situations that Sande provides (Banton, 1957, p. 185).

Sande spreads as women migrate, following marriage, to live virilocally with their husband's people. New chapters originate whenever a woman who knows the secret wisdom can attract an initiation class of local girls. This women's society is active in all of Sierra Leone, parts of Guinea, and at least the northwest half of Liberia, its distribution related somewhat to the distribution of Mande and Mel languages (Dalby, 1965; Greenberg, 1966). Since Sande is widespread, there may be regional variation in organization, beliefs, and practices.¹ Therefore, unless otherwise specified, this paper refers to the Moyamba District of Sierra Leone, including four Sherbro-speaking and ten Mende-speaking chiefdoms.

ORGANIZATION

Sande is an acephalous system of corporate groups organized by residence rather than by descent. Local chapters maintain their autonomy, and only an informal integration of chapters is achieved by local officials participating in initiation ceremonies in other areas. There is no centralized hierarchical organization to match organization at the local level. Chapters are corporate in that they "own" secret knowledge, ritual objects, and "medicine."² They exist in perpetuity. Local founding ancestresses are the source of knowledge, laws, and sanctioning power.³ In Sande ceremonies, libations are poured to these ancestresses, and food is prepared to "feed" them. New members are "born" into the corporate body through initiation and pass at death into ancestresshood through Sande mortuary rites.⁴

Since an initiate must be sponsored by an older Sande woman, most girls are initiated into their mother's chapter. Initiation entitles a woman to marry, and residence following marriage is usually virilocal; thus, the young initiate soon affiliates with the chapter in her husband's village. Ideally, she returns to her mother's chapter to give birth to children, often under the care of the midwife-official who initiated her. In much of the world, virilocal residence separates women from the solidarity of their own kin, leaving them fragmented and powerless as a group. By contrast, Sande is a focus for lifelong organization and cohesiveness wherever a woman may reside.

¹Sande is known as Bundu in Temne and Krio. Field research conducted intermittently between 1969 and 1976 has been funded principally by the National Science Foundation and the British Social Science Research Council.

²Medicine refers to physical substances with effective pharmacological properties, and to physical substances that link persons to sources of power in the universe.

³In Lungi, Moyamba District, Sande women are buried in a great mound in the village. The mound symbolizes the power of women to bless and succor, their power existing in unbroken continuity from the living to the dead.

⁴At death, a woman also joins the ancestors of her natal descent group.

All members of a local chapter congregate for a minimum of two or three days in the initiation grove at the culmination of each initiation season, and sponsoring mothers and officials may remain in the grove for weeks or even months. The Sande women of a village also meet to air common grievances, for sociability, and to dance as a group on festive occasions.

Each local chapter has a head, called *majo* in Mende, and a council composed of 20 to 35 women in high grades. There are five ranked grades within Sande, the lowest being young women who have recently been initiated and the highest composed of an exceptional few who command great knowledge, control Sande "medicine," are effective teachers, and are authoritative leaders in guiding people through life crises. Women do not proceed automatically to higher grades but must ask questions, learn a body of theoretical and practical knowledge, and display adeptness through deeds before they advance to a higher rank.

Some leaders derive their rank from other social and political attributes outside Sande. In the Sherbro country, especially, women grown old in wisdom and authority may become the ranking elder of their aristocratic, cognatic descent group.⁵ They allocate use-rights to the group's corporate land, have judicial functions, and, being principal political figures in the area, are rightfully members of the local Sande chapter's council. Such a woman may head the chapter.

The *majo* is ultimately responsible for the quality of such initiate's training for womanhood. She passes on strong, positive definitions of womanhood in the imagery of oral tradition, art, and practical skills. She, or another senior official, is also midwife and adviser on all gynecological matters. Women's fertility is not left to nature, but is a matter brought under the control of explicit cultural rules enforced by Sande women and Sande ancestresses.

RITUAL SPHERES OF MEN AND WOMEN

In the southern and eastern provinces of Sierra Leone there are several sodalities that command secret knowledge and call upon the wisdom of ancestors and other spiritual forces. The fertility of the land and people, their physical and mental health, and the general social order are maintained by the power of these forces to bless or punish.

Poros, the men's secret society, is overtly political, functioning in an institutional fashion at the local level to counterbalance the largely secular power of chiefs (Little, 1965, 1966). However, whereas all members and officials of Sande are women, Poro is not exclusively a male society.⁶ A necessary official

⁵Descent groups ranked according to origins: (1) first settlers or conquerors, (2) client groups, (3) former slave groups. See MacCormack (1977a).

⁶D'Azevedo (1973) gives a brief description of a male principal but not male membership in Liberian Sande.

of each Poro chapter must be a woman. Women who inadvertently discover Poro secrets are initiated and brought within its moral sphere as well.

There are other sodalities whose membership is open to anyone regardless of sex, as with Thoma or Njaye (known in Sherbro as Yasse). The local chapters have coheads: a man and a woman. A woman initiated into Thoma cannot be a Sande woman, and a man initiated into Thoma cannot be a Poro man. It is a separate but equal alternative to the single-sex initiation societies. Njaye is concerned with treating randomly occurring crises in peoples' lives, such as a bout of depression, rather than the more predictable puberty, childbirth, and death crises which are accompanied by status transformations. Njaye chapters have coheads, and in some areas (e.g., the Mokobo region of the Upper Kagboro), the woman cohead automatically becomes an *ex officio* member of Poro. Such a woman usually has the ability to remember names of ancestors to great genealogical depth, calling them for blessings and assistance. Through these crosslinking women, the complementary spheres of men and women are joined on a ritual plane.⁷

A second link is that of the overarching ancestors and ancestresses, often of autochthonous groups, who are called in a variety of ritual contexts.

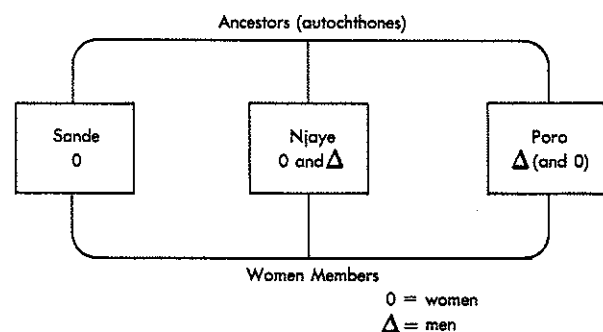


Figure 1.1 Chart of Secret Society Organization among the Sherbro and the Mende of Sierra Leone

In many chiefdoms, the ruling descent group is of recent origin, beginning with a warrior, invited leader, or colonial appointee. Religious authority in the hands of deeply-rooted autochthones counterbalances the political authority of chiefs.

Male chiefs may never be the head of a Poro chapter, but they may sit with the group of advising elders. With Sande the structural situation differs, and women paramount chiefs or their sisters have founded and led Sande chapters.⁸

⁷A woman initiated into Poro is regarded as a man and no longer a Sande woman, but she continues to work and live in the social sphere of women.

⁸For example, two women paramount chiefs of Kaiyamba Chiefdom (Hoffer, 1974, pp. 182-183; Ranson, 1968) and the late paramount chief of Gallinas-Perri Chiefdom (Margai, 1948, p. 230).

Thus, women chiefs might use Sande more directly for their political purposes than male chiefs might use Poro. However, should a chief wish to express his power by physical coercion, and if he can convince the ruling officials of his Poro chapter that force is judicious, he will have a band of strong, loyal young Poro men at his command. Sande women are not trained as warriors, and a woman chief, were she desirous of resorting to force, must utilize Poro warriors through a male intermediary. Women chiefs rely on the personal loyalty of their male kin and their husbands to put their cases forward in a favorable light within the Poro council. In some cases, a woman paramount chief will choose a Poro leader as her speaker or important subchief. Women chiefs also take sons, daughters, or grandchildren of secret society officials into their households as wards to help strengthen political alliances (see Hoffer, 1971, 1972, & 1974, for additional political strategies used by women).

Finally, it is important to stress that Poro and Sande do not exist in opposition to each other (as incorrectly suggested by Millett, 1970, pp. 48-49). Each has its particular domain of social control which complements but does not overlap with that of the other. Poro officials see that scarce resources are conserved and that people do not let disputes escalate into fights. Sande officials, for example, treat certain illnesses and enforce moral prohibitions against voyeurism. Each lays down explicit laws of behavior known to the entire community. If a law is breached, the transgressor and his or her kin are equally to blame. The sodalities provide laws and services for the health and well-being of the entire community, not for their group alone. When one secret society begins its initiation season, the others, out of respect, remain quiescent so as not to steal the ceremonial stage.

INITIATION: A RITE OF PASSAGE

For analytical purposes, the female life cycle might be divided into four stages. Girlhood extends from birth to the onset of menstruation. The second stage bounds the brief period between the beginning of physical maturity and marriage, when a female is no longer a girl but not yet a wife who may procreate. The third stage is adulthood following marriage or cohabitation with a man, and the final stage is ancestorhood, following physical death.

In the second stage, a girl, sponsored by a mature Sande woman, leaves the social domain of the village and passes through a screen of palm fronds, entering the Sande "bush." It is a cleared place in the forest or a secluded part of a town, where she is ritually separated from the larger society. The girl's sponsor sees that initiation fees and food are contributed from family and, perhaps, a potential husband.⁹ If a family cannot raise the fees from kin or moneylender, a girl may

⁹Initiation fees were about 20 pounds sterling in very rural areas of Kagboro Chiefdom in 1976. Bridewealth payments were about 25 pounds sterling.

become the ward of the *majo*, remaining in her care for four or five years, and in the liminal status of an initiate for three or four of those years. Girls from families that are wealthy or influential enough to send them to school may remain in the liminal state for the duration of a Christmas school vacation only. At a pragmatic level of analysis, there are social distinctions made between aristocratic girls who are transformed into women with a minimum of time and toil, while girls from less fortunate families may work for years making farms (a new farm is "made" each year) and extracting palm oil for the chapter's officials.

At a symbolic level of analysis, the liminal period is a timeless, abnormal, sacred period of marginality for all the initiates (see Turner, 1969, & Van Gennep, 1960 for a discussion of liminality). Old clothes and names are left behind. The girls' bodies are covered with a coating of white clay through the entire period of liminality. Every day is turned to night, since the initiates are required to arise, sweep the area, wash themselves, and sing Sande songs after the first cock crows, even if it is three o'clock in the morning.

"Dirt" is ritually washed away in daily cleansing rites. Senior officials stress their responsibility for teaching the cultural rules of cleanliness. Menstrual blood is properly disposed of, bringing that which is potentially polluting or dangerous, at the margin of the body, under cultural control. Cliterodectomy, performed at the beginning of the initiation period, is also described as making women "clean." One might speculate along the lines Douglas has developed that by excising the clitoris, a rudiment of maleness, all sexual ambiguity is removed from the incipient woman. She then fits "purely" and "safely" into the social structure, free from the "impurity" and "danger" of categorical ambiguity.

Any visible initiation scar or body modification is a public sign that the adult has been brought within a moral sphere marked by a social status. The body modification of a Sande woman, however, can only be known through intimate contact. The partner with whom she is sharing a sexual relationship is probably a man trained in the moral responsibility of a potential procreator in Poro, the men's initiation society. He will be confident that she is a Sande woman, trained in women's moral and practical responsibilities in procreation.

The pain of cliterodectomy is a metaphor for childbirth, which ideally takes place in the same grove under the expertise of the same *majo*, with the protection of Sande "medicine" and the social support of Sande "sisters." Shared pain and risk of death from infection in initiation helps to bond initiates together into a cohesive group. At the end of the initiation period, they swear an oath on Sande "medicine" never to reveal a fault in another Sande woman.¹⁰

Pleasures of feasting, singing, games, and dancing are measured with ordeals in the initiation grove, and girls look forward to the time when they may

¹⁰This is the ideal. An occasional dispute between Sande women may go outside their moral community into the Native Administration court. In such cases, Sande "medicine" may be used for swearing an oath to tell the truth in court.

go into Sande. Initiation occurs in the postharvest dry season, and quantities of special food are sent into the "bush" on the girls' behalf. It is a time of fattening, and wood carvings, which are ritual accoutrements to Sande ceremonies, depict females with three rings of flesh at the neck. A woman who is plump enough for the neck to crease is judged healthy, fertile, and beautiful, in contrast to "dry" and barren girls.¹¹

The initiation period ends when a "medicine" made by brewing leaves in water is used to ritually wash the initiates, removing the magical protection they enjoyed since entering the initiation grove. In their liminal state under magical protection, they were dangerous to any man who approached them sexually. Following the washing and final rituals of status transformation, all ambiguity about their womanhood is removed. They have become mature women in knowledgeable control of their own sexuality.

It is only after the initiation ceremonies have been completed that the women are eligible for marriage and childbearing.¹² Sande alone may certify women as eligible wives. Before hospitals provided an alternative, it also had a monopoly on delivering their legitimate children. Women seem to have the awareness that as a social group they control production of a scarce resource: offspring for their husbands' descent groups. To withhold that good is to have great power, and a woman can justifiably withhold herself from her husband if his behavior contravenes Sande law. Even more disconcerting, she, often in league with her mother, may threaten to use "medicine" to make him impotent. Rarely, however, will a woman withhold herself from her husband, since it is in her own self-interest to bear children. Children give her an honored status and rewarding roles to play during her fertile years. Later, children give her emotional and economic security in old age. After death, her children will remember her, giving her immortality.

Women organized into corporate groups thus intervene at the focus of social interest in a female's life: the period between first menstruation and onset of procreative sexuality. A bride is not transferred directly from one corporate descent group to another but passes through the intermediary institution of Sande initiation. Fees for initiation are as essential as bride wealth in obtaining a wife. The incipient husband and his kin are expected to help with initiation fees, often contributing the major portion together with bride wealth. Sande initiation is an important public ceremony. First menstruation, marriage, defloration, and birth of a first child are not. The structural point to be noted is that much of what is functionally bride wealth is not part of a reciprocal exchange between descent

¹¹See Frisch and McArthur (1974) for correlation between body fat and fertile ovulation cycles.

¹²This is the ideal. Some women have had sexual experience and even have had children and marriage with bride wealth before initiation. Although officials disapprove, they keep the doors open to initiation at any time in life. Similarly, some girls enter an initiation class before they begin to menstruate, although ideally they should not.

groups but is used in enriching and maintaining the Sande society in the expectation that it will continue to bring forth a plentiful supply of good wives.

A further point to be reiterated is that when the "natural" events of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, illness, and death come under the organized control of Sande knowledge, laws, and ritual they are brought decisively within the domain of culture. A theoretical model in which women are analogous to nature or outside the domain of culture and society does not apply to this study (see Ardener, 1972; Mathieu, 1973; MacCormack, 1977b).

INITIATION: A SCHOOL OF INSTRUCTION

When a girl goes through the portal of palm fronds into the forest grove, she is greeted by the older women singing "My child, come join society." The girls sing a response of "Yes, mother" (*ya* in Sherbro means mother or respected elder woman). The girls greet the elders with a hands-on-knees stooping gesture showing respect and obeisance.

A girl may enter the grove on her own initiative. For example, a student in a small rural secondary school was considered by her classmates to be a "girl," beneath the respected status of woman because she had not been initiated. At Christmas vacation she went into the grove and once there, her parents sent the necessary fees and food to see her through initiation.

The initiation class is hierarchically organized, with the first girl to pass through the portal being head girl, called *kema* in Sherbro. She may be the daughter of a high-ranking Sande official, but is not necessarily so. First to arise in the morning, she sees that the others arise, sweep, and wash themselves. During the day, she is the initiator and organizer of activities. She has the authority of an eldest sibling, or, more to the point, of the head wife in a polygynous household. The first in a set of siblings, cowives or initiates has more time to learn, becoming more skilled in practical and social matters than those who come after.

Ultimately it is the *majo* and other senior officials who are responsible for instruction. They stress that girls observe everything: farming, spinning, child-care, diagnosing illness, compounding and administering medicines, singing, and dancing. When a girl feels confident enough, she takes up a specific task. Ridicule and threats are used to spur the inept and idle. If these fail, the girl is directed to other tasks rather than being punished. In the evenings initiates and elders gather about the fire, singing, dancing, talking, and telling stories. The stories end in a moral or a dilemma which is debated long into the night, encouraging a more mature exploration of the human condition.

Most of what the household and farming work girls do during initiation is not new to them. Since they have assisted their mothers from an early age, it is not new skills but new attitudes toward work that they learn. In childhood they work in the role of daughter, but in Sande they begin to anticipate the role of wife

in which they will have to work cooperatively with their cowives and husbands' kin. During the initiation period they work on the *majo's* farm. They also cook, wash clothes, and daub mud houses in the manner of a married woman working cooperatively with her cowives. The imagery of death and rebirth is not as prominent in Sande initiation ceremonies as it is in Poro, where boys give up a more carefree childhood in taking on adult tasks.

Women spin; men weave. Men prepare the ground for cultivation; women weed. Sande and Poro are the root of a sharply delineated division of labor based upon sex. It is also the root of a symbolic interdependence between men and women, a force keeping marriages together against the pull of emotional security in the natal descent group.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ORGANIZATION AND AUTONOMY

Because Sande women are organized into effective corporate groups and enjoy female autonomy in all matters pertaining to Sande's sphere of interests, their political position in the larger society is enhanced. Although all members and officials of Sande are women, men, especially male chiefs, would like to control Sande. One incumbent Mende paramount chief stresses the fact that the most powerful local *majo* is one of his wives. Implicit in his statement is the allegation that he controls his wife and, therefore, controls Sande. However, when women go off to the Sande bush, they are physically separated from male control. A male chief who intrudes into the Sande private areas or secret ceremonies is trespassing against ancient Sande law. Whoever trespasses against that law is liable to suffer the divine retribution of physical illness or the concerted secular legal maneuvers of Sande women acting as a political interest group.

The community is dramatically reminded of Sande's sanctioning power when masked female ancestral figures appear in the village at the close of the initiation season. There may be two or three clothed in black helmet-type wooden masks and black raffia capes, completely hiding the figure of the woman inside. By the smooth, glossy black finish of the mask's "skin," its three rings at the neck representing fat on a well-fed woman, and the composure of the features carved on the face of the mask, the ideal of healthy, virtuous, serene womanhood is expressed. But a single mask of a second type also appears in a rough brown finish with white blotches about the face. Part of the cape is stained green, the rest red, a "strong" color, with a great bunch of large snail shells hanging on the cape. The blotchiness and decay of disease is represented on the mask, and the snail shells contain Sande "medicine." Where the black figures dance with controlled gracefulness, the blotched figure strides about shaking a bundle of switches at wrongdoers of either sex and all ages, reminding all who watch the public ceremony of Sande's power to catch and punish transgressors even if they sin in secret.

When one's illness is diagnosed as being caused by disrespect for Sande laws, the offender must go to the officials of the local chapter, publicly confess, pay a fine to the Sande officials, and submit to a cleansing ceremony. Or, Sande women may not wait for divine retribution but may physically carry the offender off to the Sande bush and chastise him.¹³ If a paramount chief attempts to interfere in Sande affairs, women may generate pressure to have him declared "unfit to rule." If a commission of inquiry is held, Sande women will testify in court and may be instrumental in his deposition from office.¹⁴

Sande laws make explicit the respect that should be shown to all women. The laws are carefully observed by both men and women, being reinforced by supernatural sanctions and by pragmatic political action on the part of women locally organized into a hierarchy of offices.¹⁵ Beyond considerations of organization and law, a deep feeling of social solidarity stems from women's activities as producers and reproducers within Sande's moral milieu, enhancing their capacity for concerted political action. In agricultural societies of the type found in southern and eastern Sierra Leone, hoeing, weeding, harvesting, and other tasks are best done in cooperative work groups, and cowives usually welcome a new wife in the household who will share in communal tasks.

Some writers taking a speculative evolutionary view of political development suggest that because women have not shared in the risks of hunting, they are not able to bond into political groups and do not have experience in decision-making. It may even be considered an aberration of human nature for women to hold political office (Tiger, 1969, p. 259). However, we have been a tropical animal for most of our evolutionary history, and among tropical people today women do hunt small and medium-sized game (Goodale, 1971, p. 169). As gatherers, they may make decisions that result in procurement of two or three times as much food, including protein, as men (Lee, 1968, p. 259). In settled agricultural societies as in Sierra Leone, women are important food producers, and the head wife in a complex household has considerable decision-making and executive powers that may lead to high political office (Hoffer, 1974).

In regard to risk-taking and social bonding, females in the hominid line have been experiencing the hazards of childbirth for at least as long as males have been experiencing the risks of hunting large animals. Childbirth is no less a social act than hunting, usually involving at a minimum the woman in labor and the midwife. In Sierra Leone, this risk-taking is embedded in the highly institutionalized Sande society. Vows explicitly expressing a social bond are taken

¹³Residents of Kagboro Chiefdom recall the time Sande women carried Paramount Chief Samuel Africanus Caulker (who ruled from 1919 to 1932) off to the Sande bush for using abusive language to his wives. They kept him there for several days, and he allegedly returned chastised and mellowed.

¹⁴See the case of the Paramount Chief of Tane Chiefdom, deposed in 1957 for offending Sande and other "native law and custom" (Sierra Leone Government 1957, p. 19).

¹⁵The Hut Tax War of 1898 was largely coordinated through the Poro society which is organized into informally linked local chapters similar to those of the Sande society (Fyfe, 1962, p. 55ff.; 1964, p. 247; Manna-Kpaka, 1953).

by initiates following the pain of clitorodectomy, a metaphor for the social support in pain in childbirth they will experience later. Qualitatively, this solidarity associated with risk-taking is not different from Poro vows of solidarity sworn on "medicine" before warriors go out. On an everyday level, there is a complementarity and balance in the strain and risk of work activities. Men climb oil palm trees to cut the fruits, or cut and burn the forest to prepare it for planting. Women do the safer but more extended tasks of extracting oil from the palm fruits, hoeing and weeding the crops, and gathering the harvest.

The decisions of Sande officials are no less fundamental to the survival of the population than decisions made by Poro officials, and executive strategies operated by Sande officials can be as overtly political as those made by the Poro. For example, a woman upon reaching maturity does not immediately leave her natal descent group for marriage and residence in her husband's group, but passes through Sande on the way. It is thus possible for some Sande leaders to have influence in arranging their initiates' first marriage. This strategy was developed to a fine art by Madam Yoko, a Mende chief renowned for her womanly grace and political power. Important families vied with each other to have their daughters trained and initiated in the chapter she headed. She selected girls from important descent groups, initiated them into Sande, and, at the urging of some parents, kept some in her household as wards. Later, acting as their marriage guardian, she gave them in marriage to men of prominence, thus making alliances with both families with each girl (Hoffer, 1974, pp. 182-183). By contrast, a male chief, by taking wives in marriages of political alliance, cannot send the women out again in marriage without breaking the first alliance link by divorce. Madam Yoko was thus able to use a political strategy unavailable to her male counterparts.

In the Republic of Sierra Leone women are enfranchised to vote. Politically prominent women who are also influential Sande women can allegedly insure large blocks of votes in national elections for themselves or candidates they favor by requiring Sande women to swear an oath on Sande "medicine" to vote for a specific candidate. This political strategy is not restricted to Sande women and is allegedly practiced in other secret societies as well (Cartwright, 1970, pp. 247-248).

CONCLUSION

There is a complementarity and balance in this ethnic area of Sierra Leone in which women participate fully in economic and political life. Sande laws insure respect for all women, and they gain considerable political experience in the enforcement of those laws. Their organization stems from a deep sense of social solidarity that begins in the initiation experience and continues in a spirit of cooperative assistance throughout life.