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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Celebrity, Violence, and the Mystic Arts

In Postwar Sierra Leone

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Culture and Performance

by

Samuel Mark Anderson

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Celebrity, Violence, and the Mystic Arts

In Postwar Sierra Leone

by

Samuel Mark Anderson

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Allen F. Roberts, Chair

Celebrity, Violence, and the Mystic Arts in Postwar Sierra Leone tracks the operations of Hassan Jalloh, once a commander in Sierra Leone's devastating civil war, now self-proclaimed "King of West Africa Mystical Power and Culture." Jalloh served in the Civil Defense Forces, a pro-government militia that mobilized the imagery and practices of village hunter traditions in pursuit of local legitimacy and esoteric defense maneuvers including disappearance, metamorphosis, and bullet-proofing. Faced with disarmament and doubtful reintegration at the end of the decade-long war, Jalloh turned to Allah for guidance, then redeployed his troops as the touring Warrior Cultural and Mystical Power Dance Troupe. Through the virtuosic fusion of acts that might variously appear as fearsome masked dancing, military pageantry, bloody self-mutilation, and sleight-of-hand hocus-pocus, Jalloh publicly demonstrates the abilities he

acquired in wartime and expounds on themes ranging from Islamic doctrine and cultural reconstruction to nationalism and HIV/AIDS prevention.

Building from more than eighteen months of research employing participant observation, oral histories, archival records, and critical videography, I follow Hassan Jalloh's Warriors and other troupes as they travel throughout the Mende regions of Sierra Leone and across numerous sites at which spectacle is used to manifest, marshal, and mitigate violence. I use Jalloh's program of acts as a thematic link between performances of militias, herbalists, subcultures, and initiatory societies, bringing their shared logics and aesthetics into focus. Each case exemplifies how Sierra Leonean individuals and institutions currently exploit public spectacle to navigate and influence unstable transitions between physical violence of open conflict, memories of violence, and the structural violence of consolidations of political power. Rather than unidirectional transmission from the spectated to the spectator, these performances hinge on a living interface, a relationship summed up in Jalloh's onstage axiom, "I am seeing you seeing me." Spectacles in Sierra Leone are events at which extraordinary visuality conjures crowds for many ends: to judge, to heal, to educate, to manifest invisible forces, and—most importantly in the postwar context—to effect personal and social transformations.

The dissertation of Samuel Mark Anderson is approved.

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2014

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NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

The research for this project was conducted in English, Mende, and Krio. To differentiate, Krio terms are preceded by “kr.” the first time they appear if they are otherwise unspecified. In both Mende and Krio, pronunciation of consonants is practically the same as English. For vowels, pronunciation is *a* as in “part,” *e* as in “play,” *ɛ* as in “pet,” *i* as in “greet,” *o* as in “foe,” *ɔ* as in “pot,” and *u* as in “troupe.”

Mende orthography remains contested. I use Gordon Innes’ *Mende-English Dictionary* (1969) due to the scope of its vocabulary, but I have also made some compensations to more closely approximate certain words and phrases as I heard them. Mende words may receive an initial consonant mutation in certain formations. For example, *ndoli* (“dance”), becomes *kɔ loli* (“war dance”). Also, any specific concrete instance of a word receives an *-i* suffix. For example, one speaks of *ndoli* in the abstract but any specific instance would be *a/the ndolii*. Concrete plurals are formed with the *-isia* suffix, as in many *ndolisia*. I follow these formatting conventions in the text. An exception is titles of *heisia* (masked spirits or kr. *debul den*), which I leave unchanged in both singular and plural cases, e.g. one *gbini* and many *gbini*.

My conversations with Hassan Jalloh were mostly in English. In quoting him, as well as other interlocutors, I try to remain true to his character and patterns of speaking, as his idiosyncratic syntax and word use have logics of their own. In matters of grammar, as for all other matters, Jalloh insists, “I do my own thing, I don’t allow things to do me.”

NOTE ON VIDEO MATERIALS

Celebrity, Violence, and the Mystic Arts in Postwar Sierra Leone is accompanied by three short films corresponding to Hassan Jalloh's "items" described in the text. The first video depicts two acts from "Item One"; the first is Jalloh's lip-sync performance to Musu Kabundu Kainley's "Somebody's Calling," and the second is the Warriors' group dance, "Marching Down to Gendema Highway" (sometimes titled "Marching Down to Zion"). The second video depicts a variety of Jalloh's gift acts from "Item Two." The third video covers Jalloh's box act as described in the "Final Item."

In each of these videos, I have edited together scenes filmed at multiple different performances. To clarify the locales, the name of each town or village is printed in the lower right corner of each shot. My intention is to create a clear and concise account of the progression of each act, a task which would have been difficult to accomplish with a single camera at any one performance. At the same time, I hope to gesture, via the technique of cinematic montage, towards the many variations differentiating iterations of the acts as Jalloh and his men perform and improvise at disparate sites.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many, many thanks to my many, many hosts in Sierra Leone. Very special thanks to Abubakarr Juana and Foday “Bamsu” Bangura in Freetown, Bockarie Mansaray in Kenema, and Alimamy Jaia Kaikai in Kailahun for research and logistical support. Of course, my heartiest thanks go to Hassan Jalloh and all the Warriors, along with the Mammy Yoko Troupe, and many many other artists whose names may not have appeared in this text but who I plan to address in the future. Danny Hoffman offered me this project during the briefest but richest of meetings before my first visit to Sierra Leone. He is but the first of a large number of brilliant scholars working in the region with whom I have received the benefit of conversation and insight.

My deepest gratitude to my committee, Allen Roberts, Don Cosentino, Steven Nelson, and Aparna Sharm, especially for their rigorous inspection, endless hospitality, and boundless inspiration they have provided me. The other professors, students, and staff at UCLA to whom I owe my thanks are too numerous to name.

I gratefully acknowledge financial support for this project from a number of donors. Fieldwork research was made possible by the considerate assistance of an International Dissertation Research Fellowship, granted by the Social Science Research Council. Further fieldwork was supported by a Graduate Student Research Fellowship from the UCLA International Institute. Preliminary fieldwork was sponsored by a Summer Research Mentorship Fellowship from the UCLA Graduate Division. My dissertation year has been supported by the generous support of a Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, provided by the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation and administered by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, as well as a Dissertation Year Fellowship from the UCLA Graduate Division.

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Celebrity, Violence, and the Mystic Arts in Postwar Sierra Leone

Introduction

The resonant throb of a bass drum. The rapid-fire crackle of a snare. The grinding roar of an accelerating 4-wheel-drive flatbed. A foreign racket punctures the still soundscape of quotidian village life. Almost immediately, the visitors' racket is met by the response of their hosts. Cries begin on the edges but soon reverberate throughout of the community, high-pitched chants of children underscored by a few exceptionally enthusiastic adults. "Heeey!" "Wo yo yoooo!" and then "Hassan Jalloh! Hassan Jalloh! Hassan Jalloh! Hassan Jalloh!"

Before long the source of this extraordinary auditory atmosphere explodes into view. Individuals hidden away from the midday sun suddenly emerge from shaded verandas. Children race out from under mango trees or inside schoolyards. Crowds converge along the main road as the spectacle of a truck overburdened with props, instruments, stereo equipment, and performers looms into view, followed by Hassan Jalloh's sleek but dusty burgundy Mercedes and perhaps one or two hired motorbikes carrying local producers or a foreign researcher. The vehicles pull to a stop by the community *semei* (kr. *barri*), the large, roofed building that serves as the village meeting space, court, and disco. The truck begins to disgorge its occupants, a crew of proud, wiry young men sporting dreadlocks and vibrant reggae and hip-hop inflected fashions. Drummers Idrissa Senassie and Sheku Saidu continue to rattle away from their perch atop the load. Gbessay Konteh, the "shortest Warrior," may or may not have decided to suffer the

outsized attention of the village's children and impudent youths; if not, he tries to shield himself inside the truck. Upon the appearance of the local welcoming committee, Hassan Jalloh himself emerges from his Mercedes and strides forward with a magnanimous grin. As he is led away to discuss the arrangements, the crowd disperses, destined to reunite that evening for the play of King Hassan Jalloh's Warrior Cultural and Mystical Power Dance Troupe.

Hassan Jalloh designs each moment of his public appearance so as to heighten the spectacle of his celebrity. He directs his percussionists to strike up not only where they play but in every community they traverse along the way. In this way, his existence is constantly marked and remarked upon, keeping him present in the public's imagination. Such brief manifestations provoke conversations about Jalloh and his mystic miracles, his politics, and his militaristic past. The drums carry Jalloh's fame far and gossip carries it further. Between them, they produce both a call to witness and a promise of wonder.

In his touring cultural show, Hassan Jalloh offers not only entertainment, but also models of metamorphosis for Sierra Leone audiences to consider and discuss. He mobilizes local conceptions of culture and spectacle as events of extraordinary visibility to pull a crowd. The many attractions of spectacle constitute an intimate public, a site for the performance of self before one's society and an opportunity to experiment with potential directions for social action.¹ Jalloh takes full advantage of his spotlight to endeavor to shape his public's views and actions regarding topics as diverse as Islamic doctrine and cultural reconstruction to national politics and HIV/AIDS prevention. Yet his proclamations are not unidirectional. As a public figure, he must be attuned to opinion about himself, both on and off the field, and shift his self-presentation according. For all their practiced professionalism, Jalloh's spectacles are constant, improvised

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1958).

renegotiations of his relationship to his public and their shifting values. His mystic displays are an ideal format in which to explore change, as they exemplify extraordinary transfiguration.

As a celebrity, Hassan Jalloh's biography offstage offers a particularly germane prototype for personal and social change. During Sierra Leone's devastating decade-long Civil War (1991-2002), Jalloh served with the Civil Defense Forces (CDF), a pro-government militia that arose to both combat rebels and address the failures of a corrupt and ineffective national army. To bolster its local legitimacy, the CDF mobilized the imagery and practices of village hunter traditions. Especially vital to the CDF's public image were its members' claims to mystic technologies including disappearance, metamorphosis, and bullet-proofing. Jalloh was initiated into the CDF and rose quickly through its ranks, leading counterattacks on significant rebel camps before being assigned the vital task of defending Sierra Leone's porous border with Liberia. In Jalloh's autobiographical narrative, he began to receive visions and dreams in the bush, then manifested mystic militaristic powers including invisibility, teleportation, and transformation.

By the close of the conflict, every faction had been accused of abuse and atrocities, whether rebel, army, or CDF. Jalloh predicted the difficulties he and his men would have in returning to civilian life, troubles later faced by the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programs, the Special Court for Sierra Leone, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As a devout Muslim, he turned to Allah and was blessed with the vision of a path forward. He gathered his men and presented his plan to transform the troops into a touring cultural troupe, performing the mystic powers they had acquired in wartime in the name of peace.

As radical as Jalloh's redeployments of mystic forces may appear, it is of a kind with long histories of Sierra Leoneans' manipulation of highly mutable and fluid practices.

Historically, Sierra Leone has long been an intersection for numerous societies, even before the British established a colony expressly designed to host freed Africans from across the world. These proliferations of different communities engendered both sweeping diversity and intense conflict. Borrowing and accumulation have emerged among the most successful social strategies under these conditions. From masked spirits to food to language, culture has been continuously appropriated and disseminated across ethnicities and other presumed boundaries.

Perhaps the most influential social formations to arise out of regional traditions of cultural exchange have been the gendered initiatory societies, most significantly the men's Poro society and the women's Sande or Bundu society. Both are ostensibly voluntary associations, but both have such significant social impact that, in many regions, to refuse membership is tantamount to refusing one's place in the community. Poro, in particular, has historically had a hand in everything from regulatory ritual to chieftaincy succession to education to economic transactions, and was observed by colonial officials to "embody everything or anything that is good or bad in the country."² Poro was apparently forged during the fraught period of radical social destabilization exacerbated by slave-raiding economies that lasted well into the colonial era, and as a trans-ethnic association, Poro served as a vital arena for contestation and mediation between communities. Whatever its militaristic past, Poro failed to adapt to the conditions of the Civil War and most communities suspended activities for the duration of the conflict. In the postwar era however, both Poro and Sande have returned with force and many regions are struggling to keep up with the demand for initiations. Despite their popularity, these societies currently face considerable challenges to their influence, as they have throughout recorded history. Both Poro and Sande engage in some of the most spectacular of Sierra Leone's

² Braithwaite Wallis, "The 'Poro' of the Mendi," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 4, no. 14 (January 1905): 183.

performing arts traditions, as initiations and chiefly funerals host visitations from spirit realms, masked dances known generally as kr. *debul* or “devils,” that engage their entire communities.

Many other performance arts have proliferated in Sierra Leone’s fertile cultural fusions. Village associations, smaller and more informal than Poro, generate and perform their own “devils,” borrowing elements from other societies and adding their own inventions.³ Dancers, singers, acrobats, and magicians have toured throughout the region seeking new audiences and patrons for as long as written records can recount.⁴ Professional storytelling briefly flourished as the most popular form of rural Mende performance—blending dance, song, and pantomime—although the art was already waning before the war and has now been absorbed into musician and magician professions.⁵ The creative powers of artists have often been aligned with the mystic powers of herbalists and healers, and the two professions are often interchangeable.

In addition to fluid transitions of practices between different ethnicities and communities, Sierra Leoneans have long transferred practices between different fields of action. “Devil” forms pass between closed Poro functions and open entertainments. Identical mystic acts are demonstrated alternately for war, for medicine, or for pleasure. The same dances and songs may promote chiefs, politicians, healers, or the performer’s own agenda. Practitioners themselves move in and out of these different spheres. Jalloh’s own trajectory may be unique, but many other cultural artists passed through paramilitary organizations, seeking ways to apply their skills to chaotic times. Almost all contemporary performer biographies flow through some

³ William C. Siegmann and Judith Perani, “Men’s Masquerades of Sierra Leone and Liberia,” *African Arts* 9, no. 3 (1976): 42–47.

⁴ cf. Frederick William Hugh Migeod, *A View of Sierra Leone* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 250–54; Warren L. d’Azevedo, “Sources of Gola Artistry,” in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, ed. Warren L. d’Azevedo (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 282–340.

⁵ Donald J. Cosentino, “Lele Gbomba and the Style of Mende Baroque,” *African Arts* 13, no. 3 (1980): 54.

configuration of initiatory societies, professional entertainments, militias, traditional medicine, political rallies, NGO projects, and anywhere else their talents can take them.

The core argument of this thesis is that spectacular, public recontextualizations of established practices within new social frames are the primary engine of collective transformation in postwar Sierra Leone. By virtue of his onstage acts and offstage celebrity, Hassan Jalloh exemplifies such transformative powers, but he is far from the only figure using cultural performance to offer his public a model for social change. The following text offers a variety of comparative sites at which alternative responses to the forces shaping Sierra Leone are being proposed.

Much social transformation in Sierra Leone is now directed towards the nation's immediate legacy of violence. Spectacle is a key means by which Jalloh and other actors are reframing practices and practitioners of violence in new postwar contexts. By re-presenting his men as "once warriors, now peace promoters for peace in our lovely country of Sierra Leone," Jalloh suggests both personal and collective changes from a time of "war" to a time of "peace." Such acts facilitate transitions from the physical violence of open conflict to violence's memorial representation and historicization. As Jalloh's fervent nationalism attests, spectacles can also facilitate the structural violence engendered by the State's reassertion of its monopoly on violence. For example, the widespread national discourse of "nonviolence" evident during Sierra Leone's 2012 elections obscured the lack of any serious debate about the political direction of the country. Spectacle catalyzes transfigurations into and out of many different forms of violence.

Sierra Leoneans are negotiating a host of other challenges related to the end of open hostilities. A massive influx of internationalist interest and oversight—whether through the UN,

the UK and other nations, or international NGOs—seem likely to transform society more radically and irrevocably than the war. Sierra Leoneans are trying to balance often contradictory demands of multiple communities, from their village to their region to their nation to the international community. Spectacle is a public arena in which the established beliefs and practices of these divergent communities may be recombined and experimented with. Hassan Jalloh carefully orients his presentations so as to balance his Islam, his ethnicity, his culture, and his nation. During the Civil War, militias used spectacle to experiment with combinations of locally produced mystic powers and global media. A union of traditional healers is now using the spectacle of national witchfinding operations to fuse regional herbalism and international biomedicine. “Rasta” subcultures offer artists spectacular global and pan-African models with which to challenge consolidations of power. Poro continues to use spectacle, as it apparently always has, to model public and private social action in order to balance its own claims to autonomy with outsiders’ calls for participation. Such performances reveal that publicity and privacy, secrecy and spectacle, all constitute different aspects of a single process of negotiating power.

Road Map

The geographical breadth of the Warrior Mystical Power and Cultural Dance Troupe’s travels is matched by the breadth of the social structures with which they interpenetrate. While Jalloh’s aspirations and ingenuity drive his perambulations across Sierra Leone, they are even more vital to the ways in which he aligns his arts with the projects of other powerful institutions throughout Sierra Leonean society. The wartime practices of Jalloh’s Civil Defense Forces (CDF) exemplified this creative repurposing of cultural idioms from multiple institutions,



Figure 1. Hassan Jalloh and the Warriors. Gbeika, Njaluahun Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

synthesizing earlier practices of hunters, Poro, Islamic mystics and kr. *morimen* (preparers of sacred talismans and other devices), cultural dance troupes, and guerilla war tactics, among other sources.⁶ Jalloh has taken this potent cultural potpourri and integrated it with international NGOs, Islamic *da'wah* (proselytizing), and national party politics, aligning his work with the most powerful institutions in Sierra Leone today.

The chapters of this thesis are organized along two parallel arcs: one on the scale of Jalloh's performances and the other on the scale of the Sierra Leonean nation's shifting relationship to violence. Across the chronology of Jalloh's performance, each of his individual acts, or "items" as he describes them, are described so as to elucidate a different aspect of contemporary Sierra Leone and how Jalloh and the Warriors integrate themselves into that dynamic. These individual "items" serve as interludes providing parallels and counterpoints to the themes developed in surrounding chapters.

The more substantial chapters are organized so as to suggest some of the protracted transitions that accompany widespread violence. Histories of wars typically begin with causes of the conflict, follow the escalation of bloodshed, then end with treaties and the "restoration" of social harmony. These narratives, purposefully or inadvertently, depict violence as an exceptional eruption or an abnormal suspension of an otherwise "normal" state of peace. However, much of the historical scholarship on Sierra Leone written during the war recalled that for most of recorded history—a period including the strife of slave raiding, colonialism, and civil

⁶ Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Mariane Ferme, "La Figure Du Chasseur et Les Chasseurs-Miliciens Dans Le Conflit Siera-Léonais," *Politique Africaine* 82 (2001): 119–32.

devastation—the divisions between peace and war have been indistinct and unpredictable.⁷

Violent experiences in the region have not been consigned to oblivion but resurfaced in each new iteration of violent action through “palimpsest memoryscapes.”⁸ These continuities suggest how violence persists in memory, discourse, politics, and aesthetics outside times of outright warfare and social chaos. By violence’s “descent into the ordinary” in order to subvert its exceptionality to some degree, this dissertation follows the forms violence takes between crises.⁹ I begin in the mayhem of violence’s most brutal physical manifestations, then follow its slide and integration into everyday life through the reassertion and consolidation of the State’s monopoly of violence, the consequent violences of exclusion and structural violence, and finally, the threat of new crisis as ritual forms of violence risk coming into conflict with other structures.

The process of mitigating and mobilizing violence is described across the work of four collectives—militias, herbalists, youths, and initiatory societies—whose actions in some way parallel or intersect Jalloh’s. Not all of these groups have had direct contact with Jalloh, and I will not necessarily be making all parallels explicit. Instead, I depend on the principles of *montage*, long an inspiration for both filmmakers and ethnographers, in order to create meaning out of the juxtaposition of images.¹⁰ Jalloh’s approach to problems such as memorialization, nationalism, and social transformation are presented alongside the approaches of other actors and

⁷ Mariane Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁸ Paul Basu, “Palimpsest Memoryscapes: Materializing and Mediating War and Peace in Sierra Leone,” in *Reclaiming Heritage: Alternative Imaginaries of Memory in West Africa*, ed. Ferdinand De Jong and Michael Rowlands (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), 231–59.

⁹ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁰ cf. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); George Marcus, “The Modernist Sensibility in Recent Ethnographic Writing and the Cinematic Metaphor of Montage,” *Visual Anthropology Review: Journal of the Society for Visual Anthropology* 6, no. 1 (1990): 2–12+21+44; Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

institutions; their contrasts and continuities suggest the breadth of contemporary Sierra Leonean responses to postwar social challenges. The text is designed to allow one to read the entire narrative of Jalloh's performance, skipping other chapters, in order to focus on the structure of his spectacles and discourse. Conversely, one can drop into the various individual chapters, each of which are essentially self-contained. Taken as a complete collection of sites, the chapters demonstrate the diversity of Sierra Leoneans' mobilizations of the power of spectacle to enact social transformation.

In the "Preliminary Item," Jalloh's own introduction of himself leads to a discussion of his process of discursive framing. By carefully introducing his own personal history, his character, and his intentions for his acts, Jalloh frames his spectacles so as to guide his spectators towards certain interpretations. I use this introductory moment to make two framing gestures of my own. In the first, I explain the rationale for defining "spectacle" as an event of extraordinary visibility that pulls a crowd and for using it as the predominant theoretical lens for the analyses that follow. In the second, I describe my methods and my positionality in the field.

Chapter One, "Mobilizing Culture," uses Hassan Jalloh's well-rehearsed autobiography as a framework around which to describe the ways in which "culture" has been defined and mobilized in Sierra Leone in both war and peacetime. Sierra Leoneans' fluid definition of "culture" makes it a category of social action with surprising flexibility. As they have throughout recorded history, Sierra Leoneans successfully move practices in and out of multiple social milieux. In war, both the rebels and the pro-government militias used practices such as healing medicines, initiations, and performances of mystic acts as technologies promoting offense, defense, and unit cohesion. In peacetime, many of these same technologies have been redirected

towards memorialization, nationalism, NGO development projects, and economies of community mutual aid.

“Item One” describes Jalloh’s introductory songs and dances as well as the Warriors’ uniforms. As the first staged actions of Jalloh’s repertoire, they epitomize an accumulative approach to both culture and memory, one in which practices of music, fashion, and dance are layered on top of each other rather than replicated in isolation as customs of the past. Through choreographic historiography, these acts narrate a history of the war and Jalloh’s place in that history.

Chapter Two, “Rebranding Culture,” leaps to Freetown to investigate the controversial activities of the Sierra Leone Indigenous Traditional Healers’ Union (SLITHU), a organization that invokes nationalism in order to unify and regulate the intrinsically diverse and acephalous practices of traditional medicine throughout Sierra Leone. The Union’s declared purview envelops all cultural performers and initiatory societies in the country, although this tremendous ambition has not been matched by governmental support or approval. Through spectacular witch-finding operations that reference the postwar programs of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) for former combatants, the union appropriates nationalism in the interest of consolidating their own power. SLITHU uses the Sierra Leonean State’s reconsolidation of its monopoly on physical violence to justify restrictions placed on individual herbalists and healers. Such appropriations of the terms and powers of the nation suggests that nationalism is not solely an ideology impressed upon subjects of the State by agents of the State; nationalism is also an arena that subjects may choose in which to experiment productively with the fusion of incommensurable global and local practices. Yet the dangers and controversies surrounding these experimentations and consolidations of power are demonstrated by local

healers' rejection of SLITHU on the occasion of its launch in Kenema. The Union's failure to live up to its mandate to represent all traditional practitioners in the nation demonstrates the inherent risks that remain in the consolidation of power and violence under the supervision of the State.

Hassan Jalloh has developed his own models for integrating nationalist fervor and mystic artistry.¹¹ "Item Two" describes Jalloh's acts of gift giving, acts in which presents for select spectators wondrously appear from beneath a presumably empty tarp. Through these gifts, Jalloh constitutes the Sierra Leonean nation through defining subcategories of age, status, gender, and ethnicity among different populations of his spectators. He also marks out his own subject position, juggling his identity as an ethnic Fula with his identity as a national subject so as to extend his own agency as far as socially possible.

Nationalist projects, whether the consolidations of SLITHU or the "sorting" acts of Jalloh or other efforts to "reconstruct" society, consign many individuals and practices to social margins. Chapter Three, "Confounding Culture," is a portrait of the Mammy Yoko Cultural Dance Troupe, the Warrior's main competition on the Mende touring performance circuit. Mammy Yoko and the Warriors are the only outfits in Southern Sierra Leone with the capacity to maintain a schedule of nightly performances and they perform many of the same kinds of acts, but their similarities stop there. Made up of malcontents and exiles from the National Dance Troupe, the Warriors, and other more established companies, Mammy Yoko is a motley crew of misfits and outcasts. Taking direction from a former-RUF insider with no training in cultural performance, Mammy Yoko's structure is much more ad hoc and volatile than the Warriors or other cohesive troupes. Yet this chaotic collective is nonetheless a community. This chapter

¹¹ To my knowledge, Jalloh is unaware of SLITHU, though SLITHU's president claimed to know him.

tracks some of the outsiders who make up Mammy Yoko's rotating roster of performers in order to explicate local conceptions of difference and argue for subculture's role in the rural areas of the Global South. These kinds of provisional associations become spaces in which individuals discover unexpected affinities between disparate practices including herbal medicine, Rastafarianism and hip hop, alternative gender constructions, and numerous performing arts. Generated as much by their distance from broader society as they are by their constituent individuals, such communities become a repository for practices that are rejected but not outright eliminated by most Sierra Leoneans. From these isolated and often frustrated subcultures, practices persist and mutate until they emerge into the public conscience in spectacular form, as they did during the "Rebel War." Yet they also possess the potential for parody, pastiche, and social critique.

"Item Three" tracks one such mystic practice as it recedes from the forefront of local imaginaries to the margins. Among the most widespread mystic acts in Mendeland are a set of bloody spectacles known by a Temne term, *sukubana*. In these displays, dancers sever their tongues, gouge out their eyes, and disembowel each other to the horror of their audiences, only to mystically restore their bodies to wholeness. While these acts experienced a surge of popularity in the immediate postwar period, they are now falling out of favor. Hassan Jalloh's decision to stop performing his version of this spectacle epitomizes the process through which he and his spectators mutually reinvent each other while revealing the nature of Jalloh's audience as a public space in which to debate common interests.

Chapter Four, "Defending Culture," extends the discussion of local publics to a site that might at first appear counter-intuitive: Poro, the extraordinarily restricted initiatory society that has shaped social lives of the region for at least the past four hundred years. The laws of secrecy

enshrouding Poro appear to exempt it from public discourse and to protect the society's autocratic grip on control over its communities from open debate. However, a closer examination of Poro's secret, private, and public activities reveals that these different aspects are mutually constitutive, not mutually exclusive. Poro instantiates a radically different alignment of publicity and privacy than the ideals of NGOs and government bodies that align public scrutiny with personal autonomy. Through spectacle, Poro's restrictive power of discretion constitutes a public arena of social action, proscribes participants' responsibilities, and dramatizes action's inherent risks. In spite of its limitations, Poro offers a space for debate and social change, but one in which change and transformation are recognized as carrying the threat of extraordinary violence.

The "Final Item" describes Jalloh's preeminent performance of individual and social action, his grand finale, a display of dramatic personal self-transformation that is intimately tied to his own autobiography. This mystic display may appear like a simple change of clothes, but it implicitly executes much more radical shifts of individual identification. Jalloh's inventive leaps between identities exemplify how spectacle and the spectacular personality of the celebrity can become the locus around which social and personal change are imagined and instantiated.

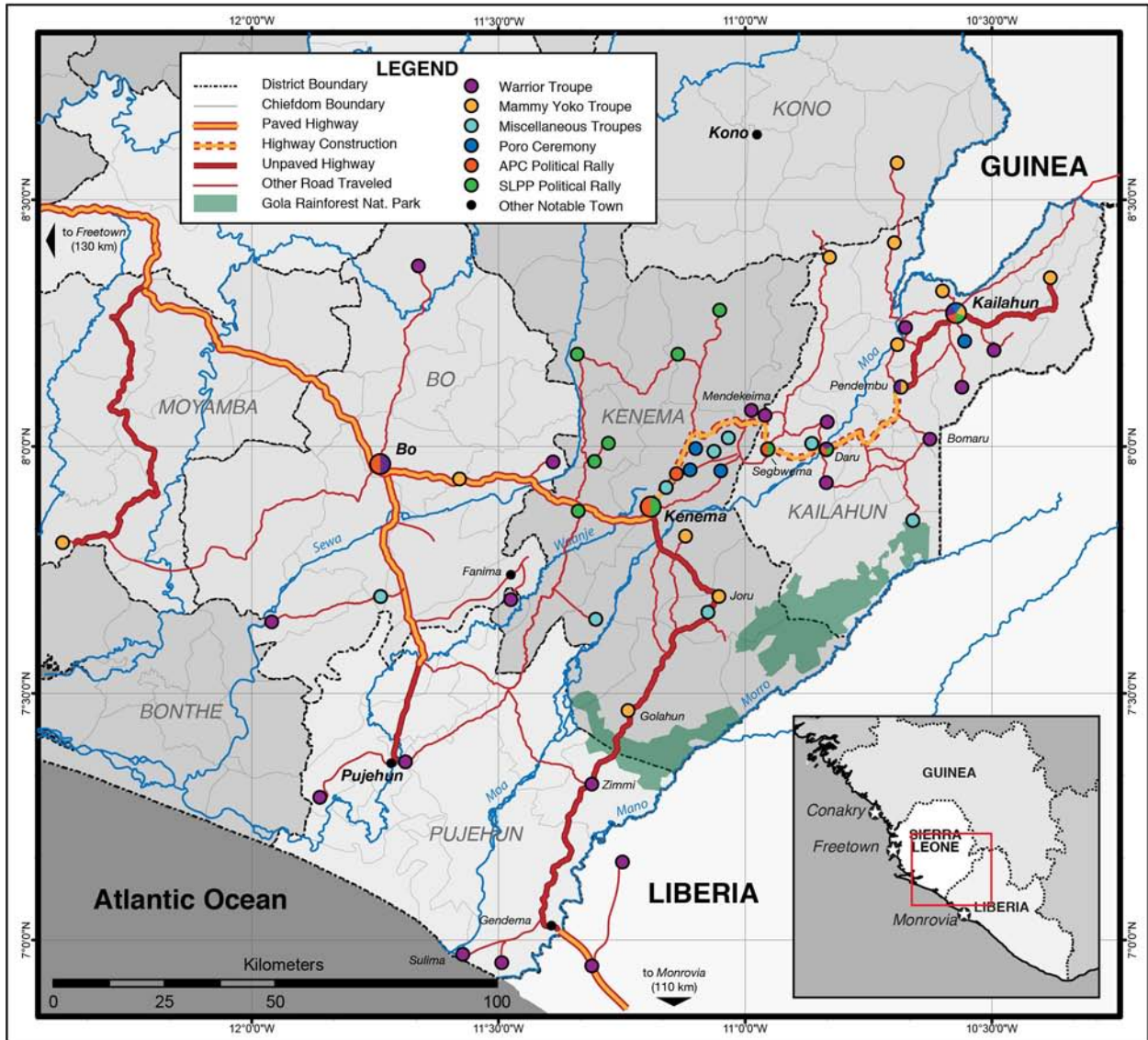


Figure 2. Map of SE Sierra Leone. The depicted routes do not represent the roadways' full extent. After Sierra Leone Information Systems (SLIS) and the United Nations (UN) Cartographic Section.

Preliminary Item: "Let Me Tell You Something About Myself..."

"YOU KNOW ME. I'M KNOWN AS HASSAN JALLOH."

Ladies and gentlemen. Let me tell you something aBOUT my self.
You know me. I'm known as Hassan Jalloh.
My title is king, which I deserve and merit it.
King of Africa mystical power. In culture.
You know?
I am a simple man by nature but I am only hard in my skin.
I have to do my own things. I won't allow things to do me.
I have to do my own things. I won't allow them to do me. Do you know why?
It is because of overrunning, I don't want to be overrun by anybody or overrun by anything else.
So I have to do my own things, I don't allow things to do me.
But in doing anything...
My hope and relies on God.
I will not promise more than I will do but I will do more than I promise.
Whatever I am doing... with God I can do a lot of tings.
With GOD, I can do possibly tings.
With GOD, I can do any ting.
With GOD, I can do ALL ting.
But le me res assure you ladies and gentlemen. Without God, I... me... King Hassan Jalloh will not do anything and I BELIEVE without God nothing can be possible.
[Applause]

The voice of Hassan Jalloh, former Deputy National Task Commander for the pro-government Civil Defense Forces (CDF) militia and present-day "King of West African Mystical Power and Culture," is unmistakable. Operating in a warm, resonant timbre across a broad sweep of pitch, it registers deeply enough to convey age and authority while simultaneously accessing piercing or playful tenor notes that keep his public engaged. Jalloh earns much of his elocutionary impact by



Figure 3. King Hassan Jalloh. Gbeika, Njaluwahun Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

deploying this vocal range in different forms to different constituencies in his audience. Addressing youths in the audience, he tacks from a soft, playful drawl, often in falsetto to heighten his teasing satire, to sharp, cutting admonishments the moment he turns to moral preaching. The contrast is jarring and coercive. When mock-flirting with women, young and old, he runs the scales of his voice from high to low to demonstrate how their beauty challenges his moral character. When talking to his *yeini* (mothers) on the other hand, Jalloh mobilizes a gentle, reassuring rumble on pleasant, conservative subjects. When addressing his (usually indeterminate) enemies, he activates a high-pitched, brusque staccato. In his opening remarks, imparted after first taking the microphone and quoted above, he affects the clean crisp delivery of state authority in formal English, the emphasis on certain words tweaked so as to emphasize his own unique character. He continues through the deployment of traditional wisdom through aphorism before he finally landing on the enthusiastic exhortations of Islamic sermon.

Before they partake of his melodious address, the spectators of the Warrior Mystical Power and Cultural Dance Troupe have already witnessed Jalloh's singular elongated form as it fluidly loped into view behind the martial entry choreography of his "boys," and while it energetically mimed and gesticulated through the show's two opening numbers. His lean, angular profile makes him appear much taller than his two meters, an effect intensified by the fact that almost all his players are a head shorter than he is. His face is long with a noble equine quality, and his strong jawline expertly accommodates indignant grimace, mocking gape, and winning smile. His dreadlocks and the theatrically intense fashion with which he swings them out of his face seem so much a part of his persona that it is hard to imagine that time before he joined the CDF militia when his skull was clean cropped, much less that potential future in which he performs the Hajj and leaves such stylistic flourishes behind. He slenderness is a

dramatic break from the engorged belly of the typical African “Big Man,” a ubiquitous marker of success that even his twin brother has cultivated.¹ Even so, it attests to his own particular form of charisma, one tightly tied to youth via energy and unpredictability. In fact, the only hint that belies Jalloh’s 50-plus years is his arthritic right hand and the manner in which it delicately curls about objects, from his mystic fly whisk to his cell phone, like a claw. His similarly gnarled feet are usually hidden within bright red tennis shoes, which act as a crimson accent to his stage uniform. His regalia consists of *bogolan* mud print overalls apparently gifted to him by Malian hunters he met in his international travels, an outfit as remarkable and outlandish (in the literal sense) for his Sierra Leonean viewers as it is steeped in “African tradition.” In short, Jalloh is more than a seductive orator. He is human spectacle.

Jalloh is nonetheless extraordinarily careful to frame how his public is meant to perceive his spectacular acts and persona. Through his introductory remarks, he sets the stage for the scenes that follow, primarily through the idiom of his own confessional self-description: *Let me tell you something about my self.*

First, Jalloh makes clear he has abandoned the militaristic epithet “Commander” for that of “King,” a title that speaks of tradition in the abstract without impinging on any particular rank of local significance, for example *mahei* (chief), which he has no right to claim.² For Jalloh, the term “king” does not indicate a royal lineage, nor any particular duties or responsibilities he has

¹ cf. Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 211–69.

² Jalloh is neither a member of a chiefly lineage nor ethnically “Mende,” having a Fula father and a Mende mother. On Jalloh’s negotiation of his ethnicity, see Item Two. On the negotiation of rights to Mende chieftaincy, see Sjoerd Hofstra, “Personality and Differentiation in the Political Life of the Mendi,” *Africa* 10, no. 4 (1937): 436–57; William P. Murphy, “Creating the Appearance of Consensus in Mende Political Discourse,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 92, no. 1 (March 1990): 24–41.

undertaken. Rather, “king” is a title signifying his exceptional skill and lofty stature.³ For that reason, he can claim to “merit and deserve it” rather than inherit or serve it.

The Warriors’ performances are fully improvised, and no two performances or speeches are exactly the same. Nonetheless, Jalloh consistently invokes a number of key aphoristic phrases as landmarks around which he orients his talking points.⁴ These phrases include time-honored Mende proverbs, both faithful and (purposely?) mangled English slogans, and catchphrases of his own invention. In these early speeches, he focuses on a few formulae that emphasize his own self-determination and independence. By speaking English at this point rather than Mende or Krio, he stresses personal authority and cosmopolitanism.⁵ His clear articulation and rhythmic weight mark the phrases as recognizably quoted even to those who do not know or understand them, attesting to his fluency across multiple milieus. With seeming irony, he claims to be “a simple man by nature,” genial and readily approachable by the common people despite being thick-skinned. Across these few lines, Jalloh quickly helps us navigate his many self-conscious paradoxes, in essence explaining that these contradictions are an effect of his powerful autonomy. Jalloh is free of all influence but his own will.

Free of all influence, that is, except for God. In perhaps the most important passage of his introduction, Jalloh calls upon his singular relationship with Allah. The powers that he is about to display are the fruit of a blessing from God, a gift of *baraka* Jalloh can share with the people

³ cf. Danny Hoffman on titles as “maps” of patronage and “aspiration,” rather than rank in the CDF. Danny Hoffman, “The Meaning of a Militia: Understanding the Civil Defence Forces of Sierra Leone,” *African Affairs* 106, no. 425 (2007): 652–54.

⁴ On the many situational meanings of African proverbs, see Kwesi Yankah, *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric: A Theory of Proverb Praxis* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); Ruth H. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2012), 375–411.

⁵ On code-switching, cf. Peter Auer, *Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Alamin Mazrui, “Slang and Code Switching: The Case of Sheng in Kenya,” *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere* 42 (1995): 168–79.

as a form of prayer as much as entertainment.⁶ Jalloh’s careful invocation of piety, here as ecumenical as much as it is Islamic, is the first of many ways in which he distinguishes himself from other presumably less pious cultural performers. His acts are neither tricks orchestrated by men, nor techniques acquired from genies or forest herbs, nor a relationship with evil. Bypassing these other more commonplace conventions for the explanation of supernatural power, Jalloh aligns his cultural practice with his religious doctrine, developing a discursive frame through which he can present wonders without risking *haram* or sin.

Jalloh underlined this distinction at every opportunity. In our very first meeting, huddled under a veranda while rains delayed his command performance for the employees of an Australian gold mining enterprise in the Kangari Hills of central Sierra Leone, he laid out his particular distinction between the “magic” that other artists performed and the “mystic” arts of his own acts.

SA: Maybe just quickly tell us what we're going to see tonight, whe– just, uh– give us an overview of what kind of event–

HJ: No, ah-ah... My action is not predicted. I never predict what I am going to do. I will only tell you when I am in the field now, after I have dressed my costume, that is the time I will talk to God. It's not a magic. Magic is what me and you arrange and present to the people. Mystical is – Mystic is only from God to you. So there are difference between magic and mystic– [...] I am a mystical man. I work with mystic. Miracles. I only concern to God when I'm ready I call God, “God I'm ready.” And he'll only talk to my head, because he brought this thing to me, I will not be taught by nobody.

This distinction is his own interpretation and mobilization of English terms. When I later asked him to translate them to Mende equivalents, he suggested *njosoi* (often translated as “sleight-of-hand tricks”) for magic and *labawai* (roughly “miracle”) or *kabande hindei* (“wonderful things”)

⁶ On the ties between *baraka* and charisma in African Islam, including the principles of shared blessings, see Donal Cruise O’Brien, “Introduction,” in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, ed. Donal Cruise O’Brien and Christian Coulon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 53–66.

for mystic.⁷ Yet his own idiosyncratic mobilization of the English words “magic” and “mystic” is the core of his conceptualization of supernatural power, one that situated his works on a more godly and powerful plane than any of his contemporaries.⁸

In this and many other instances, Jalloh makes the English language work for him, rather than the other way around. *I do my own thing... I don't allow things to do me.*

Even more than his professions of piety, Jalloh's eloquence sets him apart from the innumerable other artists who perform “culture” in Sierra Leone's hinterland. Unlike the rest of Sierra Leone's mystic artists and dancers, Jalloh is careful to frame his wondrous visual displays, giving them context by situating them *with* text. Through a mixture of captivating spectacle and contextualizing discourse, he draws the whole of Mende and Sierra Leone society into his frame.

⁷ cf. William P. Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics: An African Aesthetic of Charismatic Power,” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 4 (November 1998): 563–82.

⁸ I follow Jalloh in using the term “mystic” rather than “magic” for the following study. I make an exception when interlocutors specifically use the term “magic,” as other performers did not dismiss the term as Jalloh did. In addition, I tend to favor “mystic” over “mystical.” Although both may refer either to communion with God and spiritual mysteries or to more general mystery and wonder, I relate “mystical” to “magical” in the sense that a “magic performance” is explicitly an act of magic, while a “magical performance” might be intended figuratively. Furthermore, “mystic” in the following text should be understood as engagement with spiritual mysteries, not purposeful mystification. Compare definitions from the American Heritage Dictionary, Fifth Edition. While the terms are defined almost interchangeably, I am uncomfortable with the implications of the second and third meanings of “mystical”:

“Mystic *adj.*

- 1.a. Of or relating to mysticism or mystics: *mystic doctrines.*
- b. Deeply or mysteriously spiritual; mystical: *mystic experiences.*
- c. Of or relating to religious mysteries or occult rites and practices.
2. Inspiring a sense of mystery or wonder: *a painting of a mystic landscape.*

n.

One who practices or believes in mysticism or a given form of mysticism: *Protestant mystics.*”

“Mystical *adj.*

1. Of, relating to, or stemming from mysticism or immediate understanding of spiritual matters, especially when experienced as direct communion with God: *a mystical trance; a mystical treatise.*
2. Symbolic or allegorical, especially with regard to spirituality: *a mystical interpretation of a parable.*
- 3.a. Awe-inspiring or mysterious [...]
- b. Believed or maintained with awe or deep respect, especially when contrary to or lacking factual evidence: *mystical theories about the securities market.*
4. Of or relating to mystic rites or practices: *stones arranged in a mystical circle.*”

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Trade, 2011).

His pontification touches on all aspects of local society: religion, politics, gender struggles, youth, age, international pressures. Most often he elaborates on his interpretation of himself, seeming to preempt his audiences' critiques of his acts and to impose his own exegesis of his practice. By describing himself and his relation to society, he remakes himself and his society in a certain image; his declarations have an "illocutionary force" and are performative as well as constative.⁹ Despite this authoritative elocution, Jalloh's speeches are remarkably flexible and subject to continuous revisions based on their public reception. Jalloh's running commentaries not so much reinvent Sierra Leone's performance culture as they make audible the many debates that now surround that culture through the exhibition of one side of those discussions live upon the playing field.

Jalloh's reframing gestures are central to his acts' potential for transformation, not only of the material objects he manipulates on stage, but also of his spectators' reality and their conceptualization of their own place in it. The acts Jalloh performs are not significantly different in themselves from those of other performers of mystic arts, except perhaps in the expert skill with which they are executed. What is radical is that Jalloh explicitly situates them within a moral universe by suggesting the frames through which they are to be read. Frames might be understood here in the sociologically foundational sense furnished by Gregory Bateson and later developed by Irving Goffman: a kind of meta-language that brackets actions, specifies their signification, and signals the range of their consequences.¹⁰ The classic example is the frame of "play," in which a few small gestures are enough to turn an insult into a friendly joke, signifying

⁹ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, UK: Oxford university press, 1962). Deployed in other Sierra Leonean contexts in Ruth H. Finnegan, "How to Do Things with Words: Performative Utterances Among the Limba of Sierra Leone," *Man* 4, no. 4 (1969): 537–52., Ruth H. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972); Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

that “these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote.”¹¹ Acting similarly, the Mende term *hinda* is a flexible word generally translated to “affair, business, matter” in English or *bisnes* in Krio.¹² These terms are commonly used in Sierra Leone to specify different activities and their repercussions. Notable examples include “society business,” meaning the purview of the powerful initiatory societies Poro and Sande, “politics business,” the particular set of rules that applies to operating in government and campaigning, or “European business,” the principles and behaviors demanded by NGOs.¹³ Unlike the English cognate “business,” neither *hinda* nor *bisnes* are conceived from the standpoint of individual activity or the sum total of actions that keep a person “busy.” *Hinda* also acts as a term of location, as when it serves as a response to *mindó* (“where?”), meaning “nowhere.”¹⁴ *Hinda* and *bisnes* are thus more properly understood as locations where actions take place, suggesting a metaphor less akin to the static structural “frame” than to the immersive and flexible landscapes of fields of play. This usage of “field” has much in common with Victor Turner’s and, more notably, Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptions of arenas of social action.¹⁵ The advantage of the term “frame” is that it suggests how actors might be able to shift practices from one context to another with just a few metadiscursive gestures.

¹¹ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 39.

¹² The following analysis is deeply indebted to Bellman’s description of *meni* among Kpelle in Liberia, neighbors to the Mende. Beryl Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy: Symbols & Metaphors in Poro Ritual* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984). See also Mike McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012)..

¹³ Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics”; Andrew Lavalí, “The Reliable Route to Poverty Reduction in Sierra Leone: NGOs Or Secret Societies?,” *Concord Times*, October 31, 2005.

¹⁴ Gordon Innes, *A Mende-English Dictionary* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 26.

¹⁵ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 17; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Jalloh accomplishes his dramatic personal and social transformations by transposing actions from one field to another, much as he mystically moves objects from invisible planes to visible ones. For example, in one of his most dramatic acts, he swaps one of his “boys,” sitting beneath a tarpaulin, for a muslin-wrapped body purportedly pulled from a nearby cemetery. This particular act is quite common in Sierra Leone performance traditions, yet just as he shifts the physical context of these two figures by mystic means, he shifts the interpretive context of the entire act, from entertainment to reflection on mortality and morality, by embarking on a long sermon on the transience and uncertainty of life and the authority of Allah. Through redeployments such as these, Jalloh articulates a vision of culture and proper action for a new Sierra Leone future. However, this vision is not transmitted unidirectionally, for Jalloh is hyperaware of his public’s ever shifting sensibilities, reading them through acclamation onstage and discussions off-stage, and he remaps his persona accordingly. His performances serve as fields in which greater flexibility, play, and experimentation are possible than other quotidian contexts. Jalloh and his spectators are engaged in a continuous dance of self-redefinition, using each other as mirror.

Like Jalloh, I risk inducing more harm than benefit by conjuring and wrestling with the powerful forces of celebrity, violence, and mystic arts in postwar Sierra Leone. Like Jalloh, I offer the spectacle of images that court controversy and reductive misinterpretation, particularly in African contexts: war and violence, “black magic” and witchcraft, poverty and social deviance among them. Like Jalloh, I am compelled to frame these images in a way that suggests their transformative potential rather than their oppressive burden. I thus offer the following collection of contexts, fields, frames, or “*bisnes*” through which the visions that follow are meant to be seen.



Figure 4. Hassan Jalloh and spectators. Massam Kpaka, Panga-Krim Chiefdom, Pujehun District, 2012.

"WHAT THE EYE DOES NOT SEE, THE HEART CANNOT ADMIRE."

One of Hassan Jalloh's regular stock phrases is *ngu wu yaun loi*. When this idiom was first translated to me, it was simply as "I am performing for you." Yet the idiom's particular syntax tells a more intriguing story. Transcribed word by word, it means "I your eyes/face see." Or perhaps "I am seeing your eyes." Or perhaps "I am seeing you seeing me." Jalloh conceives his performances through the twinned dynamics of his presence before his spectators and his recognition of their own eyes upon himself. Understood via this local epistemology, performance is not a unidirectional relationship in which visions are merely transmitted from the seen to the seer, but rather as an event constituted by both the spectated and the spectator. This formulation suggests that spectacle here is a moment of encounter and mutual appraisal: an intersection leading to inspection then introspection, on and on in a reiterative loop of continuous reassessment, negotiation, and adaptation.

Mende spectacle

Hassan Jalloh mostly performs for Mende audiences and draws from the idioms of Mende cultures, the diffuse ethnic identity claimed by 31% of Sierra Leoneans.¹⁶ Much ethnographic understanding of Mende society comes by way of discussions about the powerful Poro and Sande initiation societies that continue to effect almost every life in the region to varying degrees. These "secret societies" mobilize hidden forms of knowledge and power, but they also engage in dramatically open public spectacles that indirectly serve as models for cultural show programs like Jalloh's. The interplay between hidden and revealed forms of power

¹⁶ "The CIA World Factbook," accessed May 4, 2014.

has been characterized variously as a search for balance, the maintenance of sublime wonder, or the preservation of ambiguity as a space of renegotiation and retreat.¹⁷ Poro and Sande's expert manipulations of these principles have inspired and contributed to multiple discussions of power of secrecy, both within the region and beyond.¹⁸ Secrecy, though, is only half the story; spectacle is secrecy's other side.

Before he reveals the fruit of his mystic operations from beneath a tarpaulin, Jalloh often comments, "What's done in the darkness must come to light."¹⁹ Secret operations must be revealed. Beryl Bellman observes that "the paradox of secrecy" is that the secret must be communicated in order for it to be a secret.²⁰ Part of the display of secrecy is its evidentiary value, for exposure goes some way towards confirming existence. Many of Jalloh's spectators argue that his mystic acts testify to the wonders of which African culture is capable and, moreover, they argue that the acts confirm the presence of God. As Jalloh insists in another frequent maxim, "Seeing is believing. What the eye does not see, the heart cannot admire." As is often the case, Jalloh's inversions are instructive. The more typical formulation of the phrase is "What the eye does not see, the heart cannot grieve," meaning if one does not know of an unpleasant situation, one cannot be troubled by it. Jalloh's simple shift from "grieve" to "desire" emphasizes that what one cannot see, one cannot appreciate. Spectacle produces value.

¹⁷ Donald J. Cosentino, *Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers: Tradition and Invention in Mende Story Performance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Murphy, "The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics"; Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*.

¹⁸ cf. Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*; Mary H. Nooter, ed., *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993); Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Possibly paraphrasing *surat al-baqarah* 2:257, "He brings them out from darkness into the light" or Luke 12:3 "What you have said in the dark will be heard in the light." I presume the later because he speaks the phrase in English rather than Arabic or Mende.

²⁰ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 114.

The use of the English term “spectacle” here should be considered less a clumsy translation of one specific local word than a shorthand for a small constellation of Mende terms and concepts that constitute something of a social principle. Hassan Jalloh, his colleagues, and his audiences refer to their productions primarily by two expressions: *ndoli* and *kome*. *Ndoli* is usually translated as “dance,” and, like that English term, can indicate both the particular choreography of an individual *ndolimɔi* (“dancer”) or a larger, collective celebratory event like the cultural show’s nightly disco. William Murphy enumerates a number of explicit links between *ndoli* as “dance” and political action and alliances through the idiom of *kabande* (“wonder”).²¹ *Ndoli* may also be translated as “play.”²² Again as in English, this can refer to both “a performance” and “variation” or “flexibility.” In its many uses, the sense of “play” is not solely “a separate occasion, carefully isolated from the rest of life.”²³ Rather *ndoli* is better understood in the terms of Johan Huizinga’s “play-element” or Bateson’s “play frame,” applicable to any human activity.²⁴ As Thomas Malaby suggests, play is “an attitude characterized by a readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendentally ordered account.”²⁵ On the other hand, *kome* is translated as “assembly, crowd, gathering, meeting” and refers to any kind of coming together, including everything from one-on-one rendezvous to family reunions to village assemblies.²⁶ Thus *ndolii* without *komei* is individual physical activity, while *komei* without *ndolii* is a prosaic, utilitarian hearing or

²¹ Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics,” 567–68.

²² Innes, *A Mende-English Dictionary*, 96.

²³ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 6.

²⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1949); Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.

²⁵ Thomas M. Malaby, “Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (2009): 206.

²⁶ Innes, *A Mende-English Dictionary*, 48.

conference. What I refer to here as “spectacle” is the fact of their interchangeability in the context of the Warriors’ and other cultural troupes’ presentations. The intersection of these two terms constitutes a sensationally compelling event that gathers a crowd.

The propensity of “dance/play” to inspire a “gathering” was key to the performers’ sense of their own social utility. When I discussed the role of the cultural troupes with the dancers and drummers themselves, they always spoke in terms of the provision of *kr. gladines* (“entertainment”). As far as they were concerned, the people simply enjoyed their own culture. However, this simple explanation was further elaborated when I would ask why the troupes are employed by other groups in pursuit of their own agendas. Given that my research overlapped the period of the electoral campaigns, we were generally discussing the use of dancers and musicians by political parties and politicians, but as this text attests, cultural troupes were similarly engaged by NGOs, unions, private commercial interests, mutual aid societies, and more. Here the artists were unequivocal. Without dance and entertainment, these organizations could not hope to attract the people. The promise of a spectacular entertainment lured all kinds of people to a specific site, one where the patrons, whether politicians or activists or other agents, could transmit their message and thus transform their viewing spectators into a listening audience.²⁷

At first this account struck me as a fairly prosaic conception of cultural troupes’ role in grand social processes, casting themselves as providers of simple advertisement and/or diversion. It appeared the dancers had internalized yet suppressed their status as submissive instruments of the powerful. However, my consultants’ continuous invocation of and their readily evident pride

²⁷ The performers of Sierra Leonean cultural shows seemed to agree with John MacAloon’s definition of “cultural performance” broadly: “Whatever performances do, or are meant to do, they do by creating the conditions for, and by coercing the participants into, paying attention.” John J. MacAloon, ed., *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 10.

in their role intimated that perhaps it was I who was stubbornly oblivious to the dynamics at play in these events. I finally came to realize that this process was at the core of Sierra Leonean efforts at enacting social transformation.

Society and Spectacle

“Spectacle,” in most global humanities and humanistic sciences, is not normally associated with fluid mechanics of social change. Rather it usually emerges as a fraught term of a kind with a broader suspicion of the visual as the dominant sense of Western modernism.²⁸ If Guy Debord was not the first to use “spectacle” as a critique of the modern era, his *Society of the Spectacle* is certainly the most vivid and influential deployment of the term. In Debord’s poetic proclamation, spectacle is reified into the engine of contemporary oppression, where mankind serves as a cog in a churning mechanism that decomposes sex, violence, art, revolution, history, tradition, every human activity into marketable entertainment. For my purposes, Debord’s most astute observation is that “spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images.”²⁹ His central argument is that in sharing spectacle, we spectators imagine we are creating a community, but the mediation of that image blocks our ability to commune and, by extension, to organize and revolutionize. In spite of the undeniable impulse towards commodification and political domination inherent in many of the spectacles I describe, I am suspicious of Debord’s totalizing claims and relentless pessimism. The conditions of contemporary Sierra Leone—including recent devastation, burgeoning yet still meager mass media, and a weak State supported by diffuse international agencies—suggest alternative ways in

²⁸ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 1983), p.4.

which spectacle is used to mediate communities and social change. A more ethnographically conscientious approach to spectacle demands the same critical rigor exemplified by Debord, but rigor directed so as to uncover specific “ways of seeing” and diverse conditions and configurations of modernity.³⁰

Debord’s legacy has continued to dominate descriptions of global spectacle that emphasize dehumanizing violence via discussions of “media spectacle” and “image wars.”³¹ When used in more explicitly localized situations in anthropology and postcolonial performance studies, “spectacle” is often placed on a continuum that reproduces a Weberian narrative of social disenchantment, with ritual on one end and spectacle on the other.³² In John MacAloon’s words, “ritual is a duty, spectacle a choice. Consequently we speak of ritual “degenerating” (“de-grenre-ating”) into spectacle: Easter into Easter Parade.”³³ MacAloon uses Turner’s distinction between “liminoid,” an isolated suspension of social order creating a dispersed and contingent sense of community, and “liminal,” an collective inversion including the whole society.³⁴ In Richard Schechner’s alternative division, “theater” is “entertaining” more than “efficacious,” it

³⁰ On “ways of seeing” see Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer’s Eye : Ways of Seeing in Anthropology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7. On modernities, cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Clémentine Deliss, *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa : An Exhibition* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³¹ Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle* (London: Routledge, 2003); Iain A. Boal et al., *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (New York: Verso, 2005).

³² Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Talcott Fischhoff (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963), 270.

³³ John J. MacAloon, “Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies,” in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John J. MacAloon (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 243.

³⁴ Turner, however, does not use the term “spectacle” systematically. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 53–55; Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1988).

diverts the community rather than achieving any change.³⁵ Both narratives attempt to explain how performance forms transition “from ritual to theater,” yet presuppose a teleology based on that narrative—“from ritual to theater” but not back again.³⁶ Critics often use variations on the ritual-to-theater paradigm and Debord’s spectacle, along with feminist critiques such as Laura Mulvey’s recognition of the “male gaze,” to describe the imbalances of power in the incorporation of local practices into colonial visual regimes of heritage, nationalism, and commerce.³⁷ In these contexts, analysts claim “spectacle” is constituted by “the colonizing gaze.”³⁸ By masking oppression and dehumanizing performers, “spectacle, by its very nature, displaces analysis and tends to suppress profound issues of conflict and marginalization.”³⁹ Suggesting mixtures of prior purities, the forms become “fluid, ambiguous, and hybrid performances, mixing elements of ritual, theater, and educational exhibition” and somehow “permanently suspended between the worlds of ritual obligation and national spectacle.”⁴⁰

Sierra Leone’s touring cultural shows challenge the narrative that leads local performance from devout, intact, and unified ritual to disenchanting, hybrid, and estranging spectacle, despite the fact that cultural show performers pursue many of the same goals of heritage preservation, national propaganda and commercial profit as those profiled by other scholars. While programs like Jalloh’s are free of ritual obligation, they are far from “disenchanted,” and many audience

³⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 120.

³⁶ Schechner insists that ritual has returned to theater, but his claim is based on interpretations of his own theatrical work and a few other isolated, if important, case studies.

³⁷ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

³⁸ Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 73–82.

³⁹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 72.

⁴⁰ Susan A. Reed, *Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 175; David Guss, *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 20.

members consider his acts as testaments to God's power. A cultural history of the forest region of West Africa reveals that practices were already "hybrid" well before colonialism, composed of diverse influences brought together by warfare and migration, themselves already a product of global forces.⁴¹ In contrast to claims that separation between viewing spectators and viewed performers is a project of modernism, hierarchical systems in rural Sierra Leone—including the institutions of chieftaincy and the initiatory societies, Poro and Sande—have long divided populations between those who are viewed and those who do the viewing.⁴² Fitting these spectacles into some continuum between ritual and theater reduces rather than illuminates them. Neither are divisions between efficacy and entertainment useful. Schechner himself confesses that all performances contain both elements, so I see no reason to place them in a false opposition. The distinction may be interesting as a tactic used by performers to alternately underplay and emphasize their role in the social order according to different circumstances; frequently, claiming that the cultural show is *kr. jes fɔ gladines* ("just for entertainment") is a necessary maneuver to protect the integrity of the work. However, to take those definitions at face value is to undermine the possibility of that art can facilitate social change and to ignore the fact that entertainment is a perfectly appropriate form of efficacy in and of itself.

Jacques Rancière observes that power imbalances between the performer and the spectator can be read in either direction "without altering the functioning of the opposition itself." On the one hand, the performer's activity might be considered as pedagogy, rendering her or him more powerful than the passive, disciplined spectator, as in the Debordian model. On the

⁴¹ Warren L. d' Azevedo, "Some Historical Problems in the Delineation of a Central West Atlantic Region," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 96, no. 2 (1962): 512–38; Ruth Phillips, *Representing Woman: Sande Masquerades of the Mende of Sierra Leone* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 36–38.

⁴² cf. M. C. Jędrej, "Structural Aspects of a West African Secret Society," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 32, no. 3 (1976): 234–45.

other hand, the performer's activity might be considered as labor, rendering her or him less powerful than the passive, all-seeing spectator, as in the "colonial gaze" model.⁴³ Rancière insists that the opposition must be discarded, since "the spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets."⁴⁴ Diana Taylor suggests that "'looking' is always an intervention, whether we like it, or accept it, or not."⁴⁵ Dennis Kennedy plays on the French *assister le spectacle* ("watch the spectacle") to argue that all spectators "assist the spectacle" though this wording suggests they are limited to the facilitation of an already predetermined program.⁴⁶ Augusto Boal similarly calls for a "spect-actor" in creating engaged, transformative performance.⁴⁷ However, his spect-actor is prompted by specific prior arrangements by the performers and therefore still acts within a predictable purview. Rancière's argues instead that the emancipation of the spectator only takes place "on the condition that [the images'] meaning and effect are unanticipated."⁴⁸

Most commentary on spectacle is oriented towards despotic politics, a legacy of colonialism and 20th century fascism among numerous other traumatic autocratic configurations, and towards commerce, a legacy of global capitalism. Yet these admittedly vivid and consequential examples should not impose presumptions of spectacle's effects or drown out instances in which spectacle is mobilized in grassroots declarations against power or among

⁴³ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁵ Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 264.

⁴⁶ Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

⁴⁷ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985).

⁴⁸ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 103.

equals. Nor should they blind us to the potential for spectacles, under certain conditions, to be moments of critical self-reflection or efforts directed towards social transformations.

Spectacle Dismembered

For the purposes of this project, spectacle may be defined as an event of extraordinary visuality that pulls a crowd. Below are a few clarifications about the particular terms I use in this definition.

To understand spectacle requires a humanistic view of **event**, one for which the intentionality and reaction of human agents is of paramount importance. Within social sciences, history, and philosophy, most commentators define events as points of structural transformation, ruptures out of individual control in the specific sense that no one can predict which moments will be transformative until after the transformation has taken place.⁴⁹ In this historical conception of the event, “ceremonial events,” such as ritual actions, holidays, marriages, celebrations, and entertainment spectacles are excluded as irrelevant to grand social shifts.⁵⁰ However, the impact of an event is always a question of scale and such “ceremonial events” nonetheless effect transformations. As Marshall Sahlins observes, “the event is a happening interpreted—and interpretations vary.”⁵¹

While disasters, accidents, and other unintentional instances are both events and potential spectacles, I focus on how human agents act and react in accordance with their own intentions, desires, and imaginations. Michael Jackson’s intimate view of the event describes it as “when

⁴⁹ cf. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005); William Sewell, *Logics of History : Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁵⁰ Sewell, *Logics of History*, 226.

⁵¹ Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

something memorable or momentous is undergone, and where questions of right and wrongful conduct are felt to be matters of life and death.”⁵² Jalloh’s wartime experiences reveal what it means to undergo such an event, and his performances demonstrate what it means to make one. In the end, all grand processes of social transformation must be atomized to these multiple, clashing, and overlapping processes. The accrual of these events, as moments of significance in individual biographies, is the engine that drives the great histories of social change, not vice versa. Throughout this project, events are defined as instances of social action, measured not by a teleological (and fundamentally futile) assessment of their ultimate impact, but by their *initiation* of potential outcomes, what Hannah Arendt refers to as “nascence.”⁵³

The quality of being **extraordinary**, in the sense of out-of-the-ordinary or atypical, is essential to the character of spectacle, because the rarity of the event drives the compulsion to witness it. This quality is relative. To be extraordinary is not necessarily bigger, louder, brighter, faster, or more virtuosic, although certain qualities do tend to attract wide attention more quickly than others and the nature of the crowd itself inevitably introduces many of these qualities. The extraordinariness of spectacle suggests many other qualities explored in the chapters that follow, for example wonder and its attendant social effects, both transcendental and oppressive.

Events like the Warrior Cultural Show supply participants with a profusion of sensations: tastes of donut cakes and liquor packets, smells of sweat and dust, touches of bodies and earth, all kinds of delightful and dissonant sounds.⁵⁴ Certain characteristics, however, make **visuality** the constitutive component of the spectacle’s sensorium. “Seeing is believing,” as Jalloh is fond

⁵² Michael Jackson, *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), xxix.

⁵³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

⁵⁴ Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

of observing before he reveals his transformations.⁵⁵ Again and again, spectators gave such an evidentiary rationale for attending Jalloh's mystic spectacles; they had to see it for themselves. Sight has documentary ramifications that facilitate observation and verification. Blatant visibility can however render it open to manipulation, falsification, and suspicion. The danger inherent to the visuality of the spectacle is that it can be used to distract from more subtle processes, objects, and events. Yet the compromised integrity of the image is no secret, and spectators expect and seek evidence for duplicity and misalignment between the seen and the unseen.⁵⁶ Thus the visible simultaneously occludes and suggests invisible worlds and truths.

Invisibility is a theme—along with parallel expressions of visual uncertainty such as “secrets,” “shadows,” and “mirrors”—prevalent in African experience and scholarship, not only in religion and sacred knowledge where invisible spiritual powers shape belief and epistemology, but also across local and global economics, clandestine politics, urban living tactics, and the “tectonics” of architectural space.⁵⁷ The importance of the invisible world suggests ways in which local visualities offer alternatives to Western “scopic regimes” and histories of constructing visual perception.⁵⁸ Through the invisible sphere, Africans find access to planes of

⁵⁵ However, cf. Allen F. Roberts, “Insight, Or, Not Seeing Is Believing,” in *Secrecy: African Arts That Conceals and Reveals*, ed. Mary H. Nooter (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993), 65–77.

⁵⁶ Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003); Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*.

⁵⁷ cf. Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Nooter, *Secrecy*; James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); Bayart, *The State in Africa*, lxxxv; Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Ghent: Ludion, 2004); AbdouMaliq Simone, “The Visible and the Invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa,” in *Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos: Documenta 11platform 4*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 23–44; Steven Nelson, *From Cameroon to Paris: Mousgoum Architecture in & out of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 5.

⁵⁸ cf. Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1988), 3–38; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

conceptualization, conversation, and action that may otherwise be blocked within the sphere of the visible.

Sight requires a particular proximity and thus a specific kind of presence. The quest for a common visual experience draws individuals together into a crowd, and the visual experience makes members of a crowd visible to each other. In the case of the cultural shows, whose earthshaking audio elements are broadcast by speakers set to the highest volume, any villager can hear what is happening, but in order to see it, she or he must join the assembly. Drums may call a *komei* (“gathering”), but only when the participants are in sight of each other is the *komei* constituted. At the same time, the visual sense’s externality—the distance it allows from the subject of sensation—allows both engagement with and disengagement from whatever “message” might be conveyed; the spectators are free to subsume themselves within the image, identify with the performance and/or the crowd, step back, take critical distance, look away, daydream about something else, or even fall asleep.⁵⁹ Furthermore, vision allows participants to perceive and distinguish multiple elements simultaneously in ways vital to the experience of magnitude and profusion that so frequently characterize spectacle.⁶⁰ Then again, to divorce vision from the rest of perception is to ignore the haptic qualities of the visual: the potential for sight to suggest and inspire feelings of touch as well as taste and smell.⁶¹ These interpenetrations of sensory stimuli undermine a solely visualist definition of spectacle.

⁵⁹ “The unwilling spectator, the reluctant spectator, the spectator in a bad mood or feeling poorly, the accidental spectator, the snoring spectator [...] spectation is about more than reception.” Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle*, 13.

⁶⁰ David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 49.

⁶¹ cf. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1999); Henry John Drewal, “Senses in Understandings of Art,” *African Arts* 38, no. 2 (July 1, 2005): 1–96.



Figure 5. Hassan Jalloh and the Warriors. Bomaru, Upper Bambara Chiefdom, 2013.

In defining spectacle for the context of this project, I use the word “**pull**” advisedly. In its Krio cognate, *pul*, the term applies to a broad array of activities, including the production and presentation of spectacular visuals. In Mende, *kpuwa* serves the same role. In its initially mutated form, *gbua*, it indicates “pulling out” an object, as in *i hani gbua* (“he/she pulls out something”). Without an object, the subject pulls itself out, *i gbua* (“he/she/it comes out or emerges”). This phrasing is always used, in both Mende and Krio, in reference to masked dance, when the *hei* or *kr. debul* is “pulled” into public performance. The implication is that the spirit already exists in another space (e.g. the bush) or on another plane. Humans pull the entity into a field in which it can be perceived. This aspect of spectacle concerning the materialization of intangible forces, “revelation” in other words, approximates the Yoruba conception of *iran* as described by Henry and Margaret Drewal.⁶² The connection is more than analogous, as Yoruba and Sierra Leoneans have long been engaged in mutual identity fashioning; resettled Yoruba populations were foundational to the Sierra Leonean state as well as Freetown’s public performance and masking traditions, and their migrating progeny were equally foundational to the consolidation of Yoruba nationalism and linguistics in colonial Nigeria.⁶³

Spectacle in this sense might be best expressed as *manifestation*, as Daniel Reed suggests in an Ivorian context.⁶⁴ In fact, the processional displays of potential electoral nominees are defined in the formal parlance of Sierra Leonean political process precisely as “manifesting for the party.” Featuring secular arts and oratory, these extravagant public pageants do not claim to

⁶² Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, vol. 565 (Indiana University Press, 1983), 1–2; Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 12–15.

⁶³ cf. John Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil: Art and Politics in Urban West Africa* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Jean Herskovits Kopytoff, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria: The “Sierra Leonians” in Yoruba, 1830-1890* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965).

⁶⁴ Daniel Reed, *Dan Ge Performance: Masks and Music in Contemporary Côte d’Ivoire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 5.

instantiate supernatural or mystic powers (which are nonetheless usually understood to be in play) but rather the reach and character of the contender's patronage network. Observing parades perhaps more closely than they scrutinize the nominees' stance on the issues or their moral disposition, the party uses them to gauge the population of supporters for the prospective flag-bearer, groups that are otherwise invisible due to lack of polling and the underground practices of political maneuvering.⁶⁵ Political demonstrations only begin to suggest the inconceivably vast spectrum of invisible worlds from which the visible might be pulled through the medium of spectacle: worlds that include mystical realms, spirit planes, dark forests, foreign lands, past memories, future hopes, social formations, anywhere within the human imagination.

More than the visual stimulus itself, the **crowd** defines the spectacle, constituting its premise and its purpose. The pull of the extraordinary is an open invitation that is broadcast to all. As my performer friends reason, the spectacle draws the community, which is then available to hear the discourse of the politician, chiefs, NGOs, or other organizers. The process turns spectators into an audience, and the quirk of English language that labels the former plural and the latter singular suggests unification might be inherent to that process; one cannot divide an audience without dis-membering it into audience "members."⁶⁶ In many local languages, the terms imply de-individuation through collective nouns, whether the English "crowd" or the Mende *fahin*. In Krio, *pɔpyuleshun* ("population"), as in *wi ge pɔpyuleshun* ("we have a big crowd") or the simple exclamation *O pɔpyuleshun!*, seems to have the effect of reducing

⁶⁵ Maya Christensen and Mats Utas, "Mercenaries of Democracy: The 'Politricks' of Remobilized Combatants in the 2007 General Elections, Sierra Leone," *African Affairs* 107, no. 429 (2008): 515–39; Mariane Ferme, "Staging Pɔlitisi: The Dialogics of Publicity and Secrecy in Sierra Leone," in *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives*, ed. John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 160–91; Murphy, "The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics."

⁶⁶ On the different nuances of "spectators" or "audience" across Western history, see Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle*, 5.

individual humans to numerical digits. Perhaps this reduction is a defense, because to personalize so many individuals is to fall into a ceaseless vortex of human identification.

For all their dangers, crowds serve their individual constituents. Crowds are a thrilling visual and sensory stimulus in their own right, and many are the spectacles that are simply crowds for crowd's sake. Crowds are a supplemental verification apparatus, allowing one to vet and reconfirm one's own observations through those of one's comrades. These mutual corroborations are just the beginning of the free-for-all of social exchange possible within the crowd. The spectacle hosts a site of human interaction on a mass scale. Communication and relations are bigger, faster, and more volatile, and certainly subject to all kinds of distortions and mutations due to these conditions. Because of their mass qualities, spectacles are premiere loci of social transformation, sites of pandemic transfiguration, moments of punctuated metamorphosis within more gradual and diffused trajectories of cultural adaptation.⁶⁷

Spectacle and Transformation

This conception of spectacle demands the recognition that spectating is rife with active interpretation, not simply thoughtless consumption.⁶⁸ When I asked one friend how to translate “spectator” or “audience member” into Mende, he suggested *hindahugbemɔi* and *hindagofegbaimɔi*, essentially “one who understands a matter/context” and “one who investigates a matter/context” respectively. Far from a unidirectional transmission of images and information from the active viewed to the idle viewer, this formulation suggests a relationship of

⁶⁷ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); William Mazzarella, “The Myth of the Multitude, Or, Who’s Afraid of the Crowd?,” *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 697–727.

⁶⁸ While “spectating” is historically linked to sporting, its academic usage is far broader, cf. Oddey and White’s search for alternative “modes of spectating” through various digital interactions. Alison Oddey and Christine A. White, *Modes of Spectating* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2009).

mutual inquiry, interpretation, and comprehension. In exploring these sites of pluralized agencies, I draw from contemporary academic conversations about “publics,” a conception of mass communication that acknowledges its potential for reciprocal critique and transformation.⁶⁹

Recognizing that spectacle can be a vehicle for social transformation is only the beginning. More immediately urgent is the question of to what ends that transformation is oriented. Here the particular resonance of violence in Sierra Leone’s postwar climate comes into relief. If spectacle is a force of mass transformation, this thesis contends that its primary utility for contemporary Sierra Leoneans is to transition practices, memories, and identities between different configurations of violence, whether physical, structural, discursive, or remembered.

The use of spectacle in social transformation is by no means always liberating, progressive, or otherwise something to celebrate. While not always congruent to oppression, spectacle is nonetheless profoundly ambivalent. The complete text of Jalloh’s formula cited earlier makes this clear:

Ngu wu yauŋ lɔi.
Ngu wu lema.
A ya ma(?), a neemoli(?) ve mbɛ bi lahiŋ va

I perform for you (I am seeing your eyes).
I make you forget.
At the same time, it gives me experience in order to advise you

Jalloh means that he is entertaining, he is making his public forget their cares. Regardless of his innocuous intent, this little phrase reminds us of one of the key dangers of making things spectacularly visible: the process makes other things disappear.⁷⁰ Perhaps personal memories and

⁶⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick G Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

⁷⁰ In its most pernicious form, Diana Taylor describes “percepticide” in which the spectacle forces its spectatorship to look away, such as the case of brutal and blatant dictatorship. Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 119–138.

trauma cannot be fully “forgotten,” but impersonal histories and political processes certainly can be. Making spectacles is a form of editing history and shaping society, and much will be edited out. As this text argues, many practices and people may become invisible or forgotten in the quest for a new Sierra Leone, even if they do not completely vanish.

"HE WHO TELLS YOU ABOUT THEM WILL ONE DAY TELL THEM ABOUT YOU."

THIS is Warrior

By April, late in the 2012 touring season, the Warriors’ vehicle was rapidly disintegrating. The starter had been shot since December, requiring that the truck be parked on high ground at all times in order to ensure a rolling takeoff for ignition. On a rough road near the Liberian border, the whole truck had tipped over, shattering the driver-side window but luckily avoiding any serious casualties; Jalloh later remembered the young men who dislodged the truck on his next visit to the region, but deferred on his apparent promise to play for their youth group. The many pressures had strained the Warriors’ stalwart driver, Sasko. While I was touring with the troupe to an isolated fishing village in Sierra Leone’s southern marshlands in March, Sasko, younger at only 22 years than his driving experience would indicate, unexpectedly met a childhood friend, had far too much cheap liquor, made a fool of himself and was insulted by one of the other troupe members. When he turned to Jalloh for some form of redress, he was denied, and fed up, he abandoned the company. As was often the case, Sasko and Jalloh reconciled several months later, but in the meantime, Jalloh had hired a new driver, Prince, who was more responsible but also less familiar with the vehicle’s idiosyncrasies. Returning towards Kenema from Jalloh’s former base at Zimmi, Prince insisted that we take a detour less ravaged by the passage of overloaded trucks and taxis than the main road. Jalloh drove behind the truck, partly

to make sure that there would be no problems since we were driving through a region with poor cellular coverage, and partly to exploit the time provided by the slower pace to engage in the congenial labor of being a “big man,” interacting with locals in his old territory, getting the latest news, and doling out pocket money to people along the road in gestures of munificence, including farmers, women heading to market, roadside shop owners, and so on.

Jalloh generally insisted that I either take a motorbike or ride in his burgundy Mercedes, along with himself, manager Bellay, and whichever troupe member was acting as his assistant. From that vantage point, I was able to appreciate from a distance the various skills necessary to navigate the Warriors’ truck across Sierra Leone’s pitted roads, not only by the vehicle’s driver, but by the half dozen dancers brazen enough to perch on top of the rickety vehicle. When riding on the well-paved highway between Bo and Kenema, finding a comfortable corner among the tarps and speakers in which to take a nap beneath the brutal midday sun of the dry season was an easy enough proposition. The backroads, on the other hand, demanded a perpetual state of alertness and required the dancers to leap from one side of the heap to the other, whether to avoid low hanging branches or to counterbalance the top-heavy load as the vehicle negotiated uneven, rocky tracks.

“Trouble,” Jalloh said, under his breath, as we rounded a turn and caught up with the others. A pair of tire tracks led at a slight angle off the road to where the truck lay in the bush, face slammed into a small but deceptively robust tree trunk. Apparently Prince had hit a *kr. galop* (bump in the road) and had been unable to correct course fast enough to stay on the road. The troupe was still dusting themselves off and laughing. Spirits were surprisingly high, either because no one was seriously hurt—though Senessie Sanou did end up skipping that night’s program because of a gash on his hand—or because at this point, transportation frustrations had

reached the point of absurdity. “APC” Koroma, the Warriors’ tall young stilt walker flippantly nicknamed in honor of the country’s president and ruling party, bounded over and led me to a patch of grass next to wreck and proudly declared, “This is where I fell... like a monkey!” Then with eyes wide for comic effect, he leapt upon the exact spot and demonstrated how he had landed on all fours with simian finesse. Someone looked at the front of the truck, grill collapsed, windshield irreparably cracked, the paint chips of the “King” in “King Hassan Jalloh” finally pulverized into splinters, and commented, “Now it’s ugly.” Jalloh rejoined pensively, “It is only vanity, not worth mortal man.” The troupe’s strong man and bouncer, Iron Gate, tried to open the passenger door wedged into its buckled frame, and the handle came off in his hand. Jalloh tried to call someone to send a vehicle from Kenema, but Prince insisted that he could get the truck running again, and got to work stripping off fragments and checking for leaks.

Thirty minutes later, Prince had us push the heap out of the bush and down the road. As the ignition shuddered to life and the truck kicked out of our hands, the revitalized troupe quickly charged back to their stations. As APC ran past me to toss himself up to his post above the cab, he threw his arm towards the truck and, beaming, declared, “THIS is Warrior!”

APC might have been referring to the truck itself and its resolute resilience, or the occasion of triumphing against the odds, but he might just as well have been referring to the entire lifestyle and ethos of troupe. APC was too young to experience firsthand the tribulation of military life during the war, even to be recruited as a child soldier. Yet the troupe celebrated, exploited, and perpetuated the paradigm of the “warrior,” transferring ideals of stamina, mobility, resourcefulness, and hyper-masculinity from the battlefield to playing field. Traveling with Jalloh and his men, I often reflected on the parallels between these two fields and, inevitably, my own ethnographic experience in “the field.”



Figure 6. The Warriors. Wunde Chieftdom, Bo District, 2012.



Figure 7. Commander Hassan Jalloh and CDF troops. Courtesy the personal archives of Hassan Jalloh, n.d.

Warrior Territory

While Jalloh insists that he performs for all of Sierra Leone, his tours most certainly focus their circulations in the nation's South and East, the region primarily considered Mendeland. Based on the admittedly incomplete documentation manager Ansu Bellay provided me about the troupe's touring schedule, representing 221 communities and about three-and-a-half of the company's nine seasons since 2003, the troupe spends more than two-thirds of its time in the Eastern Province, about one-third of its time in its nominal home in the Southern Province, and negligible time in other regions of the country (see chart).

District	Shows	Percentage of Total
EASTERN PROVINCE	152	68.8
Kailahun	65	29.4
Kenema	84	38.0
Kono	3	1.4
SOUTHERN PROVINCE	67	30.3
Bonthe	8	3.6
Bo	36	16.3
Moyamba	4	1.8
Pujehun	19	8.6
WESTERN AREA	1	0.5
LIBERIA	1	0.5
NORTHERN PROVINCE	0	0

Jalloh and his men's focus on the South and East is largely a result of their Mende heritage, language, and connections. The South harbors historical and familial ties for Jalloh himself. Bo District is Jalloh's home region and Bo city is the troupe's current base, while Pujehun District was the site of Jalloh's deployment during wartime. Yet both are relatively less welcoming than Kenema and Kailahun districts. These two Eastern Province regions are the most lucrative for the Warriors for a number of reasons. First, most of the Warriors themselves consider these two districts their homes, even if they now live in Bo. Second, the resurgent mining and agricultural

industries have provided their populations with a relatively ample degree of disposable income. Third, the regions are more isolated from the capital Freetown and thus the Warriors, using their own vehicle and their willingness to exploit the unmet demand for live entertainment, have an advantage. Jalloh has also begun crossing the border into Liberia for touring opportunities, both from the southern route through Zimmi to Bo Waterside and to the east through Kailahun and Luawa chiefdom (some more recent tours are not represented on the above chart).

In following the Warriors throughout this terrain, the present study is less a classic ethnography of a specific site or location than an ethnography of roads.⁷¹ Paul Virilio's "dromology" observes that roads are perhaps the constitutive element of global modernity.⁷² Like other aspects of modernity, African road modernities have their own local logics.⁷³ In many regions across the continent, roads are inexorably linked to violence through histories of forced migrations in the era of the slave trade and conscripted road work in the colonial era, contemporary physical perils such as traffic accidents, and spiritual dangers.⁷⁴ Even so, roads also offer "promises" for increased mobility and access to resources, however frequently those promises may be broken.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Perhaps the first ethnography of a road is Max Gluckman's famous analysis of colonial administration in Zululand. Ethnographic descriptions of roads have witnessed a recent proliferation. Max Gluckman, "Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand," *Bantu Studies* 14, no. 1 (1940): 1–30; Dimitris Dalakoglou and Penny Harvey, "Roads and Anthropology: Ethnographic Perspectives on Space, Time and (im) Mobility," *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012): 459–65; Gabriel Klaeger, "Introduction: The Perils and Possibilities of African Roads," *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 83, no. 3 (2013): 359–66.

⁷² Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 1986).

⁷³ cf. Jan Bart Gewald, Sabine Luning, and Klaas Van Walraven, eds., *The Speed of Change: Motor Vehicles and People in Africa, 1890-2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

⁷⁴ Adeline Masquelier, "Road Mythographies: Space, Mobility, and the Historical Imagination in Postcolonial Niger," *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 4 (2002): 829–56; Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 64, 89; Rebekah Lee, "Death in Slow Motion: Funerals, Ritual Practice and Road Danger in South Africa," *African Studies* 71, no. 2 (2012): 195–211; Gabriel Klaeger, "Dwelling on the Road: Routines, Rituals and Roadblocks in Southern Ghana," *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 83, no. 3 (2013): 446–69.

⁷⁵ Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, "The Enchantments of Infrastructure," *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012): 521–36.

Ultimately, two highways emerged as the core thoroughfares along which the Warriors engaged Mende communities: Kenema-Kailahun and Kenema-Zimmi. Both these routes are key transportation arteries, as the former links the entire Kailahun District to the rest of the country and the latter represents the most dependable link to Sierra Leone's Southern Coast. They also act as vital international causeways. Kenema-Kailahun leads on to the far Eastern Forest regions of Guinea and the Kenema-Zimmi axis is Sierra Leone's predominant route to Liberia. Both routes convey considerable commercial trade, including minerals and agricultural riches. In spite of their vital economic and transnational importance, both routes are in a state of frustrating disrepair and infrastructural crisis, to such a degree that they are impassable in the rainy season, dissolving into red ooze and requiring the use of competing networks of rural tracks that temporarily support detours before foundering into sludge themselves. Postwar road construction priorities have been focused on connecting Freetown to Guinea and to large scale mining projects in the North, leading to the Eastern roads' continued neglect. Finally in 2011, halfway through my primary research period and conveniently close to the presidential election, the national government and South Korean contractors began converting part of the Kenema-Kailahun highway into an ultramodern four-lane highway, a development that has been a spectacle in its own right, an elaborate demonstration of modern technological innovation that exceeds the requirements of the local population.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the project only extends two-thirds of the mileage to Kailahun Town, the district capital and seat of the most populous chiefdom, abandoning the most soggy and dangerous section of the journey.

⁷⁶ Brian Larkin refers to these projects as the "colonial sublime" though the aesthetic clearly retains relevance in the postcolonial era. Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise : Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 16–47; Caroline Melly, "Ethnography on the Road: Infrastructural Vision and the Unruly Present in Contemporary Dakar," *Africa* 83, no. 3 (2013): 385–402; Peter J. Bloom, Stephan F. Miescher, and Takyiwaa Manuh, eds., *Modernization as Spectacle in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

These two roads bear two different forms of significance for Jalloh and his men. The Kenema-Kailahun Highway represents the future. Along this route are new populations, people long isolated, proud of their culture, and now relatively flush with mining and farming income. Conversely, the Kenema-Zimmi Highway represents the past. This axis was the corridor of Jalloh's military authority. As a CDF commander based in Zimmi, Jalloh was charged with the oversight of the Liberian border as it passes parallel to the highway. While a handful of Jalloh's men and a number of other cultural performers hail from Kailahun, most of them call towns between Kenema and Zimmi home. These highways are thus both sources of audiences and sources of artistic practices.

The local terrain is as weighted with significance as the roads that pass through it. The Kenema-Kailahun and Kenema-Zimmi highways flank the Gola Forest, now the largest remaining old-growth canopy in West Africa. Tied to the work of herbal medical specialists, the Gola has long been a source of both natural wealth and mystic power. As a wild, underdeveloped cross-border territory, it has long harbored those who would most like to avoid the touch of state authority, and was a key passage for rebel incursion during the war.⁷⁷ Now that the Sierra Leone government has reconceived the region as a national park as a first effort towards domesticating it, its reputation as a site of danger, mysticism, and alterity might be melting away under increased scrutiny. Yet the isolated intersection of forest, borderlands, and government neglect remains a potent landscape. These highways, like the traveling troupes that ply them, run along the thresholds between the visible and the concealed, the wild and the contained, the mundane and the mystic.

⁷⁷ Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*, Rev. (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 42–48.

Ethnography on tour

The following text is an ethnography on tour, a narrative of movement, dislocation, and transposition rather than a story of a single site.⁷⁸ As George Marcus suggests for “multi-sited ethnography,” it is composed so as to “follow the people” (i.e. touring cultural groups) and “follow the life or biography” (i.e. Hassan Jalloh), rather than focusing on a single locale.⁷⁹ On the other hand, the research might be better described in Ghassan Hage’s terms as a “geographically discontinuous site” at which culture is shared across locales, ethnicities, and, to some extent, nation-states.⁸⁰ The surge in interest over mobilities and travel in late 20th century social sciences began to approach the realities of moving and dislocated peoples.⁸¹ However, this “traveling theory” has also come under criticism, particularly by feminist scholars, for privileging a position of freedom of movement applicable only to elites.⁸² Ethnographic descriptions that recognize the limitations of individual actors, such as touring performers, are an important corrective to views of mobility that depict homogenous global flows of information, people, and resources. Like all postwar Sierra Leoneans, this text continually adjusts its position across both space and time but is limited by contingency. Like the touring performers who constitute its primary subjects, it never stays in one place too long.

⁷⁸ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 17–46. Not to be confused with an ethnography of leisure tourism, cf. Edward M. Bruner, *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (London: Sage, 2011).

⁷⁹ George E. Marcus, “Ethnography In/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (1995): 95–117.

⁸⁰ Ghassan Hage, “A Not so Multi-Sited Ethnography of a Not so Imagined Community,” *Anthropological Theory* 5, no. 4 (2005): 463–75.

⁸¹ Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, “Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings,” *Mobilities* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1–22.

⁸² Edward Said, “Traveling Theory,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226–47; Janet Wolff, “On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism,” *Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (1993): 224–39.

For both performers and ethnographers, touring has its benefits and its drawbacks. One advantage of touring is its potential for comparison. A view of culture as process calls for variants on the Manchester School's extended case method in order to document transformations.⁸³ Through my travels and this text, I track variations across (1) the content of Jalloh's performances as he tours different geographic regions, (2) its reception among different audiences, (3) different cultural troupes employing similar performance idioms, and (4) analogous spectacles using similar techniques and aesthetics, including those of militias, herbalists, initiatory societies, and political parties. I engage these subjects with a range of methods, primarily ethnography, visual ethnography, oral history, and archival research. Throughout this project, I tack between national, regional, and local viewpoints. I compare top-down models and experiments conceived from Freetown, Sierra Leone's putative core and its link to the international community, with those proposed and enacted in the rural East, the nation's supposed margins. Through this contrast, I outline areas of consonance, slippage, friction, and conflict between agents representing ostensibly international, national, or local interests.⁸⁴

Touring also offers a broad view of cultural circumstances. After the wide and highly heterogeneous disruptions that took place across Sierra Leone, each particular site wrestles with its own web of past struggles and future challenges, and each has responded in its own idiosyncratic way. Considering a cultural context that was already extremely diverse before the war, no commonalities among present-day Mende communities can be taken for granted. While my travels were hardly systematic enough to make broad generalizations about "the state of

⁸³ Michael Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method," *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 1 (1998): 5–33.

⁸⁴ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Veena Das and Deborah Poole, eds., *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2004).

Mende performing arts traditions” or any other category of culture—as if that were ever possible—I did move about enough and talk to an ample number of communities to be able to speak a bit on the diversity of experiences and practices in “postwar Sierra Leone” and to hazard a few extrapolations from those observations.

My own ethnographic skills were outpaced by those of my primary collaborators and travel partners, most notably Hassan Jalloh. Jalloh, more than any other performer I met, uses his travels as a means through which to explain different aspects of the Sierra Leonean nation to each other.⁸⁵ Across his cultural troupe tours, he moves between different *scales* of community, from cities to hamlets, discovering a little about each site and passing on his discoveries to his audiences. Moreover, he moves between different *types* of community, from government ministry to political party to village chieftaincy to youth group to mutual aid society to the former CDF and so on, articulating each with the other. Not only Jalloh, but each touring performer whether dancer or musician or healer or all of the above, use their status at the margins of multiple different communities to become the links that tie sites together and make them legible to each other. Like many other mobilized or displaced Sierra Leoneans, they forge livelihoods by finding novel connections between disparate populations through commerce, politics, and culture.

The present text too, seeks out novel connections by moving in the wake of these travelers, if not necessarily in their exact footsteps. This study explores sites of differing discourses, it crosses multiple structures of authority, and it roams between numerous apparently contained institutions. It does so in order to attempt to do justice to a complex figure like Hassan

⁸⁵ cf. Laurie Aleen Frederik, *Trumpets in the Mountains: Theater and the Politics of National Culture in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

Jalloh and the complex landscape which fashions his life and which he refashions in turn, and to tease out the connections between celebrity, violence, and the mystic arts.

Other Methods

Following two three-week trips to Sierra Leone for pilot research in July and December 2010, I spent eighteen months from 2011 to 2013 in Sierra Leone to conduct primary fieldwork. The first few months, from October to December, I passed mostly in Freetown, orienting myself to the national arts scene and gauging broader cultural trends. From December until the close of the season in June, I traveled extensively with the Warriors and similar troupes, most often their chief competitors, the Mammy Yoko Troupe. During the rainy season, I visited with different troupes as they rested in their respective home bases, followed the activities of traditional healers' groups, and began to take stock of district cultural variations. In September, the electoral campaign period began to heat up, throwing the cultural activities of the country into commotion and requiring a great deal of travel throughout the provinces. This process reached its climax at the national elections in November. Basing myself in Kenema town from November to January, then Kailahun town from January to March, I engaged in more localized research into cultural performance, following the Warriors and Mammy Yoko when they passed through the region, but focusing on smaller scale troupes with more limited itineraries, village-level associations, and initiatory society activity.

The difficult conditions of postwar Sierra Leone, a country in the midst of reinventing itself, require special attention to the role of ethnography in conflict. Here I speak not of the

anthropology of conflict zones.⁸⁶ Rather I refer to the central role of disagreement in ethnographic epistemology. For Johannes Fabian, ethnographic knowledge is “initiated” through confrontation, and then made productive through communication.⁸⁷ The present study is especially attentive to arenas of social conflict that expose debates about the course of Sierra Leonean futures. As many of these debates are purposefully denied or obfuscated, I am also attentive to the epistemological value of rumor, as it circulates through both the media and the populace.⁸⁸ I am also highly aware of when rituals and performances do and do not “work,” as failures of performances and ritual can be a valuable source of information about social conflict.⁸⁹ The accumulation of personal narratives and rumor are meant to provide what Michael Jackson calls “genealogies of events” that relate multiple experiences of an event.⁹⁰ If attention to conflict, rumor, and failure threatens to describe Sierra Leone as a dysfunctional society, that is not my intention. Conflict, like spectacle, emerged rarely, but was revealing when visible.

The circumstances of postwar Sierra Leone and my travels across it facilitated some forms of historiography at the expense of others. I made extensive use of oral histories, and my narratives of individuals’ pasts are based primarily on these firsthand reports. To some extent, I was less concerned with verifying and cross-checking individual accounts of events than I was in

⁸⁶ e.g. Danny Hoffman, “Frontline Anthropology: Research in a Time of War,” *Anthropology Today* 19, no. 3 (2003): 9–12; Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

⁸⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 25.

⁸⁸ cf. Misty L. Bastian, “‘Bloodhounds Who Have No Friends’: Witchcraft and Locality in the Nigerian Popular Press,” in *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 129–66; Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁸⁹ Nicholas B. Dirks, “Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact,” in *Culture Power History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁹⁰ Jackson, *Existential Anthropology*, 2.

determining how these accounts narrated pasts that were useful for the individuals as they faced the future. These personal narratives are colored by other oral traditions such as oral historical narratives and storytelling, although these practices are rarer now than they have been in the past.⁹¹ I also consulted newspapers and other local media. Considering the widespread political partisanship and dearth of professional investigative journalism, newspaper and television reports have been more useful as demonstrations of local agents' specific methods of exploiting media (e.g. the traditional healers' unions televised witch hunts) than as evidence of events.⁹² The state of archives in postwar Sierra Leone remains dismal, as many records were lost and other were specifically targeted.⁹³ Nonetheless, individuals of every class maintain collections of photos, forms, letters, and other ephemera, what Karin Barber refers to as "tin trunk" archives.⁹⁴

In the case of performing artists, archives were mostly personal photos taken by professional photographers, themselves itinerant professionals, who attend their events. The value of photographic portraits, including the work of Sierra Leonean Alphonso Lisk-Carew, to African historiography is well-established.⁹⁵ Lauri Firstenburg argues that portrait photography offers a "new operation of embodiment, of vision, positing new terms for the revisualization of

⁹¹ Cosentino, *Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers*; Michael Jackson, *Allegories of the Wilderness: Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982); Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002).

⁹² On the challenges faced by Sierra Leonean journalists, see Amadu Khan, "Journalism & Armed Conflict in Africa: The Civil War in Sierra Leone," *Review of African Political Economy* 25, no. 78 (December 1998): 585–97.

⁹³ Paul Richards notes, for example, rebels who had been students that attacked Njala University and destroyed school records. Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, 26–27.

⁹⁴ Karin Barber, "Introduction: Hidden Innovators in Africa," in *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, ed. Karin Barber (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3–7.

⁹⁵ cf. Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Tobias Wendl, "Entangled Traditions: Photography and the History of Media in Southern Ghana," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 39 (2001): 78–101; Christraud Geary, "Photographs as Material for African History: Some Methodological Considerations," *History in Africa* 13 (1986): 89–116; Vera Viditz-Ward, "Alphonso Lisk-Carew: Creole Photographer," *African Arts* 19, no. 1 (1985): 46–51+88.



Figure 8. Hassan Jalloh. Bo City, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District, 2012.

OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL TASK FORCES COMMANDER,
C.D.F. /SL - HQ - BO
88 MAHEI BOIMA ROAD
BO.

Date: 30th April, 2001

Your Ref

My Ref

The Coordinator
N.C.D.R.(South)
Bo/Kenema Highway
BO

Dear Sir,

CALLING FOR PEACE CULTURAL SHOW

We the Coming Ex-Combatants of Civil Defence Forces (SL) 2nd Battalion - Simi, Pujehun District, are informing your good office to inform all the NGO's who are concern for peace in this country to be present on the 10th to the 11th May, 2001 at the hours of 03:00 p.m. every day, at the Bo Coronation Field.

The objectives of this Cultural Group which is organised by the Coming Ex-Combatants of the Civil Defence Force along Mano River is to demonstrate or promote peace and tranquility of our belowe country.

Sir, we are humbly appealing to your good office to inform the Resident Minister and UNAMSIL Commander (South).

Your usual cooperation is highly solicited.

Yours faithfully,

Al-Hassan W. Jalloh
Deputy National Task Force Commander

Hon. Res. Minister, South
NCRRR, South
Commissioner of Police, South
UNAMSIL Commander, South
The Administrator, CDF, South
File.

Figure 9. CDF communiqué announcing a cultural show. Courtesy the personal archives of Hassan Jalloh, 2001.

postindependence subjectivities.”⁹⁶ In this, African photographic practices differ slightly from European philosophies that suggest that photography is a substitute for memory or, more radically, a memorial to mortality.⁹⁷ The cultural performers’ portraits are as importantly forms of demonstration as they are *aides-mémoire*. Snapshots might demonstrate social networks by showing the owner engaged with a friend, colleague, or patron. They might also demonstrate forms of self-fashioning through performance of their mystic or acrobatic acts or poses with props of modernity such as sunglasses and cell phones. Not only did I benefit from these images, I also became engaged in further production of them.

Through my practice of visual ethnography, I became integrated into my guides’ mediascapes, an alliance in which we each drew different advantages. Sarah Pink asks visual ethnographers to consider “how their photographic/video research practices will develop in relation to local practices and a sense of how they may learn through the interface between their own and local visual practices.”⁹⁸ I used films and photos of the cultural shows for my own future reference, as well as a means to elicit commentary from the performers themselves in post-performance screenings and conversations. More importantly to my relationships to the troupes, filming gave me a role in their projects. By documenting their acts, my presence made sense and was useful. The specific and legible duty of videographer incorporated me into the spectacle in the sense meant by Jean Rouch in his perhaps over-poetic invocation of *ciné-transe* as the capacity of the camera to transform the filmmaker into a new character with his own

⁹⁶ Lauri Firstenberg, “Postcoloniality, Performance, and Photographic Portraiture,” in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 179.

⁹⁷ cf. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 52–67; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

⁹⁸ Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research* (London: Sage, 2001), 45.

distinct role in a ritual event.⁹⁹ For their own part, Jalloh and other artists would use my presence to indicate the importance of their work, sometimes claiming to the public that the “BBC” had sent me to report on wonders of which only they were capable. In addition to aggrandizing their status, my images were of some material benefit for these artists, as many were able to partner with local, small-scale media houses to mass-produce DVDs of the performances I filmed to sell to broader publics. The return on these investments may have been minimal, but at the very least, the distribution of these images expanded the sphere of their renown.

Ethnographer as celebrity

My role as an unusual and—however much I tried to recede from the spotlight—highly visible participant in these spectacles made me something of a spectacle myself. My spectacular nature was not limited to the playing field, of course. It was apparent at all the times that I felt obliged to wave to a Mende child’s cry of *puumɔi* (white person). It was apparent in many conversations with strangers that began, “I once saw you with Jalloh.” It was apparent every time I was unexpectedly pulled into a photo opportunity by politicians and entrepreneurial networkers. In many ways at many moments, I had to negotiate my own notoriety.

As my persona as filmmaker and researcher became institutionalized within the spectacles of many cultural troupes, my role as local celebrity became undeniable. In some instances, my presence fit neatly into already established patterns, as when Jalloh’s drummer and announcer Idrissa Senessie, a.k.a. DJ Sinava, took to making shout-outs to me along with the other dignitaries that might be present, code-switching to English to recognize me as “Brother

⁹⁹ “I now believe that for the people who are filmed, the ‘self’ of the filmmaker changes in front of their eyes during the filming. [...] but paradoxically, it is due to this equipment and this new behavior [...] that the filmmaker can throw himself into a ritual.” Jean Rouch, *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 99.

Sam, the only white man in the Warrior Mystical Power Dance Troupe.” Such recognition was of a kind with other individuals involved in the troupe’s presentations, whether fellow tour members or hosts, but I was singled out in more specific ways as well.

Early in my fieldwork, I arrived late in Komende Luyama, a village outside Kenema on the border with Kailahun District, to meet the Warriors’ tour. As the performance was about to begin, Hassan Jalloh invited me into the dancers’ *vaahun*, a small preparation space set off from the stage where the men get dressed, and offered to share some of the troupe’s pre-show *sakii tombui*, a hearty cassava leaf and bean sauce served with rice that is a staple food in Mendeland. Many of his men still did not know me too well, but they were appreciative when I tucked into the local delicacy in the local fashion with a bare hand. Moreover, they were beside themselves with laughter when I remarked with honest and spontaneous sentiment in my still limited Mende, *nεεngɔ!* (“sweet” or “delicious”). That evening, Jalloh paused the program between acts to discuss my presence, as he had at the handful of events I had already attended. Then he confessed that he was teaching me more than just the performance arts of Mende culture. Waving me onto the stage, he asked me to reiterate how I found the *sakii tombui*. I repeated “*nεεngɔ*,” the audience erupted in hysterics, and a new bit for the program was born. Around the village the next day, and to some extent wherever we traveled, I was followed by children and their tittering cries of “*sakii nεεngɔ!*”

At every subsequent program, Jalloh took a moment between acts to introduce me, do the *sakii nεεngɔ* bit, and tell the story of how we met. The longer I stuck around, the more that story hewed to reality—I finally transitioned from being a “BBC reporter” to an “American student”—yet one aspect of the story stayed the same; my alleged quest to find Jalloh. According to this epic narrative, I had travelled from America to the BBC in search of African culture. The BBC

sent me on to The Gambia, where I was meant to have met President Yayah Jammeh, founder of the Kanilai International Cultural Festival and patron to Jalloh. Jammeh was then to have sent me to Sierra Leone to ask after his friend Jalloh, where I was to have hunted in Freetown before inquiring at the Ministry of Culture. Finally, I traveled to his location on tour in the depths of Sierra Leone to find “the real thing.” Now I toured with him in order to learn African, Sierra Leonean, and Mende culture, and Jalloh, as preeminent expert, was instructing me in mystic arts, dance, language, and cuisine. Almost every time I was introduced it was in concert with a version of this, my intrepid quest. Needless to say, my journey to Jalloh was in reality much more prosaic, involving simply the invaluable advice of a more experienced academic and the expert facilitation of one of his local friends.¹⁰⁰ But the quest narrative was not meant to emphasize *my* worldliness or valor, but that of Jalloh. Each of my steps was meant to be understood as a breadcrumb Jalloh left in the ever-widening spheres of his own international influence, and my presence attested to the resonance of his own fame across Sierra Leone, through The Gambia, and as far—supposedly—as London and now America. In this way, Jalloh and I both profited from the advantages offered by the specific forms of celebrity each of us instantiated. My celebrity provided him with a window to his global consequence, while his provided me with a window to his local significance.

Jalloh would usually toss out one of his stock phrases as a further explication and summary of our little stage routine and our general rapport: “He who tells you about them, will one day tell them about you.” Jalloh commits an interesting rereading of this adage, which typically serves as an admonishment for the listeners to beware of participating in too much gossip lest they become subject of gossip themselves. Here Jalloh speaks not of communication’s

¹⁰⁰ Danny Hoffman and Abubakkarr Juana, respectively. See acknowledgements.

peril, but of its possibility. Every stranger is a potential spectator. And every spectator is a potential aide or “help.”¹⁰¹ Implicit in our relationship of reciprocal exchange was the unstated promise that I would indeed bring him to greater international attention. This document is one attempt to fulfill that promise.

¹⁰¹ Karin Barber, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theater* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 236–39.



Figure 10. Roadside photo opportunity. Woyama Chiefdom, Bo District. Photo by Al-Hassan W. Jalloh

Chapter One: Mobilizing Culture

1.1 "W.A.R. WASTE ALL RESOURCES"

Although the conflict came to a close more than a dozen years ago, the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002) remains this research's foundation. For many Sierra Leoneans, the "post-" in "postwar" could refer to "a space clearing gesture" to allow possibilities for the transcendence of past violence, as Kwame Antony Appiah suggests for the "post-" in "postcolonial."¹ Yet Stuart Hall notes that "the deconstruction of core concepts undertaken by the so-called 'post-' discourses is followed, not by their abolition and disappearance but rather *by their proliferation* [...] only now in a 'decentered' position in the discourse."² Sierra Leone's public life remains haunted by war, even if most Sierra Leoneans are trying to "forgive and forget" broken ties and distressing pasts, rather than engaging in projects of testimony and memorialization.³ Hassah Jalloh promises *ngu wu lema* ("I make you forget"), but Sierra Leonean society and its cultures are still responding to the war's legacy.

The following chapter describes the impact the Sierra Leone Civil War had upon Sierra Leone "culture" and vice versa. As Stephen Lubkemann notes, even in the midst of mass social

¹ Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House : Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 149.

² Stuart Hall, "When Was 'the Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit," in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996), 248.

³ Rosalind Shaw, *Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions : Lessons from Sierra Leone*, Special (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, February 2005); Jackson, *Existential Anthropology*, 147.

disruption, culture remains “socially informed.”⁴ The war’s chaos shattered uncountable lives, while at the same time generating the conditions under which entrepreneurs such as Jalloh could claim powers that otherwise would have remained unattainable. Jalloh acknowledges that before the war he was “the condemned one” in his family. From his youth in Fanima, Wunde Chiefdom in Bo District, among forty-seven children of his father, he ran with a bad crowd, engaged in petty theft, and had few prospects. Hassan Jalloh’s self-narrated life story provides the signposts through long histories of cultural collaborations and conflicts.⁵ Quoting Jalloh at length, while partially meant as a gesture towards James Clifford’s call for “polyvocality” in ethnography, is more importantly intended to directly portray “his will toward the future and the sedimented will of the past,” as Michael Jackson describes the epiphany of the event.⁶ I am less concerned with uncovering historical fact than I am in demonstrating how Jalloh continues to mobilize his past for all of his possible futures.

War initiated

1992, I graduated from Ahmadiyya Muslim Secondary School, Bo... Advanced level.

The same 1992, war entered in Sierra Leone 1991. Gradually the war was just going up, without any way of ending war. Of course, in 1994, definitely they burned down our village [Fanima]. My village... I lost my nephew, my sister, my elder brother, my uncle's wife. Many houses were burnt there – burnt down. We were displaced in Bo here.⁷

⁴ Stephen C. Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 28.

⁵ Alternative narrations of the war, and of Jalloh’s life, emerge throughout this text.

⁶ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Jackson, *Existential Anthropology*, 12.

⁷ I try to reproduce Jalloh’s idiosyncrasies so as to demonstrate how he commandeers the English language for his own purposes.

Although most arguments about the causes of the war illuminate some precipitating conditions, few fully explain the complex violence of the conflict. Paul Richards' condemnation of a corrupt patrimonial order exposes key desires among combatants but fails to explain why other nations with similar gerontocracies have not collapsed.⁸ Ibrahim Abdullah and Yusef Bangura's contentions that the rebels were largely uneducated and criminal masses following "logics of banditry, hedonism, and brutality" do little to account for the roots of these antisocial forces.⁹ William Reno points to the "shadow state" as a system of hidden warlord politics and privatized militias funded by diamond and other raw material exports that ultimately spun out of control, but does not account for the war's particularly heinous atrocities.¹⁰ The most satisfactory account of the war is that of Michael Jackson, who maintains that the conflict "outstripped the sociocultural conditions under which it emerged and the political rationale with which it began, running its course like a storm or a fever."¹¹ Jackson believes that no single causality is sufficient to explain the others. Instead, it is this very "indeterminacy" that defined the process of the war.¹² As national and international projects claim hardened narratives on the conflict, it is vital to remember that within the crisis, the only clear motive was individuals making increasing desperate and constrained choices, or what Chris Coulter terms "choiceless decisions."¹³

On March 23, 1991, the first shots were fired as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) crossed into Sierra Leone's Far East at Bomaru. Liberian warlord Charles Taylor had provided

⁸ Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*.

⁹ Ibrahim Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front Sierra Leone," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2 (1998): 203–35; Yusuf Bangura, "Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: A Critique of Paul Richards's *Fighting for the Rain Forest*," *Africa Development* 22, no. 3/4 (1997): 130.

¹⁰ Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*.

¹¹ Jackson, *Existential Anthropology*, 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³ Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Women's Lives through War and Peace in Sierra Leone* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 150.

RUF commander Foday Sankoh with a staging ground as well as Liberian and Burkinabé troops, but it was Sierra Leone's political schisms that nurtured expanding violence. On the one hand, decades of corruption, neglect, and political marginalization by the ruling All People's Congress (APC) left many in the hinterland, especially those from Mende and related ethnic groups, open to the RUF message of apparent liberation.¹⁴ On the other hand, Freetown's isolation meant that news of the war was slow to reach the capitol and suspect when it did arrive. Few in the city believed the country was at war until a group of soldiers fed up with the poor conditions under which they were expected to fend off the RUF staged a coup and removed the ruling APC party from power in order to establish a National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). The mood of the country turned to brief jubilation with the prospect that years of corruption and increasing violence were coming to an end.¹⁵ Yet the NPRC refused to engage the RUF in peace talks and their leader Valentine Strasser began to exhibit the same tendencies towards nepotism and autocracy as his predecessors. Under international pressure, his colleague Brigadier General Maada Bio staged another coup and ceded power to popular elections, handily won by Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) candidate and former-UN representative Tejan Kabbah.

At the warfront, the government's belated efforts to augment troops depleted during the Siaka Stevens era turned to controversial populations of Sierra Leone's disenfranchised youth, including many young men with neither loyalty to the State nor appreciation for local communities.¹⁶ These poorly trained soldiers often defected to the RUF or preyed upon villages

¹⁴ Krijn Peters and Paul Richards, "'Why We Fight': Voices of Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone," *Africa* 68, no. 2 (1998): 183.

¹⁵ Joseph Opala, "'Ecstatic Renovation!': Street Art Celebrating Sierra Leone's 1992 Revolution," *African Affairs* 93 (1994): 195–218.

¹⁶ Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction."



Figure 11. Hassan Jalloh and Sidike Sanou. Bomaru, Upper Bambara Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2013.

when the government failed to support them with adequate payment or provisions.¹⁷ Meanwhile the RUF, under conditions of increasing marginalization, turned more aggressively on local populations and began numerous campaigns of terror and depredation, including some of the early instances of mass amputation and disfigurement. These early and confusing days of the war witnessed the rise of the “sobel,” soldier-by-day and rebel-by-night, a terrifyingly baffling figure who was either an army officer who took off his uniform in order to steal from the public he was meant to protect or a rebel who put on the uniform of the army in order to deceive his targets.¹⁸ This proliferating suspicion of the rebels, the national army, and the international mercenaries drove local communities to mobilize their own defensive forces.

War escalated

I worked for the displaced people in the displaced camp as camp coordinator... 1994, 95. In Bo here. Til the time the society came in as Kamajors, in the wing of CDF, fighting against the rebels. Of course, they started down river, by Bonthe Island [...] It was not a matter of joining war and uh, revenge, what happened to me. But I saw it fitted that when the society has come and everybody has approved that the society is good, I decided to find myself into the society and to become a member. To stop the hazard that happened to us, not to happen to those which has not been affected.
So I joined the force CDF to liberate this country from war. Successfully, I joined 1996, August. Ah... I was very lucky in it.
Just to almighty God... God did everything possible for let Sierra Leone not suffer the war.

The origin of the Civil Defense Forces (CDF) is complex and contested. In its mythic mode, the CDF was the culmination of the mobilization of local hunters, known as *kamajoesia* in Mende and anglicized to “Kamajors” as the CDF gained prominence. These hunters redeployed skills

¹⁷ Jimmy Kandeh, “Ransoming the State: Elite Origins of Subaltern Terror in Sierra Leone,” *Review of African Political Economy* 26, no. 81 (1999): 349.

¹⁸ Paul Richards, “Dressed to Kill: Clothing as Technology of the Body in the Civil War in Sierra Leone,” *Journal of Material Culture* 14, no. 4 (2009): 495–512.

used for tracking, pursuit, and sniping game in order to guide soldiers and strike against the rebels.¹⁹ More importantly, they activated a number of mystic defensive technologies used in the bush, including disappearance, transformation, disorienting fog, and bulletproofing. Kamajors harnessed these powers through a variety of mechanisms, including herbal baths, amulets, and Islamic scripture.²⁰

More cynical origin narratives depict the CDF as the political manipulations of a few key paramount chiefs and other agents in the hinterland. According to these arguments, the Kamajors of the CDF had little in common with the village *kamajoesia*. The CDF was instead the product of a tradition invented out of imaginaries of a primordial Africa.²¹ In any case, the CDF soon became a primary pro-government militia, receiving significant logistical support from the Kabbah government at the expense of the Sierra Leone military.

So after the initiation, my first mission to try me was to go and lead the war to Zagoda...where the RUF was getting one of a strong base. In the Kenema District. I went there with my troops. We succeeded... And they gave me another missions to take over the Sierra Leone-Liberia border. Which is Camp Libya. [Jalloh lists a half dozen other successful battles over the course of three weeks in October and November 1996]

By then Victor Malu was the field commander [for ECOMOG], he came to the border and speak to— and spoke to me. He ask what we need and what we want. We said we don't need anything, we only need peace and we want freedom in our country. We are not fighting to overthrow the government or to become part of the government or to part a political fi— party... but we just want our people to be freed in Sierra Leone. We are the part of CDF, Kamajor wings. He brought food for us, water, lots of amusement for us too... In fact that made us to stay... about seven... days or more than that day at the border.

We were there til May 25th, another plot was made by the AFRC juntas. They called the rebels that we were fighting against, they called the rebels to join them to fight us now. Through the blessings of all mighty God, we didn't withstand with anything or withdrew— withdraw. We made a challenge against them that

¹⁹ Patrick Mauna, “The Kamajoi Militia : Violence, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency,” *Africa Development* 22, no. 3/4 (1997): 77–100.

²⁰ Hoffman, *The War Machines*; Nathalie Wlodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare: Appearance and Reality in Contemporary African Conflict and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²¹ Ferme, “La Figure Du Chasseur et Les Chasseurs-Miliciens Dans Le Conflit Siera-Léonais.”

this land is our land. If we're going to die, we'll die here. If we're going to suffer, we suffer for this land. So... We stood against them... Then the fighting continued.

Continued military discontent, exacerbated by the NPRC's relinquishment of military power to the civilian government and the latter's favoritism towards the CDF, exploded with another coup on March 25, 1997.²² A surprise attack on Freetown's infamous Pademba Prison freed numerous mutineers and brought fighting to the city for the first time. The new rulers, calling themselves the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) colluded with the RUF, but the population refused to accept the AFRC coup. The AFRC made little attempt to actually govern, ushering in a period of extreme brutality and exploitation. Kabbah escaped the country and the CDF fled to Liberia, from which they recommenced operations.

ECOMOG was supplying us weapon. Like me, I was an RDF for ECOMOG. Rapid Deployment Forces. I fight here, capture here, wait for ECOMOG, ECOMOG deploy, then I advance. [...] Which was very known to them. Well known. At- Liberia-Sierra Leone border was handed over to me as Border Area Commander for Sierra Leone. I was there 1996, 1997, til 2001 we discamped.

With the AFRC's illegitimacy abundantly transparent, the international community began to finally shift from their failed attempts at diplomatic mediation to military intervention. The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) had begun providing troops in 1997 from neighboring African states, mostly Nigeria, representing the first major reinforcements. CDF and ECOMOG troupes succeeded in winning back much of Sierra Leone's southern regions, forcing the RUF back to bases in Makeni to the North and Kailahun in the far East. In March 1998, Freetown was retaken by ECOMOG forces. The AFRC, RUF, and affiliated militias like the West Side Boys continued their attempts to strike back. In January 1999, the RUF announced a final, savage paroxysm of violence, "Operation No Living Thing"

²² Jalloh may be off by two months in his chronology above.

which succeeded in brutalizing much of Freetown and the Sierra Leone's Western Area. Finally, the United Nations and, critically, Sierra Leone's former colonial overseers the United Kingdom committed the troops and logistical support necessary to eradicate the rebel forces.

Mysticism mobilized

But during the fighting, while we were staying in the jungle... a series of dreams, things happening. Of course this time when I was joining the society... they fired us, bullet cannot penetrate us, cartridge cannot go through us, we shout on weapon that is— properly seized. You fired, water came out of it. That was happened, that was done by the society. Which then was only one day and one night. So from the society many of us became commander because we proved that what they poured in us was true.

So we decided to maintain it. We that maintained the society, summed up... you know... grew up to be the commander like myself.

But like the— these dreads I'm having is my— come out of dreams, where my boys always copy from me now. By 1997, July... seven— July seventeen they started... July nineteen, the day of Charles Taylor's election in Liberia[...] So by the time staying in the jungle with my boys, a series of dreams, just like a miracles or something happen like a mystical things. I would dream of something, someone would give me something in the dream. Where I place in the dream, when in the daylight, in the morning, I would still find this something. With it, playing with it, then I would sti— directly know exactly what the use of this thing... without telling me anything, or somebody telling me that this you will do, this you will do. So I started keeping it, just like a writing a book... by page, by passage, by chapter. Until the dream were enoughed, and I proved with them— just like some of my boys was saying... When I have talked from the dream we talk about disappear, appeared, loss, change. Sometimes we will be sitting here... then we just make a guise— where I was sitting you look you will not see me. Unless I speak to you that I'm here. Go find me. When you need me come here. In times of ambushes, when we reach I say there is ambush there. Don't go. When you go you will fall in ambush. Or in times of ambushes, we will fall in ambush... They always found me. But I careful and I call that I am here. Nothing wrong with you come meet me.

The militaristic mobilization of Islamic mysticism has a long history in the Sierra Leone region.

As for much of West Africa, social instability created ample opportunity for mercenary Islamic

mystics, known in Krio as *morimen*.²³ The Mane migrations into Eastern areas of present-day Sierra Leone in the 1500s and the coincident initiation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade unleashed a devastating four centuries, and over the course of escalating slave raids, communities consolidated under war chiefs who offered some modicum of protection from other chiefs and their raiding parties. Villages transformed into “war-towns” fortified by two to four massive stockade walls.²⁴ In this militarized economy, a number of careers developed as warfare was “professionalized,” and it is little surprise that the powers of *morimen* were in high demand.²⁵ When British troops “pacified” the region, the militaristic powers of *morimen* were demobilized but not forgotten. After shifting into service for chiefs, independent hunters, and other clients, these powers reemerged in force during the Civil War of 1991-2001.

By turning to Islamic mystic practice, Sierra Leone’s warriors were hardly the only contemporary African fighting forces to access invisible powers, Islamic or otherwise. Various sides of civil conflicts in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Uganda have been notable for their collaboration with local spirit possession organizations.²⁶ In all of these cases, the voices of the spirits, whether as ancestors, natural forces, or foreign ghosts, conferred legitimacy upon the fighter. Foreign supernatural forces figured in Sierra Leone and Liberia’s conflicts; rebel Burkinabé mercenaries and Nigerian ECOMOG officers brought magic forces from their

²³ Murray Last, “Charisma and Medicine in Northern Nigeria,” in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, ed. Donal Cruise O’Brien and Christian Coulon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 53–66.

²⁴ Arthur Abraham, *An Introduction to the Pre-Colonial History of the Mende of Sierra Leone* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 61–3.

²⁵ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 39.

²⁶ David Lan, *Guns and Rain : Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1985); Alcinda Honwana, “Undying Past : Spirit Possession and the Memory of War in Southern Mozambique,” in *Magic and Modernity : Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 60–80; Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena & the Holy Spirits : War in Northern Uganda, 1985-97* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

respective countries of origin, rendered all the more powerful because of their foreignness.²⁷ When the few dozen members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels invaded the country from the anarchic regions of war-torn Liberia, their military successes were unexpectedly effective. Many believed they owed their prowess to the abilities of Liberian and Burkinabé mercenaries among their numbers, and fighters who killed these mercenaries reported finding protective charms in their bodies.²⁸ However, the balance of invisible powers soon shifted from the RUF to Kamajor hunter militias and the Civil Defence Forces (CDF).

Kamajor is the Anglicization of the Mende word *kamajoi*, which generally means hunter, but is itself the fusion of the terms *kama*, “mystery,” and *sowei*, “master”; *kamajoi* might be literally translated as “the past master at doing mysterious things.”²⁹ As hunters, the *kamajoesia* (pl.) were held to have advanced mystical powers that helped them cross into dangerous zones of night and wilderness, and, in many ways, the *kamajoesia* were the heirs of the mystic powers developed for warfare a century earlier.³⁰ The archetypical hunter is the marginal figure *par excellence*, living across boundaries including village and bush, day and night, human and animal, as well as the boundaries of nation-states.³¹ Hunters have exploited these skills under contemporary circumstances for much more than the capture of game, whether enlisting as park wardens in Guinea, or founding vigilante groups in Cote d’Ivoire to compensate for state failures and decentralization, or innovating new performance forms in Burkina Faso to secure local

²⁷ Mats Utas, “Sweet Battlefields : Youth and the Liberian Civil War” (dissertation, Uppsala University, 2003), 145.

²⁸ Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare*, 89.

²⁹ Mauna, “Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War.”

³⁰ Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 26–30.

³¹ Ferme, “La Figure Du Chasseur et Les Chasseurs-Miliciens Dans Le Conflit Siera-Léonais,” 125–26.

legitimization.³² In epic oral histories of village beginnings in Mendeland, the *kamajoi* was the foundational figure, striking out on quest for the unknown, accompanied only by their loyal ‘medicine man.’³³ In contemporary conflicts as well, Kamajors continued to depend on *moriman* mysticism for multiple protective and offensive operations.

Especially important were the baths composed so as to bulletproof the bearer. These liquid recipes might have included local herbs, *nesi* Islamic scripture medicine, and, disturbingly, cocaine or other drugs.³⁴ Once washed in the liquid, the soldier was required to follow specific regulations to maintain its efficacy, including avoiding sexual activity with women, drug use, and other conditions that conveniently happened to also maintain troop discipline.³⁵ During the UN-sponsored Special Court of Sierra Leone, CDF leaders were charged with falsely convincing their men of invincibility before sending them to the front lines.³⁶ CDF founder Hinga Norman responded to these allegations with the following logic: “You call them medicine men, but you have your own armor in western armies and sometimes it does not work, which is the same with us. Sometimes we get hurt and sometimes we get killed, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t work.”³⁷ In other protective gestures, Kamajors wore special hunter tunics peppered with mystic amulets, “iron jackets” that mirror other mystically-protected garments marshaled throughout

³² Melissa Leach, “New Shapes to Shift: War, Parks and the Hunting Person in Modern West Africa,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6, no. 4 (December 2000): 577–95; Joseph Hellweg, *Hunting the Ethical State: The Benkadi Movement of Côte D’Ivoire* (Chicago ;London: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Sten Hagberg, “Political Decentralization and Traditional Leadership in the Benkadi Hunters’ Association in Western Burkina Faso,” *Africa Today* 50, no. 4 (2004): 51–70; Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, “Masquerades as the Public Face: Art of Contemporary Hunters’ Associations in Western Burkina Faso,” *African Arts* 46, no. 4 (2013): 46–59.

³³ Mauna, “Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War,” 86. cf. Yousouf Cissé, “Notes Sur Les Sociétés de Chasseurs Malinké,” *Journal de La Société Des Africanistes* 34 (1964): 175–226; Patrick McNaughton, “The Shirts That Mande Hunters Wear,” *African Arts* 15, no. 3 (1982): 54–58.

³⁴ Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare*, 107.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 115–6.

³⁶ The court eventually sidestepped the issue. Tim Kelsall, *Culture under Cross-Examination : International Justice and the Special Court for Sierra Leone* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 121–45.

³⁷ Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare*, 1.

West Africa.³⁸ More powerful CDF commanders had techniques that could be used both defensively and offensively. “Darkness medicine,” for example, did not render their users invisible *per se*, but surrounded them with “a veil of visual confusion.”³⁹ Other powers included teleportation, invisibility, and transmogrification into trees or animals.

Charisma

I never fight with weapon, never fire gun, any type of weapon. I fought as a traditional fighter. Or religious fighter as you think of Holy Prophet Mohammed [...] which fought with sword. Or traditional we think of Bai Bureh, Kai Londo, Dawa, in our country of such history in Sierra Leone. The sword that I fought with is the sword— The sword is with me... because I fear in war... I don't want to lie... I don't want to get seen, I don't want to do things which was not in my way of doing it. With my sword, I can reach you, identify you, and know you before I harm you. My sword will not go misfired. [...] It will not get a stray bullet. I will reach you and I identify you before that I get harm with you.

Militaristic mystic practices depended on both the manipulation of hidden realities and on the charismatic deployment of godly gifts. The powers of Islamic scholarship are understood as intimately tied to hidden *batin* knowledge secreted within every part of Allah’s creation, and to *baraka*, Allah’s blessings, which, when plied by Sufi saints and sheikhs, perform charismatically.⁴⁰ Although the powers Kamajors used included those of deception, such as disappearance and transformation, they were no less divine for it. Donal Cruise O’Brien notes that “the Prophet is quoted as saying ‘war is trickery’, and Ibn Khaldun asserted that ‘victory in

³⁸ Mauna, “Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War,” 84. cf. Roberts and Roberts, *A Saint in the City*, 182–3; McNaughton, “The Shirts That Mande Hunters Wear.”

³⁹ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 60.

⁴⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 5–6; Roberts and Roberts, *A Saint in the City*; Donal Cruise O’Brien and Christian Coulon, eds., *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).



Figure 12. Commander Hassan Jalloh and his Kamajor Unit. Courtesy the personal archives of Hassan Jalloh, n.d.

war as a rule is the result of imaginary psychological factors.”⁴¹ The Kamajors were not free from controversy however, especially as the most famous initiators became the charismatic spiritual leaders of the organization and many began profiting financially from fees for the practice.⁴² Unlike most *morimen* who can claim to be members of long Islamic lineages, many ritual specialists of this period were individuals granted powers through dreams and other more abrupt channels. Alieu Kondewa, the CDF “king doctor” and head initiator, is a case in point. Following the attack and murder of his brother, a revered Kamajor, by the RUF, Kondewa was abducted. His slain brother visited him through a dream, loosened his bonds and showed him the means to master mystic powers. Upon awakening, he “slaughtered” the rebels, freed his fellow captives, and trekked to a secret lair to begin the first initiations.⁴³ Michael McGovern, researching neighboring Guinea at the time of the war, argues that the conflict was an ideal space for the proliferation of this kind of “dream *sale* [medicine]” (the parallel Mende term is *hale*). These mystics were disenfranchised youths who profited from the regional chaos to jump up the social ladder. Disappearing into the bush on quests of fortune, they claimed to have learned and/or dreamed mystical powers. In peace time, few would have consulted these figures, but amidst widespread violence and uncertainty, their popularity grew.⁴⁴

Spectacle in war

So I was knowned throughout the world. Just like you interviewing me, a lot of people came to me... journalists... to know and prove about me. Even Robin

⁴¹ Last, “Charisma and Medicine in Northern Nigeria,” 180.

⁴² Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare*, 102.

⁴³ Mauna, “Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War,” 88.

⁴⁴ Mike McGovern, “Unmasking the State : Developing Modern Political Subjectivities in 20th Century Guinea” (Emory University, 2004), 148–71.

Wright[?] in London came to the Liberia-Sierra Leone border. He spoke with me.⁴⁵

So now you think of, you hear of Hassan Jalloh.

Combat was, intentionally or otherwise, primarily decided via spectacle. Combatants used Poro society paraphernalia, mystic “iron shirts,” women’s clothes, and military fatigues as semiotic markers of “warrior”-status as much as for their protection and mystic power.⁴⁶ The “sobel” phenomenon (“soldier-by-day rebel-by-night”) spoke to the era’s radical visual instability, in which no one could be certain who or what was being seen.⁴⁷ Militias won battles by making it look like they were more capable of damage than they actually were.⁴⁸ Only one or two AK-47s were necessary to give the appearance and auditory impression of an all-out assault. The rest of the contingent could be armed with wooden guns and the attack would still be effective. Both Paul Richards and Michael McGovern describe highly staged attacks broadcast well in advance in order to panic civilians into preemptively abandoning their villages and supplies.⁴⁹ By the time pro-government forces responded, the rebels would have stripped the village of its resources and abandoned the village themselves. At the most brutal extension of this effect, rebels visited devastation upon civilians in the form of cruel amputations whose clearest purpose was the absolute expression of their power.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Possibly for this video: *The Poor Bush Hunters Who Defeated A Military Dictatorship*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n9p0wAAu1g>, 1998. cf. Danny Hoffman, “Violent Virtuosity: Visual Labor in West Africa’s Mano River War,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2011): 978.

⁴⁶ Mary H. Moran, “Warriors or Soldiers?: Masculinity and Ritual Transvestism in the Liberian Civil War,” in *Situated Lives: Gender and Culture in Everyday Life*, ed. Louise Lamphere, Helena Ragoné, and Patricia Zavella (New York: Routledge, 1997), 440–50.

⁴⁷ Richards, “Dressed to Kill: Clothing as Technology of the Body in the Civil War in Sierra Leone.”

⁴⁸ Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare*, 119–22.

⁴⁹ Paul Richards, “War as Smoke and Mirrors : Sierra Leone 1991-2, 1994-5, 1995-6,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 377–402; McGovern, “Unmasking the State,” 154.

⁵⁰ Martha Carey, “‘Survival Is Political’ : History, Violence, and the Contemporary Power Struggle in Sierra Leone,” in *States of Violence : Politics, Youth, and Memory in Contemporary Africa*, ed. Edna G. Bay and Donham, Donald L. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 97–126.

Throughout, both RUF and CDF fighters were powerfully aware of the international impact of their conduct through media.⁵¹ Danny Hoffman considers the spectacles that combatants performed for cameras “virtuosity,” for the performers know that the more spectacular their acts, the larger the world audience they will be able to cultivate.⁵² In turn, these images were problematically exploited by global media in what Rosalind Shaw refers to as “Juju journalism.”⁵³ Meanwhile, videotaped documentation of violent acts, such as the abduction and murder of Liberia’s President Samuel K. Doe, circulated through viewing clubs, making profound evidentiary claims about the conflict’s winners and losers.⁵⁴ On the other hand, Rambo films and other fictional action movies became “educative” for those living through the war as Paul Richards discovered, “providing a stimulus to the imagination to tackle problems in their own world.”⁵⁵

Danny Hoffman suggests that in playing out violent roles through numerous local and global imaginaries of war, former soldiers, including Hassan Jalloh who he takes as a key example, have become trapped in scripts that define how they can maintain “being-looked-at-ness.”

The virtuoso moment of performing violence comes with a decreasing range of options for how a subject imagines the future. Jalloh refines his image as a kamajor, but like many young men who participated in the militia he cannot imagine too many possibilities for the post-conflict landscape that do not continue to rely on that image.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Mariane Ferme and Danny Hoffman, “Hunter Militias and the International Human Rights Discourse in Sierra Leone and Beyond,” *Africa Today* 50, no. 4 (2004): 73–95.

⁵² Hoffman, “Violent Virtuosity.”

⁵³ Rosalind Shaw, “Robert Kaplan and ‘Juju Journalism’ in Sierra Leone’s Rebel War: The Primitivizing of an African Conflict,” in *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ Mats Utas, “War, Violence & Videotapes: Media & Localised Ideoscapes of the Liberian Civil War,” in *Violence, Political Culture & Development in Africa*, ed. Preben Kaarsholm (Oxford, UK: James Currey, 2006).

⁵⁵ Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, 109.

⁵⁶ Hoffman, “Violent Virtuosity,” 970.

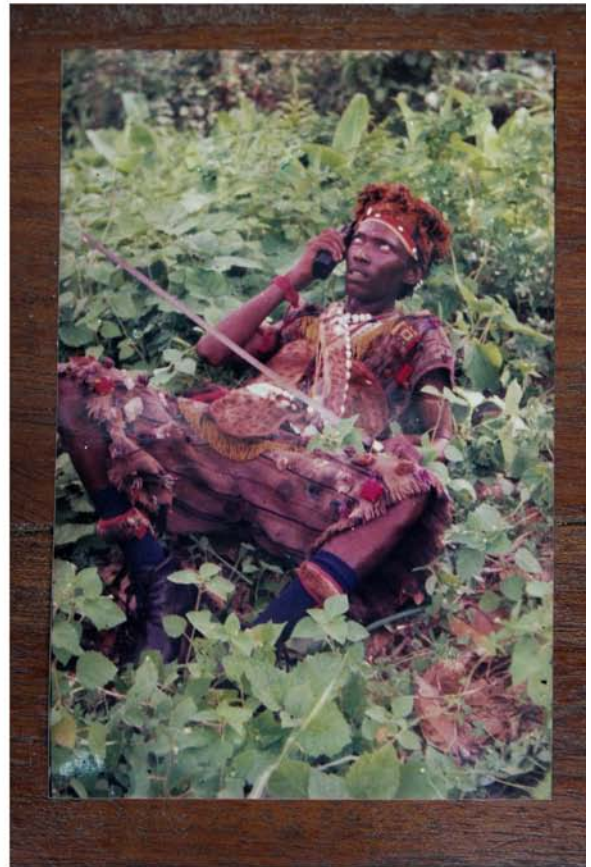


Figure 13. Commander Hassan Jalloh of the CDF. Courtesy the personal archives of Hassan Jalloh, n.d.

Jalloh's life, like all former combatants, is circumscribed by his militaristic past. Yet being a "kamajor" or a "warrior" is a mutable identity, not a proscribed role, and Hoffman misses Jalloh's awareness of and mastery over the "frames" (or "*bisnes*" or fields of action) at his disposal. Jalloh has imagined numerous other potential futures, including possibilities in politics, NGO affiliations, entrepreneurship, and cultural shows. While he remains a "warrior" as he moves through each frame or field, the rules and prospects available to him change radically. As much as he is able, Jalloh continually reframes his past so as to take advantage of each field's particular promises. Since the war, Jalloh has used spectacle not to replay wartime scripts, but rather to appear in and act upon as many fields as possible.

1.2 "CULTURE BUSINESS": CULTURE AS CONTEXT

With my boys, I have no arrangement with them. I'm just using them as tools because they have understood me. Most of them are just— are not just a dancers or artists. They stay with me during war. In fact, some were in another factions, like RUF, AFRC. They were war prisoners, war criminals. Which I feed. I would not torture them. I would not kill them. I will maintain them until— You know happiness is only when your wishes goes true. Or... if you cannot make a man think as you do, you have to make him do as you think.

So I was taught by God that I should bring these boys out, maintain them, so they will forget about war... Put what I was supposed to impose in them so they will forget about war totally. This how this— this troupe came up.

Most of them are ex-combatants. As time is going on again, I will prove there with their identity— with their disarm cards. Everybody have it. Even I no— now, we have are disarm cards... to prove to the people that we were combatants, and now we are ex-combatants. And... What mostly is our objective now is... to establish peace and reconciliation in our lovely country of Sierra Leone.

In 2000, as the Sierra Leone government, the United Nations, and the remnants of the Revolutionary United Front began negotiations to close the decade-long civil war despite some continued outbursts of vicious violence, Commander Hassan Jalloh was faced with an existential

crisis. After ten years of brutality and uncertainty, how could the public trust the young men—his men—who had served and survived the chaotic demands of militia warfare? In addressing this question, Jalloh foresaw the country’s coming postwar struggles with the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration processes (DDR), Truth and Reconciliation Committees (TRC), and the Special Court of Sierra Leone (SC-SL), each of whose missions became compromised such that they ultimately failed to affect most of the nation.⁵⁷ For guidance, Jalloh turned to Allah. Then he came to his troops with a proposition. Just as the Almighty had blessed him with the abilities of disappearance and transformation that guided him through battle after battle, He had now shown Jalloh the way forward: the men would redeploy the mystic powers they had gained in wartime for the entertainment of the Sierra Leonean public, transforming from armed troops in the service of war to a cultural troupe in the service of peace and reconciliation.

In initiating the Warrior Mystical Power and Cultural Dance Troupe, Jalloh transposed the actions and identities of himself and his men from the context of war to the context of “culture.” In so doing, he entered “culture business,” a milieu of activity with a lengthy and dynamic history both in Sierra Leone at large and in the Mende regions through which he toured, once as a militia commander and now as a “cultural hero.”

Postwar

Just as local mystic culture was vital for engaging in and surviving the war, it has become equally important in the postwar era. “Culture” is often mobilized in the name of prewar

⁵⁷ cf. Danny Hoffman, “Violent Events as Narrative Blocs: The Disarmament at Bo, Sierra Leone,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2005): 328–53; Rosalind Shaw, “Linking Justice with Reintegration? Ex-Combatants and the Sierra Leone Experiment,” in *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence*, ed. Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Kelsall, *Culture under Cross-Examination*.

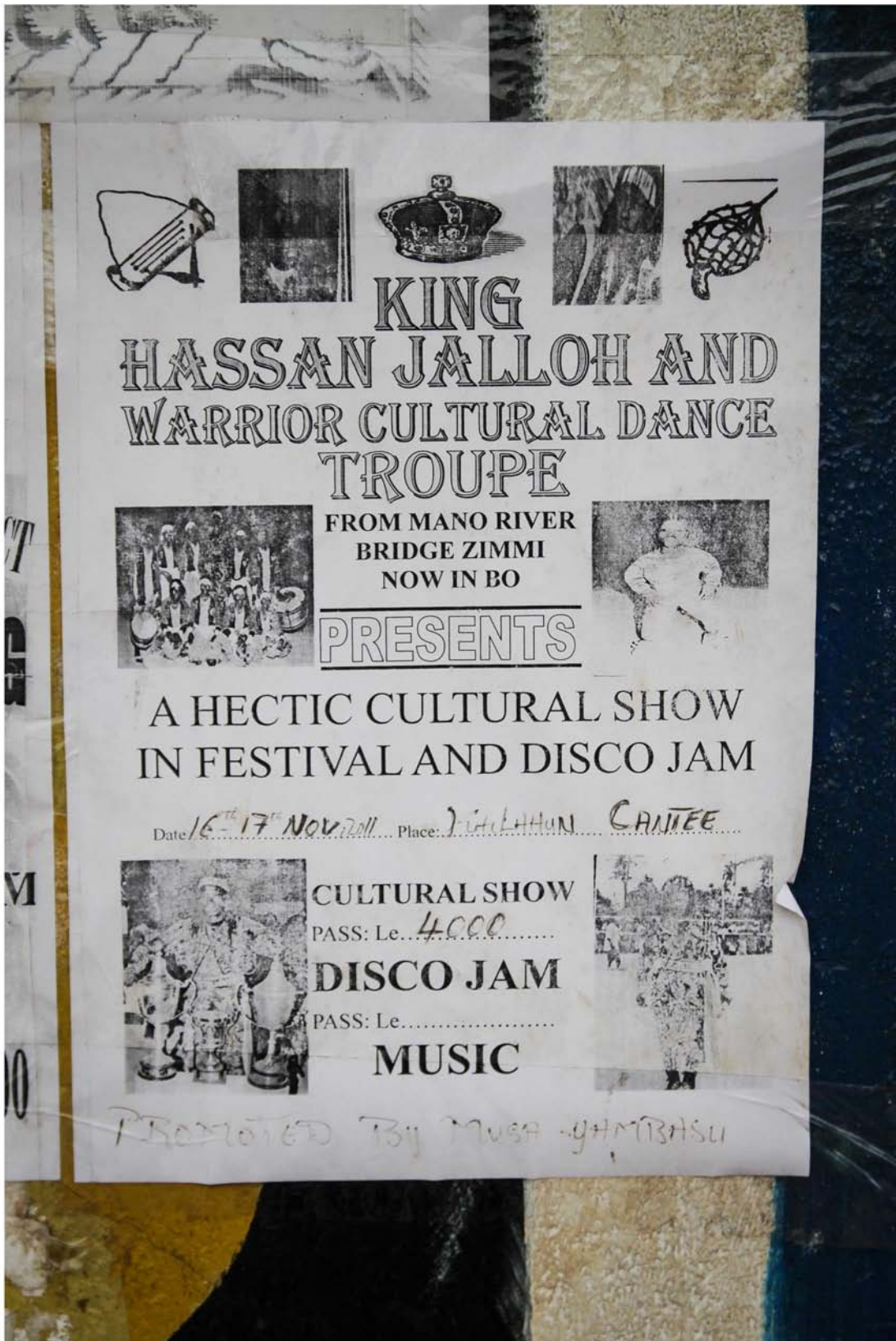


Figure 14. Flyer for the Warrior Cultural Show. Kailahun Town, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2011.

normalcy, and the rush to restore the past has led to something of a renaissance of Sierra Leonean arts and practices, particularly those deemed “local” or “traditional.” Initiations of Poro and Sande initiation societies are struggling to accommodate the backlog of youths who missed opportunities to join in wartime. Mutual aid societies, looking to reconstruct their communities, seed their farms, or send their children to school, use cultural programs, both those they create themselves and those they hire, to raise funds. Although the national government continues to struggle to fund arts and performance programs, cultural performers are drafted by individual politicians for electoral campaigns and NGO programs hire some groups to promote their development projects.

Other proliferations of culture are rooted in the increased opportunities offered by improved security. The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program provided many former fighters with funds they could invest in equipment necessary for cultural production, such as speakers, DJ sets, instruments, costumes, and vehicles. A number of former fighters have been hired by international security outfits to serve in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. These mercenaries return flush with cash, and I met at least two who had used those funds to found music studios and film editing suites. The influx of do-it-yourself technologies now available in many new forms, on smart phones for example, have further contributed to cultural production across postwar Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone performance traditions now embrace what Jean-François Bayart calls “extraversion,” the practice of actively soliciting relations of dependency with the outside world.⁵⁸ What is radically different in the postwar, post-exodus era, is that the external communities in question are former Sierra Leoneans on a scale unknown in history. Calling back

⁵⁸ Jean-François Bayart, “Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion,” *African Affairs* 99, no. 395 (2000): 217–67.

“sons of the soil”—here defined as prosperous descendants of the community who have found success in the outside world—operates at multiple scales. Villages are calling back those who left for towns, towns are calling back those who left for the city, the city is calling back those who left the country, and the nation is calling back those who left the continent. To recall their progeny, Sierra Leoneans are reinventing their domains as vacation destinations and sites of celebration. More and more cultural production in rural Sierra Leone is oriented around such reunions.

With increased mobility has come increased censure, and intra- and transnational migration have contributed to many stresses that threaten the continuation of certain forms of spectacle. The popularity of forms of Islam and Christianity that aspire to globalized doctrine is always increasing, and is now aided by transnational influxes of people and resources instigated by the end of the war. Numerous Middle Eastern development agencies are funding reconstruction of mosques and other infrastructural projects, but many of these contributions come with tacit or explicit injunctions against the benefactor community engaging in practices considered *haram*, such as Poro celebrations. Former rebels have found Pentecostal narratives of forgiveness and personal reinvention to be especially fruitful as they try to restart their lives while also offering them moral grounds upon which to recover some level of authority in their communities. Part of that assertion of control involves attempts to restrict cultural practice.⁵⁹ Each community has negotiated these competing expectations in their own way, and many have found ways to justify the integration of their customs into Islamic and Christian doctrine, just as they have for centuries. Even so, many villages are curtailing their festivities and some have used the breach provided by the war to facilitate the end of initiatory society activities.

⁵⁹ cf. In Freetown, Rosalind Shaw, “Displacing Violence: Making Pentecostal Memory in Postwar Sierra Leone,” *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (2007): 66–93.



Figure 15. Kailahun Town *soweisia* at an APC rally. Kailahun Town, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

The end of the war has spurred increased oversight of the rural regions of the country by both the central government and the international community. Whereas before the war, “upcountry” was largely left to its own devices for better or worse, now the region is under constant scrutiny. Poro and Sande societies once allowed to operate under their own autonomy have been facing the threat of greater sanction and intervention by outsiders. In the immediate postwar period, these tensions erupted into a number of highly charged disputes over female circumcision.⁶⁰ During the 2012 electoral cycle, international NGOs and the national government endlessly campaigned against the societies’ attempts to sway the results of elections. Nonetheless, the Poro apparently succeeded in forcing a woman aspirant out of the race for Kailahun District Chairperson and installing their own preferred candidate.⁶¹ The gulf between national and international conceptions of democratic rule and the particular idiosyncrasies of society practice will no doubt lead to continued conflict and irreversibly effect the societies’ expressive culture.

National “Culture”?

As frustratingly vague and compromised as “culture” has become for its scholars in the fields of anthropology and cultural studies, the term has been embraced without reservation in Sierra Leone.⁶² The observation and negotiation of social difference makes “culture” useful as a category for everyday Sierra Leoneans, just as the perplexing and seemingly arbitrary nature of

⁶⁰ Richard Fanthorpe, *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation* (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Status Determination and Protection Information Section (DIPS), 2007).

⁶¹ Aruna Turay, “A Tale of Two Sierra Leone Women in Politics: Navo & Sunkari,” *Awareness Times*, September 4, 2012.

⁶² cf. Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard C. Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137–62.

that difference has complicated the term. “Culture” is contested by Sierra Leoneans in practice, even if few spend time reflecting on its meaning. Debates about “culture” took place everywhere, from the back seats of *kr. poda podas* (“shared taxi vans”) to the conference tables of government agencies.

A brief list of some of the different definitions of “culture” I encountered demonstrates the connections and discrepancies between competing conceptions. One sense is “the way of life of a people,” literally the textbook definition as it appears in the government school curriculum.⁶³ One aspiring politician who helped host a visit by Hassan Jalloh delineated another two definitions of “culture”: one being the performance culture of Hassan Jalloh and similar public entertainers, the other being “home culture,” or the proper upbringing of children. For him, these two are practically opposites, the libertine nature of performance culture threatening the promotion of propriety in young people. Meanwhile, at a meeting of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, an emigrant returning from Canada defined culture as a “shared expression of identity” at least partly directed towards the rest of the world. Such externalized views are opposed to the repeated reference to Poro and Sande societies as “deep” culture, a system closed to outsiders.

However people define it, “culture” has become useful precisely because it is such a muddy category, one that can be reconfigured and mobilized for any of a number of purposes. Culture is thus useful as a frame that allows individuals to negotiate alternative ways of living with comparatively more flexibility, or at least a greater sense of ownership. Much “cultural” practice may have been translated as “religion” at one time, including ancestral libations, initiations, and funeral events. With the wholesale embrace of Islam and Christianity, both present in the region for centuries but only crossing into the mainstream in the past few

⁶³ cf. Cati Coe, *Dilemmas of Culture in African Schools: Youth, Nationalism, and the Transformation of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

generations, these practices have fallen into a kind of limbo of purpose. Culture provides a category in which these activities can be valorized and perpetuated, even if elements seem opposed to particular religious doctrines. Similarly, the models of modernity bestowed by the legacies of colonialism and the predominant internationalism of NGO models dictate specific ways of living for which culture offers possible alternatives. “Tradition” and “custom,” categories most often subsumed under “culture” elsewhere, are usually distinguished by Sierra Leoneans in practice, as they both tend to be linked more readily to the roles and responsibilities of the offices of chieftaincy. Even for more rigid conceptions of “culture” tied to strict adherence to Poro or Sande and Bundu societies, “culture” is still a space of experimentation and novelty simply due to its volatile interactions with modernity, ethnicity, and religion. The category of Sierra Leonean “national culture” is especially fruitful for experimentation, in part because its forms have not yet coalesced and in part because it allows more freedom than the norms of either local communities or internationalism.

National Culture

Surprisingly, Hassan Jalloh’s frequently professed nationalism is not rooted in any official association with the Sierra Leone State. The Warriors are very rarely officially hired to perform by the government, they barely profit from it, and the current administration is just one more patron whose favor Jalloh cultivates. Instead of affiliating directly, Jalloh associates with the nation discursively, benefiting from his apparent alignment without depending on the government for managerial or financial support. In this, he avoids the pitfalls of the country’s National Dance Troupe.

The Sierra Leone National Dance Troupe has had an indubitable impact on the acts of the touring troupes in Sierra Leone's provinces, but its benefit for artists has been equivocal. The Dance Troupe was founded in 1963 by John Akar, a prodigious nationalist artist of mixed Lebanese and Sherbo descent who also wrote the Sierra Leone National anthem, served as the ambassador to the United States and was instrumental in structuring the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service.⁶⁴ Under Akar's tutelage, the troupe traveled widely, won best performance at the 1964 New York World's Fair, and visited Europe and Dakar's celebrated First World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966.⁶⁵ The performers were drawn from communities and ethnicities across the nation, with some poached from neighboring Guinea where Fodéba Keïta's *Ballets Africains* had recently set the standard for the format of African nationalist cultural performance.⁶⁶ In Freetown, they were installed at a camp in the shadow of the city's largest luxury hotel, where they would presumably be available to play for any number of visiting dignitaries. The artists collaborated on training in forms from across the region, and, at least recently, have hosted international instructors in acrobatics, juggling, and other global circus acts. While, to my knowledge, none of Jalloh's current roster of performers were ever members of the National Dance Troupe, it has served as a training ground for a large number of other artists across rural Sierra Leone, including many of the members of the Warriors' chief rival, the Mammy Yoko Troupe.

⁶⁴ "John Akar, Former Ambassador from Sierra Leone, Buried in Freetown," *The Afro American*, July 8, 1975.

⁶⁵ Joe A.D. Alie, *A New History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford, UK: Macmillan Oxford, 1990), 263., cf. Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004); Lansiné Kaba, "The Cultural Revolution, Artistic Creativity, and Freedom of Expression in Guinea," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 14, no. 2 (June 1976): 201–18; Jay Straker, *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009); Mary Jo Arnoldi, "Youth Festivals and Museums: The Cultural Politics of Public Memory in Postcolonial Mali," *Africa Today* 52, no. 4 (2006): 57; Tracy Snipe, *Arts and Politics in Senegal, 1960-1996* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), 45.

Yet in spite of the influential training program of the National Dance Troupe, its capacity declined quickly after the untimely death of John Akar in 1975. The government's position on culture was extrinsic and directed outward. For the State, the importance of national culture was its use for projecting a face to the outside world.⁶⁷ The National Troupe's activities were directed towards international relations, world fairs, and tourist productions, and little effort was made to consolidate a national culture internally in order to strengthen internal unity and State power, as was the case, for example, in Guinea under Ahmed Sékou Touré or Senegal under Léopold Sédar Senghor.⁶⁸ As modeled by the divisive, party-based, clientalist politics under the Siaka Stevens regime, the most vital patronage of the arts was in the hands of individual politicians who used government resources to support those artists and troupes who promoted their patrons' specific interests and constituencies. The Freetown Ode-Lay (or *ordehleh* as they are now known) masquerades are the archetypical example of a range of urban masking traditions that flourished in the postcolonial period due to the competition of powerful donors.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the National Dance Troupe declined, along with other aspects of "national culture," as it was shuttled through numerous Ministerial configurations, including Youth and Sports, Tourism, and Information. The dance troupe members were stranded in their deteriorating camp, and many of them founded independent theatre and dance collectives in Freetown or quit the city altogether to search for better opportunities on tour in their home territories.

My own initial impression of the National Dance Troupe was disheartening. The dancers and musicians with whom I spoke rarely had the opportunity to perform, but still remained on

⁶⁷ cf. Nelson, *From Cameroon to Paris*; Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation : Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁶⁸ cf. McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*; Straker, *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution*; Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*.

⁶⁹ Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil*.

call for the government to trot out for occasional state visits and other events. In the midst of the relative opulence of West Freetown, they lived in hidden destitution behind a row of storefronts near the local taxi stand. In order to get by, they sought out other sources of income including tending small-scale shops or unofficially guarding property involved in land grabs near their compound. These bitter and unseemly set of circumstances drove me to pursue further research with the more satisfied and self-sufficient artists upcountry. Later, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture seemed to gain strength of purpose and founded a National Cultural Festival in 2012. Even so, “culture” was clearly of low priority to the government, a sentiment echoed in the personal narratives of numerous cultural dancers I met in the provinces who had left the National Troupe to pursue greater autonomy and profit in their homelands. The National Troupe was thus both a shared touchstone and source of training for a great number of artists, but also a site of inertia and failure, a foundational yet stagnant prototype.

Producing Culture

Cultural shows featuring mystic acts, acrobatics, and other performances have been a feature of the Sierra Leonean hinterland since at least the days of early colonialism. Throughout the region, it appears touring variety shows have long been contexts in which unpredictable assortments of practice from numerous communities mixed and interpenetrated.⁷⁰ These troupes are also participants in a fluid cultural field in which most of the residents of rural Sierra Leone are engaged as cultural producers, whether as professional performers, initiates, or revelers. The class of professional *ndoliblesia* (“dancers”) and “artists” is thus amorphous and provisional, as artists move fluidly in and out of different levels of professionalization and degrees of formal

⁷⁰ Migeod, *A View of Sierra Leone*, 105–109; d’ Azevedo, “Sources of Gola Artistry.”; Frederick Bobor James and Sheikh Ahmed Tejan Tamu, *B.A. Foday-Kai : A Biography* (Freetown: People’s Educational Association of Sierra Leone, 1992).

association. Indeed, the career of every performer and troupe is so idiosyncratic that any rigid classification would be futile, as each career trajectory has been driven more by the constraints of practical circumstances and the particular drive and ingenuity of each individual than by any set cultural models or norms. Even so, a few continua may be distinguished along which troupes and performers move throughout their professional lives.

One range of classification might run between full-time and conditional performers. During my sojourn in 2010-13, only two troupes in the South and Eastern Provinces, the Warriors and Mammy Yoko, had the network of clients and resources, namely their own truck and DJ set, necessary to maintain a program of nearly nightly performances. Without these resources, other troupes, no matter how established, have to wait for local producers to charter them and to finance their lodging and their transportation, usually by renting kr. *poda podas* (converted vans) or pickup trucks. Those troupes who are at the mercy of their sponsors tend to perform fitfully, doing brief tours of specific regions during periods of high demand, such as Christmas and Easter holidays. They also tend to be based in larger towns and provincial capitals, like Bo and Kenema, where they are more likely to find regular local employment for smaller scale events like weddings and women's Sande initiation festivities.

Another categorization runs along the division between hierarchical organization and acephalous or anarchic collaboration. Hassan Jalloh, as the figurehead, coordinator, promoter, and lead performer of the Warrior Cultural Troupe, typifies one extreme. At the other extreme are groups of performers of essentially equal status. These troupes come together in the interest of building each other up through mutual support and the appeal of a more diverse cultural show program. However, without a strong leadership figure, these collectives are usually short-lived, dissolving in disagreements over performance structure and, most often, the distribution of

revenue. Troupes with long term success typically consolidate under a single leader who takes the responsibility for being the face of the organization. While the figurehead of a troupe is occasionally a mystic performer like Jalloh, the leader is much more likely to be a singer. Singers' fame travels easily through recorded media, they perform more often for smaller-scale events like weddings, and they continue performing into old age. Furthermore, song exemplifies "local culture and tradition" while also being open for innovation and direct commentary on contemporary issues. Famous Mende singers capable of mobilizing large troupes today include Kpossowai, Aminata Kallon, Jebe Two, and Mamakor Koroma, all of whom had wide and passionate fan bases. These senior artists, especially Aminata Kallon, have used their fame to mobilize multiple other projects and sources of income rather than solely trading on their talents. Hassan Jalloh himself was buying up land and building a network of supporters for future projects that had little to do with art directly. The ultimate goal of most cultural performers might not be to make a living from their art, which is next to impossible and certainly not sustainable in the long term, but rather to use their fame as performers to diversify their resource base and transition into the position of patron themselves.

Community representation constitutes one more scale of variation. Again, Hassan Jalloh and his men stand at one extreme, since Jalloh frames his culture as representative of the nation-state even if his territory is usually limited to the Southern and Mende-speaking regions of the country. Most other major touring groups define their work more regionally, as Mende culture. Smaller collectives represent chiefs and their chiefdoms, towns, and villages. Finally, certain performers are highly individualistic, representing only themselves and their own interests. The performers' community representation is instantiated through varying discourse rather than through any difference of aesthetics in the performance. The same kind of acts might represent a

person, a village, a region, an ethnicity, or the whole country, depending on how it is framed.

Jalloh's own strategy walks a tightrope between the two extremes of, on the one hand, radical individuality that stresses his own exceptionality and, on the other, sweeping inclusiveness that encourages as many spectators as possible to share custodianship of the performance.

1.3 "CULTURE BUSINESS": CULTURE AS ECONOMY

"I am the only king in my kingdom"

I... I was born in Sierra Leone. I am a Sierra Leonean. Nothing different than my colleague Sierra Leoneans or my fellow Sierra Leoneans.

But only what is in me was [given] from almighty God. Which I don't have no bosses that "this is the boss that teach me, this is my teacher, this my... somebody, or my... commander." No.

In terms of war, when I was fighting, I was having commanders ahead of me. Because it was a forces. Whatever strong you are, you might be under the command of somebody. But in term of this what I am doing now and entertainment... mystical powers... is only the almighty God is my boss, is my teacher, is my coach.

Hassan Jalloh's facility with the delicate balance between constituents, as well as his nimble capacity to play participants off each other in order to optimize his own position while consolidating his own public, was demonstrated early in my time with the troupe. At the second site to which I followed the Warriors, a series of muddy tracks west of Kailahun Town in Luawa Chiefdom led to a small cacao-producing hamlet. The village was isolated enough that the rebels never entered there, though my local hosts also thanked protective medicines the elders had planted around the community. Jalloh had been invited to play by the local "King Hassan Jalloh Fan Club," a mutual aid society of about two dozen villagers who hoped to profit from his production. The first night went off very well, so I was surprised to be awoken from an afternoon nap with the news that Jalloh had quit the village.

Apparently the fan club had failed to properly negotiate Jalloh's arrival with the town chief. I had met the chief on our arrival, and he had indeed appeared surprised and less than thrilled by our presence. At first light the following day, the chief had sent a messenger to the paramount chief at his residence in Kailahun, complaining about the circumvention of authority. His rationale was that the cultural show undermined his ability to maintain public security, but the members of the village to whom I spoke were sure he was simply frustrated that the club had not sought his endorsement. The messenger returned with a decree from the paramount chief calling off the program. As I heard it, the letter was the first Jalloh had been notified of any dispute, and, as soon as he heard the news, he got up and simply walked out of the village. The fan club tried to stop him, but he only advised them that he was not going to be a party to any kind of conflict and told his men to load the truck and pick him up on their way out of town.

After I threw my things together, I found a large crowd milling about in front my host's house. The men were trying to appeal to those troupe members in the midst of packing up the disco set and the some of women were wailing as if participating at a funeral. Some of the club members who knew me begged that I intervene and convince Jalloh to return, but as a dutiful ethnographer, I told them I had no power over the situation and was only there to observe. Ansu Bellay, Jalloh's manager, came to inform me that Jalloh, in spite of leaving on foot himself, had found time to hire a *kr. okada* ("hired motor bike") to carry me back to Kailahun. I regretfully said my goodbyes to the village and hit the road.

About three miles down the dirt tracks, we reached the junction towards the main highway. Hassan Jalloh lay there, precisely in the middle of the fork. Dressed in his full regalia and fanning himself with his mystic fly whisk, he was sprawled in supine aloofness with a leonine demeanor. One fan club member had followed him on foot thus far, and was still begging

him to return. A passing *okada* rider was now also engaged in the debate. As soon as I arrived and dropped from the bike, the club member came to me to again ask if I would intervene. I greeted Jalloh and simply asked what was happening. Still lying in the road, he explained his position, the fan club's failure to collect the proper authorization, the paramount chief's letter, and most importantly his policy of non-interference in village matters. He paused for a minute, perhaps to give me a moment to respond, but when I had nothing to add, that pause turned from one of consultation to one of introspection. "OK. Let's go back." The fan club member and both *okada* riders cheered. Arrangements were quickly made for one of the bikers to carry me back immediately, and Jalloh would follow in a few minutes with the other. I met the Warriors' vehicle on the way, as it was trying to negotiate a patch of mire at the base of a hill. I waved them back, and Bellay happily hopped out of the truck's cab to join me on the bike, while the troupe attempted to execute a three-point turn across the path's soggy ruts.

As soon as the villagers saw Bellay and me riding back into town, they erupted into cheers. Men, women and children streamed out from behind the houses and swallowed us in a crowd of questions and congratulations. The women pulled down a fresh palm leaf and began joyfully dancing throughout the village. The celebration was probably the closest I will ever come to experiencing a hero's welcome, yet amid the heartfelt thanks and questions about how I convinced Jalloh to return, it was hard to tell how many people recognized me for the pawn I was. The infectious community-wide joy bestowed us all with the sense of triumphant accomplishment, both individual and mutual, but only one man was truly responsible for the outcome of events. The moment he felt the village slipping out of his control, Jalloh had brilliantly orchestrated the entire situation, including the relatively novel presence of a *puumɔi* ("white person") researcher, so as to optimally reaffirm his legitimacy. Through him, his public-

both the immediate “fan club” that had invited him and the broader village that had mobilized to demand his return—was instantiated, challenged, and vindicated as distinct from the dictates of traditional authority. Jalloh was justified as a popular force greater than even the paramount chief could control.

Jalloh’s public was mobilized yet again when we heard a few minutes later that the Warriors’ truck had been lodged in the mud while trying to execute its u-turn. Almost the entire population of young men decamped to help force the vehicle out of the swamp, though it took several hours for the entourage to roar back into town. That night, the village chief was, unsurprisingly, absent. In his place, another elder, a man with a more cosmopolitan bearing, welcomed Jalloh with open arms and spoke at length about the benefits of culture. My host whispered what I did not need to be told, that the man was jockeying to replace the village chief and that his position was suddenly looking very good. Otherwise, Jalloh made no mention of the day’s incidents, content to let his presence speak for itself. The village’s celebratory atmosphere was disrupted, however, by a quarrel at the disco in the early morning that escalated to the stabbing of a young man, perhaps suggesting that the chief’s concerns about village security had been justified after all.

Structures of Authority

As the figurehead of the Warrior troupe, Jalloh’s executive role is central and sweeping, but he shares the responsibilities of the troupe’s maintenance among a number of stakeholders. The Warriors’ structure of authority is the most rigid of all the troupes I followed. However the network of responsibilities is diffuse enough to survive the absence of any individual member except Jalloh, as was the case during a number of power struggles. As the lead performer, artistic



Figure 16. Celebrations on the return of Hassan Jalloh. Foobu, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2011.

director, and primary business contact, all decisions passed through Jalloh before being delegated to other members of the troupe.

Ansu Bellay, a childhood friend of Jalloh's without any significant artistic background, serves as the troupe's manager. Though most communities first contact Jalloh directly with inquiries about hiring, once he agrees to play he directs them to Bellay for scheduling and contracts. Bellay keeps the books, which simply consist of a list of sites and dates at which the troupe will be playing, and which both Jalloh and Bellay have practically memorized anyway. Before the evening festivities, Bellay prepares tickets that are often reused from program to program unless the local organizers wish to print their own versions to emphasize their role in the production. Bellay also mans the ticket booth, collecting receipts and stamping wrists along with one of the other troupe members such as Iron Gate, the imposing brother of lead drummer Idrissa Senessie. After the program, Bellay's role in ticket distribution is repeated for the midnight disco. In the early mornings while Jalloh and the men sleep off a long night of performing or pack the truck to leave town, Bellay rehearses the accounts with the local producers and divides up the take. Bellay is charged with guarding the troupe's financial resources, a small shoulder bag stuffed full of cash which he dips into for all of the company's ongoing expenses.

Idrissa Senessie, a.k.a. DJ Sinava (*sina va* is Mende for "for tomorrow"), is the lead musician and the artistic second-in-command for the Warriors. A stocky "Rasta" with a jovial strut and wide smile, Idrissa is a technical wizard on the side drum, the snare that serves as the percussion for the entirety of the performance. Idrissa's high status in the troupe reflects the central role of the drum's punctuation in the effect of the dances, acrobatics, songs, and mystic acts. His creative riffing, backed up by Sheku Saidu on the bass drum, acts both as the pulse of

the onstage action and as what sound designers call “live foley,” emphasis and sound effects underscoring mimed gestures. Through his well-timed snaps, Idrissa gives aural texture and materiality to the invisible forms Jalloh juggles through pantomime. Drummers are highly valued across the region and perhaps the only performers whose demand outstrips supply, as both the instrument and the skills are difficult to obtain and their music are absolutely essential to any show. Idrissa’s performance roles also include entertaining the crowd as they enter the arena, taking over the microphone to introduce the closing acts once Jalloh quits the stage, and acting as one of the troupe’s two DJs during the midnight disco. Idrissa is consulted on all artistic decisions, and often acts as the advocate for the other men in group meetings. Yet in spite of his outward sociability and his high status in the group, Idrissa also harbored serious frustrations, even while his favor with Jalloh created tensions with many of the other players. Towards the end of the 2012 performance season, his struggles with Jalloh over the direction of the troupe and finances became too much, he insulted the family of one of the other members, and he broke with, or “came out from behind,” Jalloh, taking his two brothers with him. This was, to my knowledge, only the second major schism in the Warriors’ decade-long history. For the final few weeks of that dry season, Jalloh managed to hire a new drummer by absorbing an entire small troupe based out of Bo, while Idrissa struggled to find a new patron. By the beginning of the next dry season and the onset of the political campaigns, the two men had recognized their reciprocal need and had somehow reconciled.

Other troupe members took up other responsibilities. Almost every participant has some kind of title, including “senior dancer” or “lead actor” or “chief acrobat.” These honorifics appear to be distributed as favors and represent relationships with Jalloh, rather than the

fulfillment of prerequisite qualifications or the acquisition of specific responsibilities.⁷¹ One exception is the “senior dancer,” a role fulfilled by Foday “Small” Sama when I first met the troupe and then by Alhaji Lukulay when Small was demoted, who is the point person for organizing dances and infrequent rehearsals. Another industrious dancer, usually Victor Koroma, serves as community liaison, distributing accommodations to the performers and arranging meal times. Other performers, usually those with minimal stage time, serve primarily as roadies and are responsible for the safe transport of equipment. A few of the dancers trade off the role of Jalloh’s personal assistant as they fall in and out of his favor. These men tail Jalloh on jaunts around town, ride along in Jalloh’s Mercedes instead of the troupe truck, and eat with him at dinner. They serve Jalloh as bodyguard, porter, messenger, and go-fer. In return, they receive inside instruction in the arts of patronage and networking.

Regional promoters are not required to book gigs, but many enterprising individuals have interpolated themselves between Jalloh and his audiences so as to facilitate tours in certain regions in the country. In return, they receive a cut of the profits as well as promotion for their own businesses. Some of the most important regional producers for Hassan Jalloh have emerged from among the itinerant photographers who converge on cultural shows and discos in order to erect temporary portrait studios. Musa Yambasu, the leader of the Luawa Chiefdom Photographers’ Union based out of Kailahun Town, arranges month-long tours of Luawa for Jalloh, and has done similar promotions for big name pop music acts from Freetown and the Sierra Leone diaspora, including artists Steady Bongo and Buberry. Yambasu’s photos of the stars are posted throughout his photo studio and copies are available for sale, while his

⁷¹ cf. Hoffman, “The Meaning of a Militia.”



Figure 17. Photographers of the Daru Photographers' Union. Kortuma, Jawie Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

promotional activities also amplify his political aspirations as a key supporter for the ruling party in a region run by the opposition.

A wide variety of clients hire Jalloh and his men to perform in their communities. Village chiefs and elders may charter Jalloh as a public service for their constituents or to celebrate particular holidays, such as when the sheriff of a mining town hired the Warriors in order to ingratiate himself with a diverse community of itinerant young workers. Business owners hire Jalloh as promotion, such as when the proprietor of a multi-purpose disco/football club/bar/hostel venue in Daru sponsored a three-day festival on his property. Most often, villagers form a mutual aid society in order to hire the troupe. These collectives, which might evolve out of shared work groups or youth associations, assemble the resources necessary to host Jalloh and share the profits of his program. Locals are entirely responsible for providing accommodations for the players, most often guest rooms in large houses of more important community members or rooms of young men planning to spend the whole night at the midnight disco. Villagers are also required to prepare rations, most often huge caldrons of rice and *saki* (cassava leaf sauce) or groundnut soup. While these collectives might occasionally invest returns in broader village interests, their profits more often remain distributed among the members. When a group of teachers led by one of Jalloh's former lieutenants hired him to play in Zimmi, I assumed it was to fund improvements to their school. Jalloh told me matter-of-factly that they were simply raising money to pay for their own children's school fees. This very performance was later disrupted by rocks thrown by members of yet another mutual aid society, youths that had hired pop star Bubby to play in town a few weeks later and were upset that everyone in town might be spending all their minimal disposable income on Jalloh's show. While the mutual



Figure 18. King Hassan Jalloh Fan Club Foobu. Foobu, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2011.

support fostered within these fan clubs can reinforce communal unity, the numerous competing collectives could also occasionally be a source of discord.

Villagers are producers, organizers, hosts, and, along with their families and neighbors, spectators. The work they put into mounting the performance and the profit they derive from it integrate them into the troupe and ensure that they are invested in the spectacle, owning it as much as the artists do. This mutual claim to performance culture is central to its efficacy as a public space.

"We live on what we create, we don't imitate"

We don't have no other thing else to do. We live on what we are doing and we live on what we create. As I am talking to you, we have no supporter. We have nobody which is sponsoring this group. All what you saw with us... vehicles, instruments, local... costumes and the costumes we get... was produced by ourselves. We catered, we played, what we get we feed our families...

We make ourself to forget about what we were doing before this time... and I assure you we never talk of war again. And we never talk of war where the— We never make any group where they talk of war. And we ready to prosecute anybody else, the place that we were, that you say that we will go done there again... we will not give you that time.

Because we have experienced ourself into social life with others, going to another country... we ride in planes, going to live in with different people in different hotels in different countries... We were not be doing this during war. And before war we would not be recognized. Now after war, with what we have created— what I have formed as a founder and director of this troupe... we are recognized. Even in the country— outside country.

So with that we content with what we are doing now. We will not be do— thinking of ever story what we were doing. So we prefer of what we are doing now, than what we were doing.

Whatever immaterial pleasures the dancers and their hosts may receive from the performance, and there are many, financial gain is clearly a prime motivation. Jalloh and his hosts' mutually improvised yet careful distribution of economic risk and benefit allows the performances to thrive. Jalloh and Bellay have two partnership models they present to their prospective

producers, depending on the risks the locals wish to incur. One option is a straight split between the two parties, called “self play.” In this case, Jalloh’s transportation, equipment, and personnel charges are presumed to be equal to the costs the hosts incur with accommodation and local promotion. Both profit or lose in equal proportion, depending on the number of spectators they attract. The other option is a “charter,” where the troupe is hired at a fixed rate of 400,000Le (approx. \$92 USD at the time) each night for two nights. Any profits beyond the first 400,000Le fall to the local parties. This second proposition appears riskier, so it tends to be chosen by communities whose previous experience of the troupe assures them that they can attract the population necessary to recoup their losses. Overall, Bellay told me the split between the two is about even.

The Warriors are always a safe bet for their local hosts. They consistently pull large crowds wherever they played. Any one evening’s program usually attracts two hundred to two-hundred-and-fifty spectators. Jalloh makes sure that tickets were charged between 3000Le and 4000Le (\$.70-.92 USD), so a typical program can expect to net 600,000Le to 1,000,000Le. In larger towns, Jalloh can pull four hundred or more, and for his play in Daru, there were up to one thousand attendees on both nights of his performance. The only times when the audience dropped below one hundred of which I was aware were occasions of poor scheduling. In one case, the Warriors rolled into town right after *Poro* initiation festivities at which the entire community had already spent their disposable income. Jalloh is generally sympathetic and considerate in these situations, but the lack of a public does affect his performance. He barely takes the stage, performs by rote when he does, and can pick up and leave town the following day whether he is scheduled or not. On the other hand, with an enormous crowd, Jalloh attains superhuman levels of stamina. In the Daru performance when the population reached four digits,



Figure 19. (above) A local organizer and ticket buyers. Gbeworbu Gao, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2011.
(below) “Iron Gate” Senessie and attendees, Kortuma, Jawie Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

he held the stage for six hours, continuously returning to a seemingly endless repertoire of mystic acts and ceaselessly finding new subjects on which to pontificate.

In spite of making upwards of 400,000Le a night, the Warriors lose much of their income to expenses. Jalloh pays the players out every two or three weeks, about 25,000Le (almost \$6.00 USD) each, depending on their contributions and seniority. While this sum seems meager, the dancers also have their living expenses covered for the period of their touring, collect tips from spectators, and their income is comparable to that of half the residents of Sierra Leone who live below \$1.25/day.⁷² The personnel costs are spread among about ten dancers, two drummers, three DJs and technicians, and the driver, as well as supplemental entertainers (b-boys, acrobats, comedians) who sometimes travel alongside the Warriors. Additionally, there are the costs of maintaining the DJ set and speakers, which need to be replaced every three or four years. Not surprisingly given their brutal touring schedule, the greatest expense is vehicle maintenance. The two seasons I traveled with Jalloh were especially rough in this regard. The used cargo trucks, usually Toyota or Mercedes flatbeds converted from military use, are supposed to hold up for almost five years, but the machine suffered mightily, surviving many collisions and mud pits, and finally broke down less than two years into its service. Jalloh was forced to hire the pickup his brother usually employed for produce transportation, and the costs of renting a new vehicle almost broke the troupe.

'We traumatize and sensitize'

In the following passage, Jalloh explains the troupe's present-day mission. Later conversations clarified that "to traumatize" here means to surprise or to shake up, while "to

⁷² Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, *Country Briefing: Sierra Leone*, 2011.

sensitize” is the NGO buzzword for increasing awareness. Together, they suggest some of the potential futures sought through public spectacle in postwar Sierra Leone.

In Sierra Leone, we were sufferer. Everyday and every night, people point finger at us. “These were the people who were fighting... These were the people who were destroying... These were the people who were burning down houses. Who were ambushes.” We tell people and we talk to people to forget describing these peoples since they have forget about war... they have lay down their arms, hand over their arms to the, you know, the UN's people, you know, they forget about war. Let's live with them, let's get the courage for them. Let's get even concert play with them, play football with them, disco with them, whatever activities, social activities we get.

We traumatize people about then. Then we sensitize people about where we are coming from. Not to get attempt again to go there.

About War. W. A. R. Waste All Resources. We don't want the resources of Sierra Leone to be wasted again. Because we were the key implementing partner be wasting these resources.

[...] We sensitize people, the youth, who were not strong to fight the war, for them not to confuse again to bring another one again back. Into people. Because the youth [...] took part of this war, and the youth were tools to use against the others. So, we sensitize them, we traumatize them, not to do such things again.

Item One: "If You Don't Know Your History, You Don't Know Where You are Coming From."

Hassan Jalloh's past as a commander of the Civil Defense Forces militia underpins the entirety of his spectacle, but it takes center stage in his opening acts. Through song, costume, and choreography, Jalloh offers a vision of Sierra Leonean history that references the Civil War most explicitly, but also harbors echos of older times. The process of translating oral, visual, and embodied memory into history requires reinventing numerous practices, converting them from actions of the present to signifiers of the past.

Performative forms of historiography are now recognized as essential tools for understanding the past. Diana Taylor argues that dance, along with other "so-called ephemeral" forms that require embodied presence for transmission, can collect historical material within a performance-based "repertoire" in ways unavailable and complementary to written or object-based archives.¹ African communities, once described as "without history" are finally understood to "tell, sing, produce (through dance, recitation, marionette puppets), sculpt, and paint their history."² Many practitioners and commentators have stressed African dance and ritual's

¹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19–20.

² B. Jewsiewicki and V. Y. Mudimbe, "Africans' Memories and Contemporary History of Africa," *History and Theory* 32, no. 4 (1993): 3.

capacity to preserve counter-histories and connect diasporic communities across generations.³

Speech and movement repeated through generations may perpetuate histories that are unable to be articulated in written texts, whether due to oppression or traumatic disruptions.⁴

The study of alternate forms of history is mirrored by the study of alternate conceptualizations of memory. Academic efforts now seek “to pursue memory beyond the mind—or more exactly, to show that it is already beyond it,” as Edward Casey has recommended.⁵ Memory is increasingly understood as inherently social and embodied and mediated by sensory perception and culture.⁶ No longer understood as simply a repository, memory represents, in the words of Mary Nooter and Allen Roberts, “a dynamic social process of recuperation, reconfiguration, and outright invention that is often engendered, provoked, and promoted by visual images.”⁷ Yet as is the case with Pierre Nora’s otherwise astute distinction between memory and history, memory without history is often conceived as “unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, [and] spontaneously actualizing.”⁸ Memory is not free of intention;

³ To name three: Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1984).

⁴ While the academic literature on trauma looms large over this chapter and this entire project, I do not reference it here. While these attempts to understand past violence are both illuminating and laudable, it remains unclear how much the analysis is colored by Western psychoanalytic presuppositions.

⁵ Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 258.

⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Susanne KÜchler and Walter Melion, eds., *Images of Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1991).

⁷ Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1996), 17.

⁸ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 8.

the capacity of embodied memory to become “habitual” reflects rememberers’ attention, not their agency.⁹

Movement is versatile and multifaceted and bodily memory is protean and multifunctional. Totalizing claims that “African dance” instantiates “living memory” or “celebration of life-giving force” falsely suggest that these are ubiquitous and inherent qualities, rather than optional and purposed processes.¹⁰ As Nicolas Argenti notes, “in contrast to the majority of ordinary discursive practices, dances are polyvalent, labile, and ambiguous in their references and the experiential and emotional effects they bring into play.”¹¹ Historiography is just one use for and exploitation of bodily memory. Others include the inculcation of discipline, the cultivation of physical prowess, the pursuit of spiritual transcendence, escapist entertainment, and more. Dancers do not automatically orient their embodied memories towards yesteryear. As Kirsten Hastrup observes, memory, strictly speaking, is “uchronic,” as it exists “nowhere in time” and is as applicable to the future as it is to the past.¹² To generate history with dance requires the intentional framing of physical activity as a reference to a “past” that is somehow different from the present day.

Using a few simple discursive maneuvers, Jalloh frames his dances and songs as a lesson in history. With economy, he orients the otherwise semiotically fluid signifiers of melody and

⁹ To his credit, Connerton recognizes the agency at play in habitual memory, but is unclear about its source: “Every group, then, will entrust to bodily automatisms the values and categories which they are most anxious to conserve. They will know how well the past can be kept in mind by a habitual memory sedimented in the body.” Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 102.

¹⁰ Francesca Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 3; Kennedy C. Chinyowa, “More Than Mere Story-Telling: The Pedagogical Significance of African Ritual Theatre,” *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 20, no. 2 (2000): 94.

¹¹ Nicolas Argenti, *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence, and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27.

¹² Kirsten Hastrup, *Other Histories* (London: Routledge, 1992), 113. Quoted in Roberts and Roberts, *Memory*, 29.

lyric, costuming, and choreography towards reflexive deliberation on the forward momentum of time and the radical changes that Sierra Leone and all its people have seen over the course of the past two decades. Through this commemorative contemplation, Jalloh's biography emerges piecemeal between mnemonic markers, his own personal history serving as a model negotiation of the torrential forces of temporal transformation.

Song

Master mixer, let's go with the music. At Idrissa's command, DJ Omega lets loose from the CD player a steadily pulsing bass line, punctuated by a tingling bell. The throbbing rhythm is quickly covered by Musu Kobondu Kainley's mournful cry: "Somebody's calling. Somebody's calling me." Just as quickly, her voice is buttressed by the shaking of a *shegburai* rattle and a rhythmic chorus of other female voices echoing the intonation "somebody's calling." Within a few beats a complex polyrhythm has been established in which the ear struggles to capture drums, rattle, melody, and harmony as they weave in and out of each other.

From behind the *vaahun* (preparation space), the Warriors emerge. Sidestepping, their shoulder-to-shoulder line undulates to the flowing rhythm. Their torsos hang low to the ground, rocking back and forth as their feet shuffle to the heavy mournful bassline. Their arms sweep up from the ground along their raffia skirts, flaring the strands out into minor explosions that echo the bursts of dust under their feet. On each staccato upbeat, the dancers rear up and half-skip half-spin around to face the other side of their line. At the end of the column, Momoh Lukulay, the Warriors' chorus master, carries Jalloh's sword, a rusted ceremonial saber long abandoned by the Sierra Leone Armed Forces. Behind them, Jalloh leaps into view. While his men roll with the melancholy weight of the drums, Jalloh soars with the vocal flight of Kainley's plaint. He

bounces forward and backward, rotating in all directions, advancing and retreating on the rear flank of his warriors' formation with his mystic fly whisk arcing around him.

The procession loops once around the playing field and then the Warriors straighten out to face a single direction, usually towards a small bamboo shelter that shades the DJ set and a few seats for potential dignitaries. Meanwhile, Jalloh springs towards the audience, lip-syncing to Kainley's song while miming gestures of listening. He takes a few moments to sweep into the audience, greet elders, hold children, or gesture as if giving specific advice to particular youths, singing all the while. Finally he lopez back to his men, who have been dispassionately swaying to the song's unchanging rhythm. He forces himself into the center of the line, signals to Omega to cut the music, and leads the Warriors in a deep bow.

The history encoded in this opening act is oblique and perhaps difficult for outsiders to read, especially as Kainley's lyrics are smothered beneath complex rhythms and scratchy static of a recording that makes the song sound older than it is, along with the rattle of speakers that long ago were blasted past their breaking point. Nonetheless, most audience members recognize the Liberian singer's dirge as a reference to wartime displacement. To wit, somebody's calling, calling from home, but how can one reach there in times of war?

Jalloh's typical followup act makes the reference to past tribulations much clearer. In another Kainley song called "That is War," rhythms are faster and its imagery more explicit. Jalloh adapts his performance to the new energy with more intense miming: charging in mock anger, futilely running in place, falling to the earth in anguish, pretending to slit his own throat, and so on. Once again, he takes his performance directly to the audience while his men sway and sign with minimal commitment.



Figure 20. The Warriors. (above) Boesan, Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia, 2012. (below) Bomaru, Upper Bambara Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2013.

Although the practiced melodrama of Jalloh's gesticulations might appear artificial, the tracks in question speak quite intimately to his past. Jalloh's historical relationship to this music is stronger than he typically acknowledges in performance. According to Jalloh, Kainley was held as a POW at his base in Zimmi for four months, while the CDF attempted to assess her allegiances as a foreigner. Jalloh protected her from harassment, and she sent him the music in thanks at the war's conclusion. For those in the know who have heard this story through Jalloh's frequent informal off-stage lectures or through gossip, these songs speak to Jalloh's own biography as much as to the general affect of life led in violence that they so poignantly evoke.

As spectators continue to settle, Jalloh takes the microphone for his introductory remarks. He then collects his men about him. "Warriors, bomb blast!" he exhorts. They respond by striking their chest with their fist in unison. They mill about Jalloh, slowly tightening into a close huddle. From behind their massed backs, Jalloh's head and his microphone continue to tower, visible from all sides. In his sharp baritone, he cries out a melodic phrase: *De Warrioooooors, hey!* His men return a harmonized response, and the troupe enters into a rousing antiphonal chorus. Idrissa has stepped up to the other microphone, perched on the edge of a tank of spare generator fuel, and snaps his side drum into their rhythm with ear-splitting authority before relaxing into a more supportively muted volume. About three lines in, or enough to establish his facility with the tune, Jalloh abruptly halts his men and lobs another song into the mix. They change gears quickly to accommodate the new chant and Idrissa again matches their tempo.

The Warriors fly through at least a half dozen songs, selected seemingly at random from a continuously growing repertoire of traditional airs, war anthems, and Jalloh's own compositions. As with Kainley's recorded tracks, Jalloh inserts himself into a shared history through familiar melodies. Many of the more strident songs were designed by soldiers to stir up

passions for fighting, and even now warm up the performers for their acts. Some of the songs reference recent history or current events. In honor of the current All People's Congress (APC) regime and the President's "Agenda for Change," Jalloh sings, kr. *APC taym, papa. Na taym na kum fɔ chanj we sef go mek wi kuntri go bifor. Na taym fɔ chanjes.* ("APC time, Papa. The time has come to change ourselves to better our country. It's time for changes.") Perhaps as a gesture to his audiences who primarily identify with the opposition party, the specific changes, whether good or bad, are left unspecified.

In his opening chorus, Jalloh does not sing a group of songs; he performs a corpus. Jan Vansina looks to a total "corpus" of oral histories within a community to establish a history from the continuities of multiple narratives.¹³ Jalloh's quick succession of songs pulled from different eras and the multivalent qualities of their references describe history not as a linear cause-and-effect trajectory, but rather as a system of mutually informative associations. Diana Taylor calls these kind of histories "multilayered sedimentation [...] not an either/or but a both/and."¹⁴ Such performers layer rather than substitute imagery and evoke rather than pinpoint narratives. More effectively than written text, performance exploits fluid and transformative forms of history.

In addition to framing the production through memories of wartime struggles, these lip sync sessions and chorus also serve as low-effort, high-impact methods to introduce the players to the stage while audience members continue to trickle onto the field and take their positions. Villagers outside the walls of the field are able to hear the music, but have not yet missed any of the visual wonders. The undecided may still enter the field to participate, tempted by the lyric summons of Jalloh's articulations of a shared past. The call to hear history echoes widely, but the image of history remains a privilege for paying customers.

¹³ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Diana Taylor, "Performance And/as History," *TDR* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 83.



Figure 21. The Warriors. Mendekeima, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District.

Attire

Before any mystic acts take place, the first visual wonders to greet spectators are the dancers' carefully coordinated uniforms. While all "traditional" dancers wear outfits of various levels of flamboyance that testify to their artistic and/or mystic status, no troupe I observed was as systematic in dress as the Warriors. Whether due to Jalloh's care for detail or his deeper financial means or both, the Warriors looked "pro."

The Warriors' uniforms attest to the past as vehemently as their songs. Connerton and others have noted how social actors exploit changing fashions in distinguishing social eras from each other.¹⁵ Yet the clothing the Warriors display is not a precise reproduction of any singular chronological moment. Like the songs and Taylor's "both/and" performative histories, their costuming depicts history as accumulation, not as demarcation. Their outfits simultaneously reference multiple layered eras rather than any specific historical moment, and thus they access multiple layered principles of power rather than any single authority ascribed to "heritage."

As with all other elements of Mende "deep culture," the dancers were quick to separate their work from that of the *Poro* and *Sande* societies that they, as entertainers, had no right to represent. However, the formal similarities between the secular dancers and certain elements of Poro spectacle are hard to ignore. Warren d'Azevedo notes that Gola storytellers wore exaggerated forms of Poro dress for their performances in the 1950s, suggesting that styles do intersect.¹⁶ Both the uniform and the dance of Mende cultural show performers contain numerous parallels with the figure of the *wujei*, the herald for Poro's most powerful *hei* ("spirit"), the *gbini*. Both cultural dancer and *wujei* sport lush raffia skirts mushrooming from their hips. Both also bear rattles of roughly bent iron tied to their calves. Neither the skirt nor the rattles have any

¹⁵ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 10–11.

¹⁶ d' Azevedo, "Sources of Gola Artistry," 315.

sacral significance, or at least none was related to me. Rather, they were described as serving to emphasize the movements of the dancer. This somewhat prosaic function might explain why the secular cultural dancer is permitted to share elements of the *wujei*'s fashion. Despite the clear distinctions separating cultural dancers from Poro, their shared silhouette signified shared heritage and shared power. To my knowledge, neither archives nor living memory can verify whether *wujei* or dancer outfits came "first." Rather, both participate in a web of references to various activities, conventions, and powers that confound any conception of originary fashions. These confounded practices all engage the potentials and dangers of transition and change, such as the liminal moments of Poro and Sande initiation, more than the reproduction of static tradition.

More immediately germane to the Warriors' identity are the many ways in which Mende culture, both Poro and secular, has been shaped by histories of warfare.¹⁷ In addition to Poro, d'Azevedo connects local arts of storytelling to warriors who had served as heralds and messengers.¹⁸ The form of the belts and banners hung over the Warriors' raffia skirts are consistent with *kololewengoi* decorative leather strips arrayed around a belt or, more spectacularly and much more rarely today, around a collar. *Kololewengoesia* have been worn at various times in history by chiefs, Poro initiates and masqueraders, witch-finders, and herbalists, and William Hart suggests that the fashion can be traced back to warrior's armor that protected the head and torso. All uses may be traced to a militaristic conception of bodily protection which was then translated to political and spiritual realms. In the colonial period, elaborate

¹⁷ I was told of another "Warrior Dance Troupe" sponsored by Dodo Chiefdom. Unfortunately, I was unable to contact the troupe during my time in the field, but they apparently specialized in dances replicating the intricate strategies of precolonial Mende warfare, as described in detail in Kenneth L. Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West African People in Transition*, Rev. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 32–36.

¹⁸ d' Azevedo, "Sources of Gola Artistry."

kololewengoiesia were characteristic of the costumes of mystic entertainers, snake charmers, and dancers.¹⁹ Today, actual leather accoutrements are rare and less extravagant, but some remain in use, while their form is otherwise perpetuated in bands of fabric. One prized leather sash that circulates among the most senior Warriors carries inlaid photographs of African wildlife, linking the item to both the powers of the bush and globally communicable symbols of the continent.

Notably, technologies of mystic protection that served on the battlefield are also used on the playing field. Along with *kololewengoiesia*, they include amulets, medicinal scarification, *ronkos*, and other forms of battle shirt. *Ronko* is a Temne-derived term for shirts woven from country cloth and charged with medicines that serve as protective armor. Paul Richards makes the astute observation that, for the wearer on the battlefield, the *ronko* references not violence but rather the social ties at home that made its construction possible.²⁰ Dancers also wear bands of pure white around their head, waist, and wrists as gestures of spiritual purity. The exchange of these wearable protective technologies between different spheres—physical combat, mystic practice, ritual action, or aesthetic performance—provides all of these liminal activities with analogous forms and fashions. Their recurrent mobilizations in different eras—slave-raiding empires, colonialism, the civil war—reproduce the items’ inherent power while also recoloring it through each new era’s filtered lens. The accumulation of items thus protects the wearer through a stockpiled assortment of techniques, while also referencing multiple planes, both social and temporal, in which the techniques are deemed effective, further attesting to their pervasive strength.²¹

¹⁹ William A. Hart, “Kololewengoi and the Myth of the Big Thing,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 37 (2000): 72–88.

²⁰ Richards, “Dressed to Kill: Clothing as Technology of the Body in the Civil War in Sierra Leone,” 506.

²¹ But see Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 27.

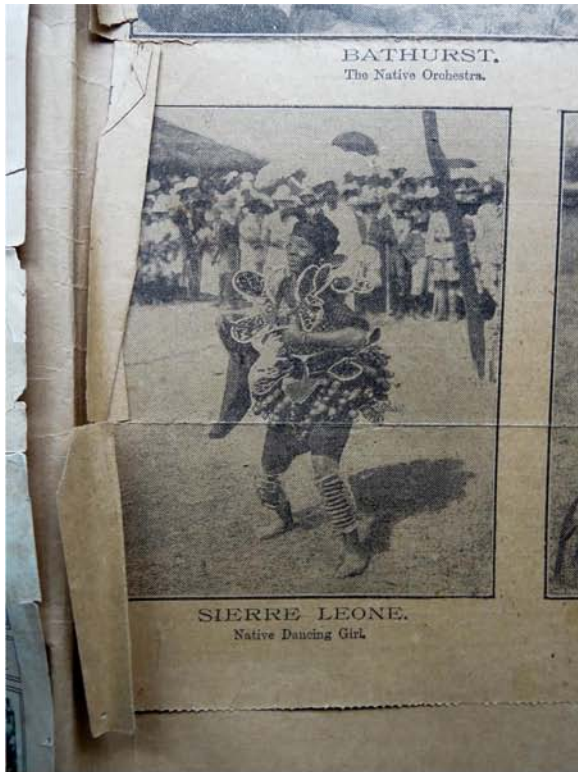


Figure 22. (left) Photographer unknown, 1925. (right) Photo by Lisk-Carew Bros., n.d. Courtesy the Sierra Leone National Archives. (below) Sidike Kamara. Mendekeima, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2013.

The Civil Defense Forces' mobilization of both Kamajor hunting technologies and globalized militaristic guerilla techniques appended further stylistic elements. Diverse repurposed military fatigues became a uniform despite their variant provenance. For a long time following the war, the Warriors sported camouflage tank tops and other martial flourishes. Jalloh had to discontinue the use of fatigues following complaints from the Sierra Leone Armed Forces that the dancers might be confused for soldiers offstage after the program. Now their outfits reflect other transnational forms of authority.

Jalloh presently alternates between two full suits sewn from *bogolanfini* (Bambara, “mud-print cloth”) and festooned with cowrie shells and amulets.²² For *dozo* hunters in Mande cultures of Mali and environs, these shirts carry and display trophies of power and prestige that a hunter accumulates over time through numerous exchanges, and Patrick MacNaughton links them to concepts of protective darkness and obscurity.²³ Jalloh's own uniform is less cluttered than some of these examples, and it reflects one transaction rather than many; he received these outfits from a group of Malian hunters and bards he met during his festival performances in The Gambia. Jalloh's *bogolanfini* thus conveniently amalgamates references to hunting, mysticism, exoticism, and his own mobility. Wraps, ties, and belts worn by the dancers are colored in the red-yellow-green of pan-Africanism, the blue-white-green of the Sierra Leonean flag, or the red of the ruling APC party. Elements of the company's identifications with “Rasta” culture, such as images of Bob Marley or the profile of a marijuana leaf, also pepper much of their wardrobe of brightly colored t-shirts, socks, and hats, most of which has been imported from China. These

²² cf. Victoria L. Rovine, *Bogolan: Shaping Culture Through Cloth in Contemporary Mali* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

²³ MacNaughton, “The Shirts That Mande Hunters Wear.”

accumulated symbols gesture towards natural, traditional, nationalist, and transnational sources of power.

Jalloh's current source of dancer uniforms, and one that is quickly catching on among other cultural dancers, rallies international images of masculinity, virtuosity, and star power: the football uniform. These widely available jerseys, also imported from China, are a readymade source of identical ensembles and tap into one of the great passions of the Sierra Leonean nation. While allegiances to various Premier League Football teams are hotly contested issues of identity, Jalloh has been careful to align his men with the most potently symbolic clubs. On alternating nights, they appear in the white jerseys of the Sierra Leone national team, whose representation is self-explanatory, and the red "AON" commercial-logo of Manchester United. As Jalloh explains: "Well I like Man United, but it is for our country and our president. The color of red."

The Warriors' costumes are "traditional culture," but they do not speak to any one specific historical era. Instead, they have accumulated sedimented histories of powerful associations, including pre-colonial and contemporary militarism, secret societies, initiation and transvestism, mystic healing and snake charming, hunting and the bush, pan-African "Rasta" culture, national politics, and international sporting spectacle. While some of these stylistic choices are made to protect the dancers from invisible threats pitched at them on the playing field, all of them are made to project the dancers forward and backward through history and out into the spectators' imaginations.



Figure 23. Hassan Jalloh, Malian hunters, and Sierra Leone traditional singer Kpossowai (second from left).
Kanalai, The Gambia. Courtesy the private archives of Hassan Jalloh, n.d.

Dance

As is the case with many African languages, there is no precise translation of “dance” in Mende.²⁴ *Ndoli* has a much more sweeping meaning, engaging all kinds of forms of “play,” including amusement, performance, and looseness. Nonetheless, Sierra Leonean performers have embraced “dance” along with other European terms to categorize different kinds of stylized physical activity. Most notable is the categorization of grouped synchronized dance as “ballet.” I have little doubt that their use of this term is rooted in its employment by Fodéba Keita and the *Ballets Africains de Guinée*. Keita’s reconceptualization of African dance as an immigrant in Paris and his successive return to Guinea for the foundation of the first postcolonial dance troupe set the model for most other regional national dance troupes.²⁵ Guinean dancers were among those recruited to Sierra Leone’s national dance troupe, and the term “ballet” for synchronized dance probably travelled to the provinces from dancers who had returned from training in Freetown, though it is equally likely that the term “ballet” arrived from its deployment in youth education in the forest region of Guinea, closer to much of rural Sierra Leone than the capital.²⁶ In any case, the distinction between ballet and solo dance has far-reaching consequences for Mende dance. While both utilize the same forms, they have different relations to discipline and virtuosity.

Despite *ndoli*’s definition as “freedom” or “play,” Mende traditional dance, whether solo or group, is stylistically closely delineated. Dancers’ virtuosity is defined by speed, force, and precision. Roger Dorsinville describes neighboring Liberian dance as

²⁴ Georgiana Gore, “Present Texts, Past Voices: The Formation of Contemporary Representations of West African Dances,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 33 (2001): 29.

²⁵ cf. Arnoldi, “Youth Festivals and Museums,” 57; Snipe, *Arts and Politics in Senegal, 1960-1996*, 45.

²⁶ cf. Straker, *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution*.

an education; primarily physical it tends toward exceeding the limitations of the body as they are experienced in every day use. Physical frontiers are slowly pushed back in competitive emulation. Religious motivation deeply ingrained in the necessities of culture (it is not by chance that dancing is part of the sacred grove's curriculum) sustain[s] that tension to go “beyond” the possible, men by strength, adroitness, agility, girls through agility, deployment of grace, enhancement of beauty.²⁷

Within the context of gendered initiations, male and female dance may be differentiated, but in public “cultural show” entertainments their aesthetic ideals are the same (although very few cultural troupes used many women dancers during the months of my research). In concert with the lead drummer, a dancer works to match the distinct elements of the percussion’s polyrhythms with different parts of the body.²⁸ In most Mende dance, the complexity of the rhythm flows upward through the dancer’s physique. Thus, the most complex and active elements of the rhythm are articulated through the feet and the least are engaged by the head. Matching the breakneck pounding of the side drum’s highest tempo, the dancers’ feet trace out patterns faster than the eye can follow. The rattle of the dancer’s leg irons visually and sonically complicates the footwork and amplifies the effect that the movement is beyond human comprehension. Knees kick out in a slightly slower time signature. Hips sway front-to-back and side-to-side in time to the one beat set out by the bass drum, the raffia flipping outward to further accentuate the pulse’s smooth yet constant flow. Meanwhile, arms and torso bend into new forms about once every meter, whether relaxed, splayed in counterbalance, or activated to arc in different directions. The focus of the head and eye is largely stable throughout, though it might snap to new points of focus at major shifts in rhythm.

²⁷ Roger Dorsinville, *The Regulated World of Hinterland Dancing* (Monrovia, Liberia, 1970), 6. Quoted in Kariamu Welsh-Asante, *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), 8.

²⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

The overall arc of the dance performance follows a general pattern, yet there is considerable room for improvisation in direction and gesture within this model. The dancer begins by stepping into the space with an authoritative engagement of drummer, warming up to get into sync, accelerating in speed and intensity, then rapidly downshifting to a number of tightly coordinated gestures of punctuation before closing with a form of salutation. The effect on the audience's attention is to be grabbed, caught up in quickening complexity, then lost in rhythm and action. The final snaps of synchronization restore sense to the spectacle. Since these snaps follow an internal logic and rhythm consistent from the beginning, they are also somewhat predictable, and the audience's pleasure results to some extent from accurately predicting their arrival. However, the actual form of the final gestures is always an improvisational surprise. Like the gifts that Jalloh produces from beneath his tarpaulin, these gestures' sudden appearance out of the chaos of rapid footwork are welcomed with shouts of jubilation and praise.

The relationship between dancer and drummer is central to this entire effect. All drummers with whom I discussed such matters emphasized how crucial it is to be both attentive to a dancer's subtle indications of the direction of further steps *and* to be authoritative enough to drive the dancer in the direction the drummer desires. The mutual constitution of the dance is taken for granted by the audience members, many of whom have participated in informal dancing of this style themselves. When the intimate connection of drummer and dancer is challenged, success is unexpected. The Warriors and most other cultural groups enact at least one group dance in which the lead drummer turns away from the dancers and, in some cases, is blindfolded. In spite of the drummer's inability to see, the dance remains successful due to carefully pre-arranged choreography. The improvisational element is understood to be so central to dance that memorized choreography and rhythm represents the height of virtuosity, an inverse

to Western tendencies to see skillfully improvised music-making as more virtuosic than memorized or read forms. Adrienne Kaeppler helpfully distinguishes two types of memory at work in dance, a cultural grammar of motifs on the one hand and specific choreographed sequences of those motifs on the other.²⁹ The wonder that greets the memorization of dance suggests that, for most Mende, facility with the “grammar” of dance is expected, while “specific choreography” is not.

For most Mende observers, group dancing and practiced choreography are associated more to discipline than to history-making. Dancers and their directors mobilize bodily memory to control and contain power, rather than to reflect consciously on past experiences or historical continuities. Outside of the context of cultural troupe entertainments, dance has been said to be a central educative element of Poro and Sande initiation practice (although I was not privy to the interior activities of the societies and so cannot confirm how much this remains the case).³⁰ Coordination of physical action instills self control and engender *communitas*. Some commentators have suggested continuities between traditional dance forms and agricultural production, hunting, and other Maussian “techniques of the body.”³¹ The role of dance in discipline, i.e. the limitation of bodily potential, and in exercise, i.e. the extension of bodily potential, is clearly as much a part of Mende culture as any other.

One familiar and potent space of bodily regulation is the military. Judith Lynn Hanna enumerates the many potential roles for “warrior dance” in African societies, of which a number

²⁹ Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “Memory and Knowledge in the Production of Dance,” in *Images of Memory*, ed. Susanne Küchler and Walter Melion (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 113.

³⁰ d’ Azevedo, “Sources of Gola Artistry,” 313.. Little perhaps overstates “recreation” rather than discipline. Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West African People in Transition*, 121, 128.

³¹ A consideration of similarities or complementarities between local forms of dance and physical labor is beyond the scope of this work. cf. Paul Richards, “An Accidental Sect: How War Made Belief in Sierra Leone,” *Review of African Political Economy* 33, no. 110 (2006): 653.

are notable here. Understood as “liminal” (after Turner), warrior status stands between youth and fully autonomous adulthood. Dance “is frequently the mode of status change” that demarcates advancement through hierarchies.³² These status changes confer extraordinary privileges. Warrior dance, like masking or possession, “separates and defines differences between an individual’s role in ordinary life and his role in another domain that sanctions extraordinary behavior,” allowing acts of both freedom and violence that are normally off limits.³³ Warriors dance to display their facility with extraordinary powers and privileges, both their own and their sponsors, who may include commanders, chiefs, and nations.

True to their name and their history, the Warriors marshal displays of militaristic regimentation through their dance. While Mende dance has long had martial qualities likely linked to extensive warfare in the 18th and 19th centuries, Jalloh’s troupe magnifies and modernizes this militarism with strict, linear formations and sharp commands that echo practices of the armed forces of the colonial and postcolonial State. Jalloh insists that “dance” was a central element of militia training and that the dances they now perform were training programs in camp. It is certainly possible that some CDF initiators, as part of their mobilization of Poro and other local cultural idioms, reproduced dance practices from the initiation bush. In any case, Jalloh’s group dances are expressly designed as drills. Jalloh shouts, “Company! Frontline!” The dancers deploy themselves in ranks, either lines or staggered tiers, facing their commander. Jalloh paces up and down inspecting his men, waving his fly whisk to direct them to more precise formations. He takes up position in front of them and salutes. The Warriors snap to attention. Jalloh then enjoins Idrissa to commence drumming and conducts the dancers’

³² Judith L. Hanna, “African Dance and the Warrior Tradition,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 12, no. 1–4 (1977): 115.

³³ *Ibid.*, 119.

movements with broad and precise gesticulations of his whisk. The troupe's grave martial demeanor is taken to parodic extremes and crosses into the realm of satirical play. Often the rigid gravity of Jalloh and his troupe members caves into friendly hysterics, a whispered inside joke collapsing their stiff decorum into laughter.

Irreverent distance is one way in which the bodily techniques of the military are cast as the past through Jalloh's group dances. Before, these gestures were exercises of aggression; now they are entertainment. As he describes himself: "Once a warrior, now a promoter for everlasting peace in our beautiful Sierra Leone." Jalloh's days of violence, like those of his nation, are over but not forgotten, and Jalloh has taken it upon himself to purposefully and expressly write history through the medium of dance.³⁴ Unlike any other popular cultural performer, Jalloh chooses to frame his dances as instances of historical education as much as entertainment. Introducing the group dance segment of his show, Jalloh quotes no less an authority than Bob Marley, "If you don't know your history, you don't know where you are coming from."³⁵

Like choral songs, dances vary each night from a small repertoire. Gendema is the border town with Liberia, thus a key strategic point along Jalloh's past deployment. In the dance titled "Marching Down to Gendema" (sometimes Jalloh calls it "Marching Down to Zion"), the Warriors form a line and rock to a steady processional beat as if marching in place. As Jalloh singles out each dancer, he steps forward to perform a virtuosic and often acrobatic solo, then returns to the steady rhythm of the "front line." After all the dancers have had a chance to show

³⁴ cf. Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographing History," in *Choreographing History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3–23.

³⁵ Marley's actual line is "If you know your history, then you would know where you are coming from." The song is "Buffalo Soldier" whose resonance with Jalloh as an anthem of postcolonial militarism and the "dreadlocked Rasta" should be amply evident. It is possible that Jalloh is purposefully misquoting in order to make the saying his own, or to create a kind of portmanteau axiom with George Santayana's famous admonishment, "Those who cannot remember history are condemned to repeat it." George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Introduction and Reason in Common Sense* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 172.

off their specific skills, Idrissa leads them all in a ferocious climax that ends with all the dancers kneeling in a deep salute before Jalloh. Another dance, “Mano River Floating Down to Sulima” dramatizes the course of the river dividing Sierra Leone and Liberia, again an important geographical marker for Jalloh’s military career. This dance also takes the form of a line-up, though the movements are smooth and swaying, making the raffia skirts flow like liquid, and the number ends with the dancers bent backwards as if swept by the river’s torrential power.³⁶ “Gola Vai Acrobatic Combinations” refers to Gola and Vai ethnicities along the border and to the Gola forest that harbored rebel and CDF forces during the conflict. The dancers are widely spaced, and the choreography begins with Jalloh testing their balance by standing on one leg for a comically long period, until the dancers start to fall over from exhaustion. They then launch into a vigorous dance that sees the performers facing multiple directions and alternately marking rhythmic time with their head, hips, and shoulders. In “Freedom and Peace is our Gold,” the dancers line up in two rows facing each other and perform a kind of celebratory jig.

One dance stands out as dealing with contemporary crises. “HIV/AIDS” is performed more often in larger towns where the discussion of sexual matters is likely to be less controversial than in smaller villages (even though the high teen pregnancy rates in the later suggest that it might be more useful there). Jalloh explained his rationale for adding the dance to his repertoire in an interview:

We even talk to the people about this killing diseases. To our down local people—who they don't listen to radio, or even they listen to radio, they will not know what you are talking about. HIV AIDS. We will tell them about the STI. Sexually Transmitted Infections. We tell them about the STDs. Sexually Transmitted Diseases. So they will go locally know what we are mean and what the people mean, not only what they talk of radio... [gibberish] HIV [gibberish]. There are down people will not know what you are talking. So we go down to them and tell

³⁶ This last move is not unlike the choreographic “break to the back” noted as an exemplar of acrobatic virtuosity and social revolution by Allen Roberts. Allen F. Roberts, *A Dance of Assassins: Performing Early Colonial Hegemony in the Congo* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 76–98.



Figure 24. The Warriors. Sulima, Soro Gbema Chiefdom, Pujehun District, 2012.

them exactly about these killing diseases. [...] they changes of partnership... jumping from one trees to another like that monkey type. We stop that. [...] Although I'm not paid. I have never been paid, never been given contract, never been given project about HIV AIDS. But I— even in the— you watch the clip I mention I make in Gambia, Nigeria, Gam- Ghana, I spoked about it. That my president said I should talk about it anywhere else I gathered or people gathered to watch me.

Jalloh starts by decrying the danger that is HIV/AIDS, though not in any specific medical capacity. He urges the youth, “you have to put it on, before you put it in,” gesturing helpfully and then clarifying, “c-o-n-d-o-m, condom.” Without explaining where to find condoms in periurban Sierra Leone, he moves on to his other advice, which is not to move about from one tree to another “like that monkey type.” The dance itself dramatizes this statement. As with “Freedom and Peace is Our Gold,” the dancers face each other. In riotous pantomime, they charge each other, back-and-forth, hop up-and-down with their hands waving simian-like in the air, before charging again and simulating pelvic thrusts with their partners. The comical effect is best when the tall Jalloh pairs himself up with Gbessay Konteh, “the smallest Warrior,” and their disproportionate sizes accentuate the dance’s absurdity. The whole piece ends with a furious bout of flailing and running in place. This invocation of HIV/AIDS awareness may not be terribly effective, but it is Jalloh’s own contribution to public sensitization efforts. Though it may appear more practical than historical, in fact the bit speaks to Jalloh’s tenure as refugee camp coordinator in Bo before he joined the CDF. There, he and his friend and future manager Ansu Bellay underwent HIV/AIDS sensitivity training. Jalloh resurrected this period of his own history in an effort to instrumentalize his troupe in a way that would appeal to international funders. Like many of his efforts, they have not yet been fully realized, but the dance lives on as a testament to Jalloh’s social consciousness and his hopes for international patronage.³⁷

³⁷ The HIV/AIDS dance’s frequency in towns might also be due to the fact that NGO officials and potential patrons are more likely to be in the audiences.



Figure 25. Hassan Jalloh and the Warriors. Bandakor, Kpanga-Kabonde Chiefdom, Pujehun District, 2012.

Jalloh turns dance into history with a simple turn of phrase. His dance's choreographies are not "historical" in themselves, for they neither reference styles of the past nor mime previous events. By framing his overall presentation as "history" and entitling each of the pieces, Jalloh transforms the referential field through which the dances are to be read. In this discursive gesture, Jalloh recognizes that for dance to choreograph history, it must be performed by a "body that fuses dance and rhetoric," as Susan Foster explains.³⁸ They also attest to a form of history-making that accumulates rather than fixes meaning.

Overwriting history

Jalloh's historiography is economical. To evoke the past, he merely needs to touch on that most potent of memory containers: place.³⁹ The titles of the Warriors' group dances mark out towns, rivers, and forests, in landscapes that signify the nation's recent wartime history and encompass Jalloh's personal experience of it. Rather than making history through his "ability to persuade others through a rendition of the past,"⁴⁰ Jalloh makes history by suggesting sites and then letting his audience fill in the gaps with their own memories of them.

Mnemonic terrains are familiar globally.⁴¹ Pierre Nora distinguishes two kinds of environments in which memory takes place, corresponding to the distinction between memory, "a perpetual active phenomenon" and history, "a representation of the past."⁴² *Milieux de mémoire* are atmospheres pervaded and shaped by memory, while *lieux de mémoire* are sites

³⁸ Foster, "Choreographing History," 18.

³⁹ Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, 189–216.

⁴⁰ Roberts and Roberts, *Memory*, 147.

⁴¹ Frances Yates' traversals of Greek and Renaissance architectural conceptions of memory are now classic, as are many discussions of American and Australian geography. Frances Amelia Yates, *The Art of Memory* (New York: Random House, 1966). cf. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

⁴² Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," 8.

purposefully segregated from the rest of society to safeguard and oversee memory. Nora's notion of a historical break between primitive peasant societies of memory and contemporary industrial societies of history is certainly clouded by modernist romanticism, but as Paul Antze and Michael Lambek observe, it works as a metaphor for "memory's continuous dialectical movement in and out of consciousness. [...] As memory emerges into consciousness, as it is externalized and increasingly objectified, it always depends on cultural vehicles for its expression."⁴³ As a depiction of historical consciousness, Nora's *lieux de mémoire* are applicable to any social order, rural or urban.

Mariane Ferme notes that most Mende historical narration is "occasioned by contingent events," such as walks through landscapes.⁴⁴ Drawing on Ferme's invocation of the memories of terrain and Rosalind Shaw's formulation of "palimpsest memories," Paul Basu calls Sierra Leone host to powerful "palimpsest memoryscapes" as sites at which cycles of memory accumulate, each event coloring those before it and those that follow. Through the course of successive forms of violence, "the landscape of Sierra Leone continues to be transformed into a memoryscape of conflict, and not necessarily through intentional commemorative practices."⁴⁵ The performing arts are no different than these vistas and locales. Each new iteration of performance, each repeated choral refrain, each mobilization of wearable mystic technologies, and each dance accumulates memories. Jalloh reflexively highlights these successive "chronotopes" (to use the Bakhtinian term) and thus makes histories of his own.⁴⁶

⁴³ Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (London: Routledge, 1996), xvii.

⁴⁴ Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 6, 23–48.

⁴⁵ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 15., Shaw quotes Vansina's "palimpsest traditions" Jan Vansina, "Comment: Traditions of Genesis," *The Journal of African History* 15, no. 02 (1974): 320; Basu, "Palimpsest Memoryscapes: Materializing and Mediating War and Peace in Sierra Leone," 250.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–252.

In Sierra Leone, the idea of the palimpsest has specific local resonance. Wooden writing boards, clouded by years of repetitive brushwork and rinsing, are a common sight in rural Sierra Leone as a tool of training in Arabic literacy and Koranic learning. *Morimen* and other mystic healers have long used the ink washed from these boards for medicines.⁴⁷ Ingesting or washing with these medicines is to ingest or wash oneself in the words of Allah, understood by Mary Nooter Roberts as “a literal interiorization of holy prayers and protective formulae, and a form of transubstantiation through which a patient ‘becomes’ the Word itself.”⁴⁸ Such medicines are known in Mende as *nesi* and have been used for purposes ranging from easing childbirth to bulletproofing during the Civil War.⁴⁹ Today, *nesi* is most frequently prescribed to students who wish to strengthen their schoolwork. Palimpsests are residues of *nesi* preparation and thus implicated in local processes of knowledge and wisdom pursuit.

Whatever its intellectual benefits, *nesi* medicines also harbor dangers. The dosage is determined relative to the student’s age and life experience. If a patient exceeds the recommended dosage, he (and it is most often “he”) may be driven mad. I was introduced to several young men around Kenema who had once held promising academic careers and whose scholarship had taken them to the major national universities at Njala and Fourah Bay, and even overseas. Something had gone wrong and they returned to Kenema broken, in mental distress or with inexplicable wasting diseases. They were understood to have drunk the *nesi* too greedily. A friend pointed to a groundnut and told me that an equivalent volume causes wisdom, while any more brings madness. Unlike some converts to global religions who might have been weary of

⁴⁷ Caroline Bledsoe and Kenneth M. Robey, “Arabic Literacy and Secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone,” *Man* 21, no. 2 (1986): 210.. cf. Roberts and Roberts, *A Saint in the City*.

⁴⁸ Mary Nooter Roberts, “Sacred Scripts,” in *Inscribing Meaning : Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2007), 97.

⁴⁹ Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 177–78; Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare*, 107.

such elixirs in general, most performers I knew readily took other treatments prepared by *morimen* but were careful around *nesi*. The dangers of *nesi* testify to the struggles and pressures of migrant labor, education, and youth's wasted potential amid pervasive unemployment and dysfunctional academic structures. Moreover, they speak to the hazards of accumulative histories. In the constant wave of past events and past trauma, it is far too easy to lose oneself to despair.

The danger of disorientation and loss of self requires anchoring oneself with one's own history. Aged *kaamɔisia* (Islamic priests and elders) are capable of reading and ingesting more holy text because of their long life experience. They have a clearly developed sense of self and their place in the cosmos. In a sense, these elders have a position from which to view the wonders and horrors of the invisible world, both spiritual and historical, without being swallowed by them.

Jalloh's insistence that "if you don't know your history, you don't know where you are coming from" may seem to state the obvious, yet the sentiment actually carries great significance in a context in which many Sierra Leoneans are actively trying to "forgive and forget" difficult histories.⁵⁰ Unlike many other former combatants who struggle to divest themselves of their violent pasts, Jalloh and the Warriors embrace their background and use it as a platform to carry themselves into the future. In so doing, they demonstrate a model for their spectators to follow or critique. As Edward Casey notes, "an intimate relationship between memory and place is realized [...] *through the lived body*."⁵¹ Jalloh's performances suggest that the body in question does not necessarily have to be one's own; memory and place can be experienced through the body of an other, whether through vicarious identification or held at a critically comparative

⁵⁰ Shaw, *Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions : Lessons from Sierra Leone*.

⁵¹ Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, 189, emphasis in original.

remove. As Nora predicted, “the historian” (e.g. Jalloh) “has become no longer a memory-individual but, in himself, a *lieu de mémoire*.”⁵²

Hassan Jalloh narrates the nation’s recent history through his own experience, oblique yet efficient evocation, and the bodies of himself and his men. He demonstrates that cultural prowess is not a slavish reproduction of former times but the ability to navigate and orchestrate memories of multiple accumulated strands of precedence. In so doing, he models a way to make history without being unmade by the past.

⁵² Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” 18.



Figure 26. The Warriors. Daru, Jawie Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

Chapter Two: Rebranding Culture

Invading the National Stage

Armed figures descend on public sites in regimental formation. They engage and strike their enemy with advanced technologies deployed across specialized units. Emergency medical teams tend to their wounded. Dozens of prisoners are apprehended by their operations. They claim they serve the defense of the nation, but these are neither army troops nor police nor any other state institution. Through extravagant public “disarmaments,” the Sierra Leone Indigenous Traditional Healers Union has taken upon itself to rid the country of witchcraft. Its spectacular actions unearth countless “witch guns,” capture witches, and jail offenders until they can be cured and “rehabilitated.” They claim jurisdiction over issues of public health, performance culture, traditional chieftaincy, and internal affairs, yet have no formal relation to nor oversight from any of the relevant government ministries, and despite a few promises, the government has apparently never financed their operations. Yet the Union continually aligns itself to the State, even if that State holds it at perpetual arm’s length.

The Sierra Leone Indigenous Traditional Healers Union (SLITHU) is more than just a union.¹ Beyond its promotion of skilled members, it attempts to fundamentally reinvent the way traditional medicine is perceived and practiced in Sierra Leone. Under the leadership of the inimitable President Field Marshal al-Hajji Dr. Suleyman Kabba, SLITHU has embraced

¹ The acronym SLINTHU has also occasionally been used by the organization, the “IN” still referring to “INdigenous.”

multiple projects since its foundation in 2008: dramatic public cleansing ceremonies, the establishment of an allopathic health clinic, literacy training, anti-violence programs, and more. Not content to oversee only herbalists, the Union claims authority over every area of “tradition” and “culture” in Sierra Leone, reasoning that cultural performers’ and initiatory societies’ employment of spiritual protections make them subjects to the work of herbalists. SLITHU is based in Sierra Leone’s capital Freetown, but its branches radiate across the country with an overt mission to incorporate and manage the activities of every herbalist and cultural performer in the nation.

Yet the consolidation of the proudly individuated mystic powers of the country’s characteristically decentralized healer community is an extremely dangerous undertaking. Kabba and his followers risk political schism, accusations of chicanery and corruption, censure by religious groups, invisible attacks by fellow masters of esoteric arts, and brute physical violence. With these looming threats and when financial and institutional support from the Sierra Leonean government is tenuous at best, why do these practitioners voluntarily adopt the discourse of the State? In tracing the rise of SLITHU and the frictions it engenders, I argue that the members of SLITHU, along with many other Sierra Leoneans, embrace the national because it provides a stage upon which to experiment with the integration of often radically irreconcilable local and international spheres.

Grassroots and Leaves: Imagined Nations and Herbalists

While many scholars have tracked the process of inventing national cultures within the invented states of postcolonial Africa—territories lacking Europe’s nationalism generators of

industrialization or print capitalism²—most of these projects have focused on states with relatively strong governments or particularly intense interests in developing and shaping a “national culture.” Studies of government cultural policy emphasize a top-down power struggle of government agents using political power to shape local imaginations of the nation-state. These projects see state power as the formative force behind national culture, whether through the destructive influence of censorship and iconoclasm (as exemplified in Guinea) or through the encouraging influence of patronage, national competitions, and heritage projects.³ A second model centers on the agency of postcolonial artists who mobilize local aesthetic idioms in the quest to define new national forms (largely in centers of powerful international visual arts industries such as Nigeria and Senegal).⁴ The third model is epitomized in Achille Mbembe’s description of postcolonial national culture, in which mutually repulsed leaders and citizens constitute new forms based upon grotesquerie and excess.⁵ Each of these models tend to depict “national culture” as the product of a local, usually ethnically coded, raw material, a resource to be corralled and harvested by the agency of an engaged State in the interests of its own authority. Little attention has been given to non-state actors who readily embrace and generate nationalist cultural discourse beyond the influence of their government.

Weak states do not at first seem to be ideal breeding grounds for nationalist sentiment. In the heady days of early transnational theory, many imagined the withering of the nation-state as

² cf. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2006).

³ e.g. McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*; Kelly Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Apter, *The Pan-African Nation*; Laura Edmondson, *Performance and Politics in Tanzania: The Nation on Stage*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007); Peter Probst, *Osogbo and the Art of Heritage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). among many others

⁴ e.g. Ola Ololodi, “Art and Nationalism in Colonial Nigeria,” in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clémentine Deliss (Paris: Flammarion, 1995); Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow*.

⁵ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

globalization created new forms of affinities via the increasing global flows of media and migrants.⁶ Key to those predictions was the perceived weakness of those numerous postcolonial states that seemed headed for immanent dissolution at the close of the century, Sierra Leone foremost among them. In the last decade however, evidence suggests reports of the nation's death were greatly exaggerated. In fact, the public embrace of nationalist discourse in Sierra Leone may be more intense now than at any other time in its history.

This chapter explores the conditions for “national culture” in a State with limited will and means with which to imagine and enforce a vision of itself. As I argue in the previous chapter, the history of the Sierra Leonean government's involvement in arts and culture has been markedly oriented towards the exterior; it has used culture as a local resource whose purpose is to integrate Sierra Leone within an international community of nations, not to shape the imaginations of its own citizens. Rather than a unified and public vision of “national culture,” the government's impact on cultural expression has historically been characterized by the individual patronage of cultural troupes and “secret societies” by government employees and political candidates. This decentralized and competitive clientalism has produced a plurality of cultural expressions, many of which are not only private but also practically closed off too much of the nation's population. As a result, the actors most engaged in defining and producing a shared national culture in postwar Sierra Leone are not state agents but non-state actors like touring cultural show superstar King Hassan Jalloh and organizations like SLITHU. This grassroots nationalism is the engine that is currently generating the contemporary Sierra Leonean nation.

Unlike government agents, these actors do not embrace the nation as an end to itself. Instead, the nation is a crucial frame through which they are able to articulate novel agendas. In

⁶ e.g. Ulf Hannerz, “Notes on the Global Ecumene,” *Public Culture* 1, no. 2 (1989): 66–75; Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

stark contrast to interpretations of national culture as limiting and conservative, these actors demonstrate that, for many, the national sphere is a zone of flexibility and innovation. Most crucially, the nation provides a conceptual arena in which these actors can experiment with the integration of often diametrically opposed local and international practices. For them, the nation offers more play within certain domains than either local or international structures currently allow. The nation opens this space in three important ways. First, the nation offers a new stage of authority and legitimacy free from restrictions of either internationalist or local/ethnic norms. Second, the nation provides a set of shared memories through which to refashion mutual affinities. Third, the nation has already been positioned as the site through which the local accesses the international and vice versa.

In examining how SLITHU uses the category of the national to experiment with and reconcile contrasting local and international interests, I turn to Anna Tsing's productive invocation of the term "friction." In describing global interrelations, friction evokes the grinding clashes that arise in the impact between two seemingly solid forces, and yet also suggests the progressive creative energy that is generated that "grip of encounter."⁷ However, instead of focusing on the "universal," as Tsing does to draw attention to the constantly shifting utopic principles that motivate the interactions between global actors, Sierra Leoneans I knew were more concerned with the "international." I believe this attention to the international indicates that their objective was not the definition of generic principles implied by calls to the "universal," although those principles were certainly significant. What they sought was a sense of balancing their belonging among multiple communities.

⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 5.

Therefore, when I invoke “local,” “national,” or “international” as categories of practice and ideology, I do not do so in order to prescribe origins or to concretize correlations. Indeed, the boundaries of these categories are in constant flux and their constitution and permutations are precisely the stakes upon which conflicts are waged. Instead, I take a fundamentally social view, and argue that “local,” “national,” and “international” are categories that indicate belonging within multiple concentric (rather than mutually exclusive) communities. Most Sierra Leoneans view their village as part of a larger ethnicity, their ethnicity part of a larger nation, and their nation as part of a larger world. Just as participating in a local practice asserts one’s participation in a local community, participating in an international practice asserts one’s participation in the international community. While many Sierra Leoneans, whether isolated village herbalists or jet-setting global businessmen, may appear to forsake one kind of community for another, almost every member of the nation is striving to maintain membership in each one of these spheres, and all are searching for ways to balance these spheres’ frequently contradictory demands. These struggles are not fights against the international community but fights within the international community over the terms of participation in the global order. Through its invocation of the nation, SLITHU is offering its public one powerful model for how to accomplish that balance.

2.1 HEALTH IN POSTWAR SIERRA LEONE

Medical Infrastructure and Alternatives

SLITHU has risen in a time when health care has become one of the most politically momentous issues in the nation. When Sierra Leone emerged from civil war in 2001, it had among the worst medical conditions in the world, and progress since has been disappointing. As

one distressing example, child mortality rates led the world in 2000 and again in 2011.⁸ To combat the deplorable state and untenable cost of medical facilities, the APC-led government initiated a program of “Free Medical Care” in 2010, which supposedly provided free services to pregnant and lactating mothers and children up to five years old. Even so, Sierra Leone has come under fire for lack of oversight and gross mismanagement of funds and medicines, as when a number of high profile doctors were recently indicted for selling medicines intended for free distribution.⁹ Even patients covered by the “free medical care” program are regularly required to pay inexplicable fees and purchase treatments from private pharmacies to replace depleted government stockpiles. As a result, while all rural Sierra Leoneans juggle a variety of alternative medical therapies, most only go to hospitals to mend broken bones after accidents or as a course of last resort.¹⁰ For any other kind of health issue, they are more likely to seek out an herbalist.

Along with other African nations and the international community, the Sierra Leone government has begun to make (a few) token efforts to manage the population’s wide use of native medicine rather than eradicate it. SLITHU can be compared to other associations of healers that have coalesced to “professionalize” in the neoliberal era in Mozambique, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and beyond.¹¹ As in Mozambique, the struggles of postwar reconstruction have strained the Sierra Leonean State’s ability to provide health solutions for its citizens, so it has become dependent on farming out responsibility for medical services to NGOs and other

⁸ United Nations Children’s Fund, *Levels & Trends in Child Mortality: Report 2012* (New York: United Nations Children’s Fund, 2012).

⁹ Amnesty International, *At a Crossroads: Sierra Leone’s Free Health Care Policy* (London: Amnesty International Ltd., 2011); Adam Nossiter, “Sierra Leone Graft Charges Imperil Care and Aid,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2013, sec. World / Africa.

¹⁰ cf. John M. Janzen, *The Quest for Therapy: Medical Pluralism in Lower Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

¹¹ e.g. Murray Last and Gordon L. Chavunduka, eds., *The Professionalisation of African Medicine* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988); Harry G. West and Tracy J. Luedke, “Introduction: Healing Divides. Therapeutic Border Work in Southeast Africa,” *Borders and Healers: Brokering Therapeutic Resources in Southeast Africa*, 2006, 1–20.

associations. In this context, traditional medicine has presented itself as a pre-existing and cost-effective source of health solutions. Yet until now, the Sierra Leone government has only made symbolic gestures towards the oversight of traditional practices. SLITHU fills this void.

At the same time, herbalists and healers have found unexpected rivalry from the opening of pharmaceutical markets after the war. The number of private international medical firms, including numerous purveyors of herbal medicine from China and Malaysia has mushroomed. While I was in Sierra Leone, the Philippine company Dynapharm was beginning to court clients through sales by locally recruited referral marketers. Offering sleek packaging and dubious scientism, these companies present local healers with both competition for desperate patients seeking health alternatives and exciting models of entrepreneurialism.

“Traditional medicine”, alternately referred to in Sierra Leone English as “herbalism,” “native” or “indigenous healing” or any of a number of combinations of those terms, comprises a wide variety of practices that transcend Western distinctions between medicine, religion, art and culture. In Sierra Leone, traditional medicine is practiced through both “leaf” medicine, the collection and preparation of herbs, and “book” medicine, practices rooted in writing and Islamic scholarship. These medicines are not always mutually exclusive, though they are balanced in different ways by different healers. Both of these practices claim authority through a wide variety of supernatural agents. This accumulative approach to authority sets the scene for SLITHU’s appropriation of State power.

Assembling the Authority to Heal

Herbalists gain their power in a dizzying number of ways, each one attesting to a different form of spiritual legitimacy, and frequently combined in novel forms in order to best

attract clientele. The following narrative from Alpha Koroma Labawai, a successful young Kenema-based herbalist, is worth an extended quotation for the way it ties together multiple sources of mystic authority. Koroma Labawai was already studying Koranic scripture under a *kaamɔi* (Islamic scholar) in exchange for agricultural labor, when he received a visitation:

We made a farm, we were working on a farm. I hear a sound. People call me, somebody call me, but I didn't see the person. "Koroma! Koroma! Come this way!" He direct me. When we were weeding on the farm, I heard the sound. Lot of people were there. Lot of people were there. So I went to the call, directly. When I'm going, I see a road going, directly... a road going directly like a street. I follow the street. By then I was not able to recover my mind. I was off by then. I'm going to the bush, I was there up to nine days—I mean, nine months. My parent find out me, they isn't able to see me. My *kaamɔ* search, do all the miracle, he don't know where I am. Those *gina* ["jinns"] take me, in the bush. Teach me how to perform. They teach me how to dance, that's the first thing. They teach me how to dance. How to dance. How to perform a miracle. What kind of leaf I have to play to perform this miracle. This is the medicine I have to teach people. They teach me. A lot of things. Is one hundred and ninety-nine miracles. One hundred ninety-nine miracles, one hundred and ninety-nine leaves. Given to me, not a dream. Directly, when they took me in bush. They feed me, I eat the food, but I never see the town. Only the house I saw with them, only three house. It was so nice. I have never seen the type of house. The house I saw, in that area where they took me, ever since I travel, I never saw the kind of house I saw with them. The type. Is very hard to describe. They modernize. The house was so beautiful, so nice. But the other house, what I am seeing inside, is only leaves. Leaves, different different leaves. They teach me all the different leaves, what is this, what is this, what is this. The other house I saw, only a Koran. Different Koran, different Koran, different Koran. Teach me what is Koran. The other room, where they sleep. [...] I can only call their names, I cannot describe them. They are nice. They are white people. They are not black. But the woman, she is so beautiful. I only can see her. I only can see her. I will command that woman to come here, you will hear the voice of her, but you will never set eyes on her. [...] They are three. The grandfather was Rajiru. The husband of the woman, because the woman is married, was Alia. Then the woman, Haji Mary. They are from the boundary between Monrovia [Liberia] and Sierra Leone. That's the Mano River. They're in the river. But their origin, their background, from India. They came from India traveling. They stay here because they saw the place was very nice for them. From there, they saw me.

Koroma's extraordinary narrative weaves together multiple sources of medicinal authority: forest herbs, Islamic scholarship, dreams, visitation from spirits or jinns, and foreign Others, in this

case from India.¹² Other common sources include family ties, powers inhering in twins, and international voyages to find new skills and medicines.¹³

This rampant assemblage of sources of authority makes healers exemplary border crossers.¹⁴ Their practice is grounded in their ability to both demarcate and transcend the boundary between the visible and invisible world. They move readily across national and ethnic boundaries in search of new skills and new clients. They eagerly experiment with and synthesize forms of power originating from all kinds of sources. That healers should be on the forefront of experimentation with local and international practices is therefore no surprise.

However, very few practitioners readily offered apprenticeship or other training under senior herbalists or scholars as the origin of their knowledge. Their origin narratives have been designed to emphasize skills and relations exclusive to the person of the healer, not skills that can be readily transferred between humans. The personal specificity of these stories suggests that medical power is understood to be inalienable from the person of the healer, as Stacey Langwick argues is the case for different traditional medicine contexts across the continent in Tanzania.¹⁵ Anyone can learn the mixture of techniques necessary to compose herbal medicines, but only through the specific interactions of a uniquely powerful healer and his or her specific clients can healing be accomplished. This intensely personal and social view of the efficacy of medicine is perhaps what is most at stake in the debates over the integration of what is understood as African traditional healing and Western biomedicine.

¹² cf. Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 103–48.. On local uses of Islamic scholarship, see Bledsoe and Robey, “Arabic Literacy and Secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone.” On visitations from foreign others, cf. Henry John Drewal, ed., *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* (Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2008)..

¹³ On local views of twins, see Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 212–16.

¹⁴ West and Luedke, “Introduction.”

¹⁵ Stacey Ann Langwick, *Bodies, Politics, and African Healing: The Matter of Maladies in Tanzania* (Indiana University Press, 2011), 78–79.

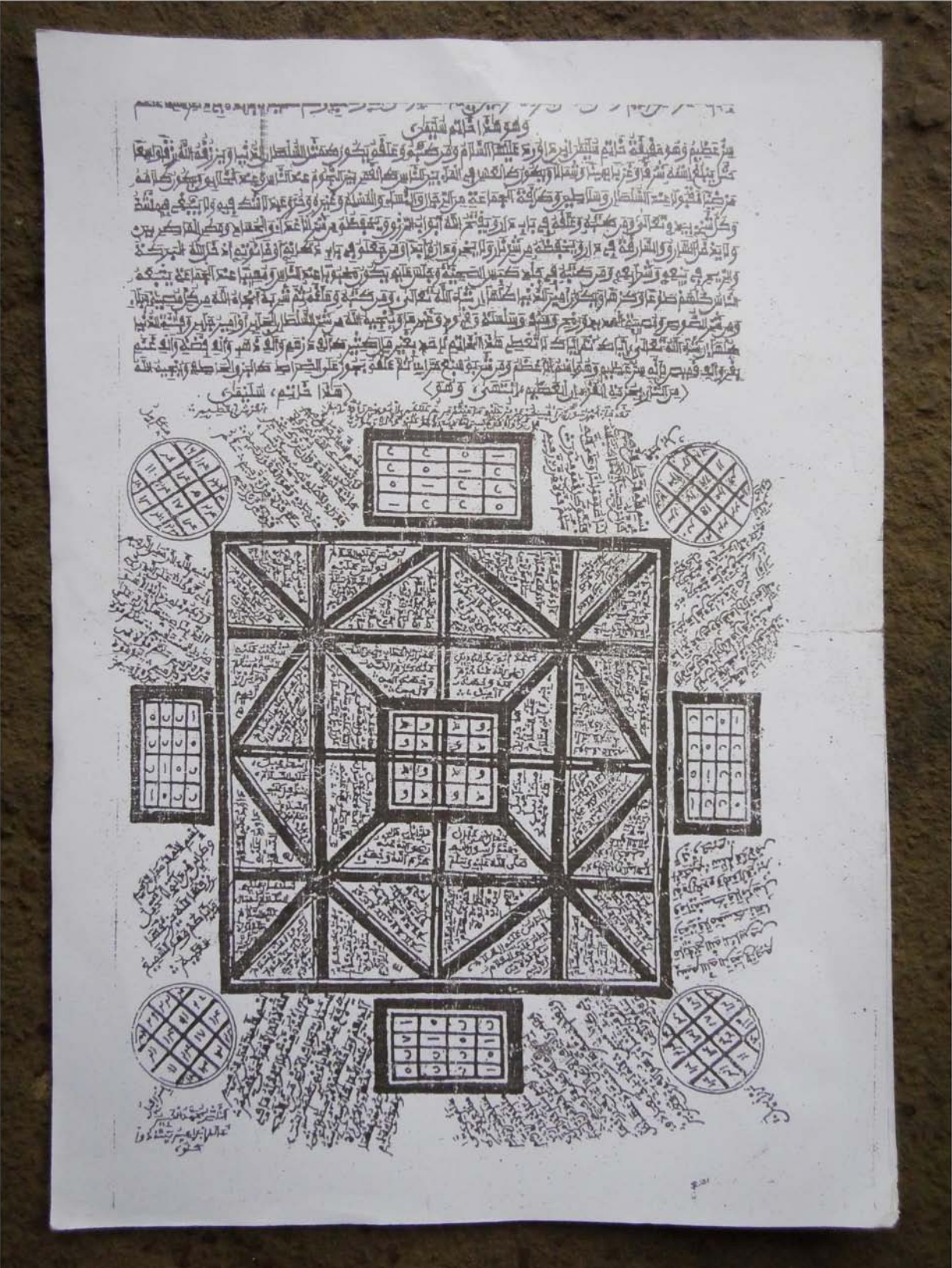


Figure 27. Guidelines for medicines. Courtesy the personal archives of Karmoh Brima “Korkor Pinya” Sama.

Spiritual and Social Ailments

Just like their healing practices, the illnesses traditional healers combat are at once personal, social, and spiritual, not limited to impersonal viral and bacteriological agents of biomedicine. Principle among these social afflictions is witchcraft. The term “witchcraft” is an English contrivance whose European connotations have little to do with African understandings. Nevertheless, since the colonial imposition of this foreign terminology, local beliefs and practices have developed in concert with European preconceptions, such that “witchcraft” is recognized in some form or another across the continent. Dozens of ethnographers have attempted to convey the nuances of African witchcraft with widely varying degrees of insight and empathy.

Understanding of witchcraft begins with its close relation to kinship. Among the first successful interpretations, and easily the most renowned, is E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s work with the Azande in present-day Sudan.¹⁶ Evans-Pritchard made the argument that belief in witchcraft was a logical continuation of a worldview that saw social interrelations as central to the workings of the universe. Witchcraft marked an illness not in the body, but in kinship and the relationship between persons. Following this insight, many anthropologists proceeded from a structural-functionalist position characterizing witchcraft as a key means with which to purposefully dissolve unwanted social relations.¹⁷ In order to explain the persistence (and perhaps escalation) of witchcraft in the postcolonial era, scholars rephrased their terms to better consider the “moral economies” and “modernity” of witchcraft.¹⁸ Crystallizing these reinterpretations, Peter

¹⁶ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

¹⁷ cf. Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford UK: Blackwell Oxford, 1956).

¹⁸ compiled in Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity and Its Malcontents*.

Geschiere determined that the radical economic transformations of global capitalism have produced the ideal conditions with which to nourish witchcraft rather than to defuse it.¹⁹

Working in Freetown and the Temne regions of Sierra Leone,²⁰ Rosalind Shaw enumerates multiple ritual practices in witchfinding that she argues echo the traumas of the slavery trade.²¹ Expanding on Geschiere's modernity of witchcraft, she describes how the invisible world of witches is populated by the instruments of modern wealth, from invisible jet planes that take witches around the globe to stereo systems that broadcast the news of their malevolent conquests. She describes Sierra Leone's most profuse conception of witchcraft: the dreaded witch gun, an armament that is as invisible and anonymous as it is fatal. Although she focused on a different region and ethnic group, I have found many of her investigations consistent across Sierra Leone, and they might begin to represent a national understanding of witchcraft rather than a local or ethnic one.

Mende conceptions of witchcraft are not too different from those in other parts of Sierra Leone, though there are variations that set them apart. The base term for "witch" in Mende is *hona*, while the definite form of the word, *honɛi*, refers to the "witch spirit," carried most often in the belly. The human host is called *honamɔi*, as adding the *-mɔi* stem corresponds to "-er" in English, as in heal/healer. The witch spirit is an external something that resides in the body, forcing the "host" to enter the witches' realm at night to conduct its destructive business.²² Lack of agency is precisely what causes a witch's violence and antisocial character. On the other hand

¹⁹ Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, trans. Peter Geschiere and Janet Roitman (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

²⁰ The Temne compete with the Mende for the title of Sierra Leone's most populous ethnic group. They are also the dominant ethnicity of the North and the ruling APC party.

²¹ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*.

²² William Harris and Harry Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct* (Freetown: Sierra Leone University Press, 1968), 73–76.

the relationship between the *honei* and the *honamɔi* can be very different when a healer or a witchfinder consciously harbors the spirit. In these cases, the *honei* is either inherited or purchased by a healer, who then infiltrates the witches' society on his or her own terms. The self-knowledge and personal agency of such a healers permits them to use the *honei* as a "witch eye," allowing them to see otherwise invisible witches and disrupt their evil intentions from within. Witchfinders in Mendeland may be herbalists or Islamic scholars who receive clients with inexplicable ill health or thwarted life plans. They typically resolve witchcraft issues through dreams or the interventions of *gineisia* ("jinns or similar spirits") without confronting witches directly. Alternately, many itinerant specialists tour through villages to root out local troublemakers for a small fee. These professionals confront witches directly to illicit confessions and release the *honei* immediately in the presence of village spectators.

As in the rest of Sierra Leone, most Mende are particularly cautious about "witch guns." This sort of mystical weapon emerged in the colonial period, reflecting the particular violences of modernity. While every practitioner with whom I talked recognized witch guns, there was a fair amount of variation as to how they were described. Before their acts, performers protect themselves with herbal injections from witch guns that they described as fired upon them with an audible "pop" and an acrid smell like gunpowder. One herbalist argued that witch guns are only used by initiatory societies like Poro, Wunde, or Gbangbani to censure their members for breaking regulations of the collective. Another herbalist distinguished three different kinds of witch gun, with effects ranging from sickness to instant death. A striking feature of the witch gun is the disturbing anonymity of the assailant. As a comparatively wealthy foreign researcher in cultural and political affairs, I was consistently warned to take seriously the threats of random witches who might be jealous of my success or seeking to defend secrets. The witch gun thus

participates in broader currents of unease about the types of violence that can arise from the anonymity of the city or the fluidity of movement to and from the provinces.

As important as their interventions are, the “modernity of witchcraft” school has come under criticism for depicting witchcraft as a metaphor for other problems—social inequity, state corruption and injustice, the trauma of slavery—rather than a real lived experience of African actors.²³ Adam Ashforth suggests the corrective of seeing witchcraft as an extension of “spiritual insecurity,” the pervasive sense of vulnerability that is influenced by medical system failures, frequent road fatalities, and the HIV/AIDS crisis in the South African townships of his research.²⁴ In postwar Sierra Leone, insecurity has most often been discussed in the terms of “trust.” “Trust” is a difficult quality of relationship to quantify, but many researchers have argued that it is short supply in post-war Sierra Leone.²⁵ Many Sierra Leoneans are anxious about misplaced trust, constantly protesting about the dangers of strangers, the infidelity of romantic partners, and potential violence through witchcraft. Yet to my eyes, there is a surfeit of trust in the country. Lives are placed in the hands of strange bike riders for transportation, business agreements are rarely transacted via paperwork, loans are handed out without any documentation. As in many other societies struggling to overcome state failures and impoverished conditions, one cannot trust the government, international donors, technology, electricity, medicines, vehicle safety or maintenance, schedules, timetables, or announcements. Pervasive uncertainty places a great burden on the faith individuals place in each other and in

²³ e.g. Blair Rutherford, “To Find an African Witch Anthropology, Modernity, and Witch-Finding in North-West Zimbabwe,” *Critique of Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (1999): 89–109.

²⁴ Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁵ Laura Stovel, “‘There’s No Bad Bush to Throw Away a Bad Child’: ‘Tradition’-Inspired Reintegration in Post-War Sierra Leone,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, no. 02 (2008): 305–24; Michael Jackson, *In Sierra Leone* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

God. What other researchers have read as a surplus of mistrust, I understand to be the inescapable necessity of trust and the resultant inescapable fear that this trust might be misplaced.

Witchcraft is an extension of these experiences. No other social phenomenon so effectively unites the affective force of broken trust with that of incapacitating jealousy. Witchcraft has no ethnic or class boundaries, and is discussed seriously by politicians, professors, media figures, and military officers. Rather than being diminished by the world's increasing exchange of knowledge, witchcraft feeds off of international circulation, notably through media. Witchcraft's international appeal is most evident in the video film industry, where Birgit Meyer observes that special effects "offer audiences the extraordinary experience of penetrating the otherwise invisible."²⁶ Witchcraft is at the heart of most plotlines in the Nigerian and Ghanaian films avidly consumed by Sierra Leoneans, and is central to many videos produced by Sierra Leone's nascent but burgeoning homegrown industry. Witchcraft travels more fluidly than even pirated DVDs. As more people move about the continent, more narratives of witchcraft are disseminated. Wartime, as a period of hyper-intensive movement from mobilized military forces and fleeing refugees, was especially suited for cultivating witchcraft beliefs. Migrations of peoples, alongside conflict and social stress, produced instances of witchcraft and anti-witchcraft practice.²⁷ Witchcraft was a key weapon ascribed to most international fighters, beginning with the Burkinabés who fought with the first wave of rebels, and continuing through the "Tap 40" Liberians, and certain Nigerian ECOMOG troops who

²⁶ Birgit Meyer, "Ghanaian Popular Cinema and the Magic in and of Film," in *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 200–222. cf. Scott M. Edmondson, "Striking Prayers and Mediating Powers: An Ethnographic and Hypertextual Interpretation of Pentecostal and 'Charismatic' Cultural Production in Ghana" (University of California Los Angeles, 2009).

²⁷ cf. Mary Douglas, *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (London: Routledge, 1970).

arrived to restore the Tejan Kabbah government to power.²⁸ At the end of the war, many felt that this malevolent mysticism brought in by outsiders had been left behind. These residual evils set the stage for SLITHU's dramatic interventions.

2.2 THE RISE OF SLITHU

International Roots: the Sierra Leone Traditional Healers Association

Given the long history of international dynamics that have influenced witchcraft and herbalism in the region, the international origins of the Sierra Leone Indigenous Traditional Healers Union should not be surprising. In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a "Traditional Medicine Strategy" to recognize the vast numbers of patients in impoverished countries around the globe who rely on the affordable, available, and holistic ministrations of traditional medical practitioners and locally grown herbs.²⁹ As a result, WHO began to encourage governments to organize and oversee the operations of traditional doctors, and the government attempted to organize a new branch of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation to accept WHO's resources.

At that time, only one man in Sierra Leone appeared qualified to liaise with WHO in the matter of traditional herbal medicine. Barbara M.S. Turay studied plant taxonomy in England with the expectation that it would lead to a flexible career in agriculture, but memories of his childhood suggested other directions for his research. His mother, raising six children on her own, turned to herbal doctors to cure their ailments, paying a little extra in order to learn the

²⁸ Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare*, 89.. Compare the powers ascribed to strangers in William A. Shack, Elliott Percival Skinner, and Herschelle Challenor, eds., *Strangers in African Societies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Fritz Kramer, *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa* (New York: Verso, 1993).

²⁹ World Health Organization, *WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002-2005* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002).

secrets of their preparation for herself. On his return to Sierra Leone as an agricultural scientist, he traveled to different regions to study the effects of detrimental weeds. As a side project, he began interviewing local herbalists and compiling their medicines, attempting to identify the plants used and to gauge their efficacy adequately. He had established a network of hundreds of herbalists by the time he was hired to run the National Herbarium at the Sierra Leone University's Njala campus, which was then specialized in agricultural science. At Njala, Turay began to try the medicines with encouraging results, and he became a herbal medicine provider himself. He was then relocated to Freetown to serve as the dean of and sole professor in the department of Pharmacology at the School of Medicine. Turay continues to produce and sell his own medicines, making local innovations to fit the urban market including professional packaging and labeling, indications, and ingredient lists.³⁰

With the support of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation and WHO, Turay founded the Sierra Leone Traditional Healers Association (SLENTHA) in 2003. SLENTHA has largely focused its efforts on occasional workshops and sensitization projects intended to help healers cooperate among themselves and improve their products for mass markets, and the organization generally follows themes and activities laid out by WHO, such as the celebration of African Traditional Medicine Day every August 31. However, SLENTHA was undermined by Sierra Leone's political shifts. After the All People's Congress (APC) came to power in 2007, Turay was informed that SLENTHA, a project sponsored by the previous Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) administration, would no longer be eligible for government support. At the same time, SLENTHA members, frustrated that available funding was not matching earlier promises, blamed Turay for misappropriating funds for himself, in what would become a pattern

³⁰ Lacking the equipment to perform chemical analysis of the herbs and any interest in the symbolic or spiritual side of the practices, his research is largely limited to anecdotal evidence from his clientele.

throughout the various iterations of the organization. In 2008, members of the association broke away to form a new organization, SLITHU, that would be eligible for support from the APC-led government. The members of SLITHU now claim that SLENTHA turned into the Union as it grew to encompass oversight of all traditional healers, but SLENTHA endures as a separate organization still run by Turay, who struggles to find funds for research and workshops as he heads towards retirement.

President Field Marshal Alhaji Dr. Sulayman Kabba

Meanwhile, SLITHU began to make dramatically new claims for its mandate and its mission as a new leader began to consolidate power. Alhaji Sulayman Kabba began his studies of the Koran in Northern Sierra Leone and continued them in Kankan, Guinea, before moving on to Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and India. Before returning to Sierra Leone, he spent some time working with President Yayah Jammeh of The Gambia, who he says instilled in him a respect for traditional African culture.³¹ Kabba has little training in herbal and therapeutic dimensions of traditional medicine, but is very comfortable addressing spiritual ailments such as witchcraft. The activities of the Union therefore refocused on the amelioration of spiritual ills.

Kabba mobilized connections within the new APC regime to bring SLITHU fresh attention from the government. His energy and influence led to his election as president of the Union. Current Union members are quick to refer to him as the first democratically elected president of the country's traditional healers, although it is unclear exactly how many of Sierra Leone's hundreds of healers actually participated in the vote. Kabba brilliantly aligned SLITHU with other APC projects, especially the Secretariat of Attitudinal and Behavioral Change (ABC),

³¹ Jammeh's cultural interventions in Sierra Leone also include patronage of King Hassan Jalloh.

whose somewhat Orwellian name belies its generally limited role in sensitizing the public about interpersonal skills. Kabba has argued that SLITHU acts as the ABC for traditional healers and took on the task of controlling the use of what he terms “black magic” and “juju” in Freetown and the country at large. In 2010, SLITHU arranged for a gala inauguration at Freetown’s National Stadium, and got none other than President Ernest Bai Koroma to speak at the event. Kabba prepared a staff for Koroma to present to him, a ceremonial gesture that replicates the investiture of paramount chiefs. As a result, Kabba’s followers were given the impression that Kabba’s role parallels that of a paramount chief, and, like those chiefs, his presidency now extends to a life term. Kabba further interpreted his mandate from President Koroma to include multiple new duties and powers, extending SLITHU’s oversight over not only all traditional medicine, but also all “traditional” performers and all secret societies such as Poro, Sande/Bundu (whether Mende, Temne, or Sherbo), Gbangbani (the predominant Limba men’s society), and the various Freetown “devil” societies. Despite these aspirations, the practical public activities of SLITHU have been largely limited thus far to ceremonies to “launch” (i.e. introduce) the Union at different sites and the dramatic spectacles of their witchcraft disarmaments.

Kabbah subverts Africa’s stereotype of “big man” charisma, the form and affect of assured masculinity that embodies stereotypes of power across the continent.³² Rather than an imposing figure that blends physical strength with the gray hair of middle age and the well-fed girth linked to wealth, Kabba is a surprisingly small, lean, youthful figure with sharp features and a seemingly inexhaustible reserve of hyperactive energy. A fount of unpredictable inspirations, he is capable of launching into hour-long off-the-cuff speeches that spin through dozens of half-finished ideas and projects. If the cliché of charismatics is that they make one feel like he or she

³² Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 211–269.

is the only person in the room, Kabba's magnetism works in the other direction. With constant fidgeting, incomplete sentences, and piercing looks around him, one gets the impression that there are a million more important things he could be doing at any moment. For his followers, Kabba's mannerisms demonstrate his attentive intelligence and his ability to see into the invisible world of witches and spiritual distress. For his detractors, his easily reproducible ticks make him a ready caricature of the rodent-like crook.³³

Kabba accrues titles like he accrues medicines. Yet with the exception of "Alhaji," the work of these titles is not to indicate the fulfillment of set duties or training. They are rather a marker of social relations, bestowed by followers in the mutual construction of Kabba's authority. Tracy J. Luedke has noted how prophet-healers in Mozambique have called upon the titles of "mother," "bishop," and "president" to invoke powers related to the family, religion, and the State, respectively.³⁴ Similarly Kabba's list of honorifics invokes State, religious, military, academic, and scientific authority, positioning him at the helm of numerous modern bureaucratic organs of power.³⁵

SLITHU by the numbers

As Kabba's numerous titles attest, chief among SLITHU's appropriations of Western medical practice is the performance of bureaucracy. The paper trail of registration applications and issued ID cards, numerous declarations and press releases, piles of handwritten meeting

³³ At a private meeting of one opposition organization's leadership, a member raised the group's spirits by briefly imitating Kabba as a rat.

³⁴ Tracy J. Luedke, "Presidents, Bishops, and Mothers: The Construction of Authority in Mozambican Healing," in *Borders and Healers: Brokering Therapeutic Resources in Southeast Africa*, ed. Tracy J. Luedke and Harry G. West (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 43–64.

³⁵ Other appropriations of colonial titles are noted in Terence O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa, 1890-1970: The Beni Ngoma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil*.

notes, and the pervasive SLITHU logo and letterhead all establish SLITHU's claims to authority through the archival powers of the written word. The following table charts some of the self-proclaimed numbers that constitute Slithu's public image. If SLITHU's claims to membership were to be accurate, fully one of every four Sierra Leoneans would be a member. Instead, the numbers suggest a performative population that undergirds SLITHU's claims to authority.

- 1.4 million registered members
- 15,000Le one-time registration fee (approx. \$3.75 USD)
- 78 herbalists arrested
- 125 reintegrated children sent to school
- 66 (approximate) reformed herbalists
- 56 agricultural field workers
- 76 employees at the Calaba Town Allopathic Clinic
- 250 adult education students (head office/Western Urban)
- 156 adult education students (Western Rural)
- 632 adult education students (Northern Province)
- 200 adult education students (Southern Province)
- 86 adult education students (Eastern Province)
- 106 cultural groups

2.3 INNOVATIONS AND FRICTIONS

Witch Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

Dressed in the charm-laden cotton shirts, popularly known by the Limba name *ronko*, that are mystically rendered bullet- and witchcraft-proof, the healers descend upon the sites of their operations with the instruments of their ritual cleansing: amulets, brooms, horns, and mirrors through which to see the invisible.³⁶ The disarmaments begin with a “charity” or a sacrifice, determined through prayer, which might consist of groundnuts, eggs, coconut, leaves, or other materials. The collected goods are prayed over and then distributed for consumption before the disarmament troops can enter a site. The group moves through the site in formation, under the direction of a handful of commanders. When herbalists in the disarmament division find invisible powers, they “pull them,” risking seizures and coma in the process. A second team

³⁶ On *ronko*, cf. Richards, “Dressed to Kill: Clothing as Technology of the Body in the Civil War in Sierra Leone.”



Figure 28. SLITHU billboard. Kenema, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2012.

of herbalists stands by with other medicines in order to wake and heal their fallen comrades. The leaves they hold in their bottles are capable of keeping an herbalist standing, even if they are holding an armed witch gun in their hand. Division Two stands in watch, using “witch eyes” to spot attacks before they happen. Various items may be unearthed, from fetishes to witch guns, which in this case appear as umbrella handles wrapped in red cloth and cowry shells. Sometimes a witch, fearing capture, will bolt, and members of the squad will be forced to pursue. The witch might be in disguise, or may have changed gender, becoming a woman and unable to change back to a man until assisted by SLITHU members. Witches are then detained, and at the time I asked, one SLITHU member claimed there were forty witches held by the Union. They are fed and lodged until they are cured of their witch, disarmed and rehabilitated back into the community. Small children apprehended as witches are taken to school. At times, SLITHU works with the police, who can lock witches away in the infamous Pademba Road Prison in central Freetown—but only for three days because of “human rights,” according to SLITHU members. The events are for the public benefit, so no payments are required from any bystanders, though any spontaneous contributions are happily accepted. Otherwise, SLITHU claims most of the necessary funding is provided by President Kabba. Disarmament programs have visited several high-profile sites, including Uppgun Turntable, a central roundabout near the ferry terminal that once held a traditional medicine market, various army barracks, the Lungi Airport, and even the State House. They call the process “DDR”—Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration—after the postwar peacekeeping strategy of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone.³⁷

³⁷ Abu Bakarr S Tarawally, “After Arresting Over 57 Witches...SLITHU President Kabbah Declares Operation Cleansing,” *Sierra Express Media*, June 14, 2012; Aruna Turay, “Traditional Healers Vow to Rescue Upp-Gun Turntable in Sierra Leone,” *Awareness Times*, March 19, 2009.

In their most visible public actions, SLITHU mobilizes a performance event, witch-finding, that has long been observed in numerous contexts across Africa, but re-imagines it for the particular circumstances of postwar Sierra Leone.³⁸ As I argue throughout this project, spectacle and crowds work together to constitute the meaning of the event. In the cases of these witch-finding operations, hypervisuality is established through the literally outlandish (in the sense that it references spaces outside human comprehension) appearance and behavior of the witch-finders. This hypervisuality calls a crowd, and between the two intermingling forces, they produce knowledge and judge it simultaneously.

Witch-finding actions are readily recognizable to most Sierra Leoneans. In Freetown, Yoruba-related witch-finding devils called *ariogbo* with ties to the powerful Ojeh societies make irregular, unannounced, but not infrequent tours through numerous neighborhoods.³⁹ During other public performances of all kinds, performers publicly denounce witchcraft operations that they sense are threatening their acts. Although I never saw any dancer or mystic artist actually identify a specific audience member as a witch or produce hidden ritual objects, these performers were clearly drawing upon witch-finding as a mode of public censure mutually recognizable to

³⁸ On the Kpaa Mende, see Joe A.D. Alie, “Reconciliation and Traditional Justice: Tradition-Based Practices of the Kpaa Mende in Sierra Leone,” in *Traditional Justice and Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: Learning from African Experiences* (Stockholm: IDEA, 2008), 137.. Elsewhere in Africa cf. Michael Jackson, “Structure and Event: Witchcraft Confession among the Kuranko,” *Man* 10, no. 3 (1975): 387–403; Douglas, *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*; Mark Auslander, “‘Open the Wombs’: The Symbolic Politics of Modern Ngoni Witch-Finding,” in *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1993), 167–92; Rutherford, “To Find an African Witch Anthropology, Modernity, and Witch-Finding in North-West Zimbabwe”; James H. Smith, “Buying a Better Witch Doctor: Witch-Finding, Neoliberalism, and the Development Imagination in the Taita Hills, Kenya,” *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 1 (2005): 141–58; C. Bawa Yamba, “Cosmologies in Turmoil: Witchfinding and AIDS in Chiawa, Zambia,” *Africa* 67, no. 02 (1997): 200–223; William C. Olsen, “‘Children For Death’: Money, Wealth, and Witchcraft Suspicion in Colonial Asante,” *Cahiers D’études Africaines*, no. 3 (2002): 521–50.

³⁹ Mohamed Sheriff, “Sierra Leone,” in *A History of Theatre in Africa*, ed. Martin Banham (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 173.. One Freetown paper is named *Ariogbo Sierra Leone News Hunters* and features the motto “No Fear, No Favor, Let the Light Shine” along with satirical editorials from an *ariogbo* spirit.

both themselves and their publics.⁴⁰ More germane to SLITHU's activities, individual healers would frequently engage in village level operations to find hidden power objects. One healer described to me an operation he had completed earlier in the day with a palpable sense of awe in the strength of his *ginei* ("jinn"), proudly showing me photos taken on his cell phone of the objects and the crowd that he and his partner spirit had made appear. The manipulations of power that witches, their finders, and their spectators constituted through dramatic events were legible well before SLITHU's operations.

SLITHU's innovation was to integrate these processes with two projects wedded to ostensibly modern conceptions of power—the State and media—in such a way that the three power structures reinforced rather than sabotaged each other. The Union suggested a mission that could unite all three systems, recognizing each as operators of the revelation and manipulation of distinct invisible powers. As I note above, most healers work alone, but with the SLITHU spectacles, multiple healers were invited, as well as members of the government, agents of the State such as the military and police, and the national press. SLITHU orchestrated each of these together in ways that were mutually constructive. Most obviously, by organizing so many healers to work in concert (even if the numbers were a fraction of a percentage of the healers in the country), SLITHU demonstrated its own power over its constituents, the national community of healers. By forming the healers into fractal units, each breaking down into multiple constituent bodies and posts, SLITHU both integrated a number of divergent healing sciences—herbal, scriptural, witch-based, illness-based—and gave each of their members a purview of power and responsibility. The accomplishment this orchestration represents for a profession that is practically synonymous with the figure of an isolated loner guarding his or her individual

⁴⁰ Hassan Jalloh made such a challenge during one particularly fraught performance.

knowledge cannot be understated. The conceptualization of rank is here less useful as a disciplinary strategy than as a means to reward individuals for their participation in a clientalist system.

This regimentation also clearly aligns SLITHU with the powers of the State, most notably those of its most recognizably formidable aspect: the military. I have already noted how Kabba's titles tie him to medical, military, and governmental power. These titles are distributed to the rest of the Union through the mode of militarism, which in spite of the consolidations of the civilian government, remains the most potent source of strength in postwar Sierra Leone. Similarly, by invoking the DDR process in their dealing with witchcraft suspects, SLITHU perpetuates that sense of military might by suggesting that, just as the State holds a monopoly on physical violence after negotiating the surrender of rebels and militias through the DDR process, SLITHU now commands the monopoly on spiritual violence after negotiating the surrender of witches through discursively identical DDR programs. Here, the powerful threat of rebels and witches are compounded, and the more powerful forms of security provided by the State and SLITHU are similarly compounded through their protective retaliation. SLITHU's operations rhetorically connect the activities of their healers with the activities of the military as a kind of obverse to the rhetorical maneuvers of the CDF that tied their militia members to the activities of hunting and healing mysticism. In both cases, the military and the traditionalists have sought each other out as a means of mutual fortification.

The mutual fortification of the State and SLITHU is not merely discursive. SLITHU calls on the State for reciprocal reinforcement through logistical support in two clear ways. First, it locates its operations at sites of State power, thus casting the State as its primary client and beneficiary. Witchfinding operations take place in arenas that are headquarters of State power—

army bases, police posts, and even the State House—and public sites of heavy state infrastructure—most notably the National Airport. These operations also stretch into areas apparently beyond State control but which serve as critical nodes of the informal civic circulation of goods and individuals, such as the Upgun roundabout. By bringing their “national” operation to bear on these sites of informal and unregulated circulation, they bring the State to areas of power that were previously considered out of their reach. Kabba framed the first operation at Upgun in exactly these terms when he argued that the express purpose of the action was to accomplish what the police and military could not. In each of these cases, the choice of locations of State significance as sites of witchfinding operations explicitly casts the projects as efforts to heal the nation.

Secondly, SLITHU invites units of State power not only to act as clients but to participate in its operations. Escorted by agents of State force such as the police and army, the powers of the healers are multiplied by the powers of the State. Ostensibly, these State agents have the power to do what the healers cannot, resort to violent means to enforce their objective, while the healers have the power to do what the State agents cannot, identify the sources of spiritual danger. Police and military serve as bodyguards for the healers, and, crucially, as crowd control. Their presence both escalates and contains the presence of spectators. Most importantly, once witches have been apprehended, SLITHU turns to the models of the State for censure and punishment. While independent witchfinders usually turn their witches over to the community, SLITHU refers its captured miscreants to State institutions, most often, in their telling, to the national Pademba Road Prison. The media regularly highlights the number of malefactors captured in raids and placed in the custody of Sierra Leone’s most notorious jail. The State rarely trumpets its relations with SLITHU as readily as SLITHU does, and their cooperation is largely informal. Even so, any

cooperation reifies the ties between SLITHU and the State and bolsters each others' claims to righteousness.

Critical to SLITHU's wrangling of its power relations with the State in the course of these operations is its manipulation of the other pervasive exemplar of modern power, the media. This is the other novel divergence from the work of witchfinders with more modest means. As with my friend and his cell phone photographs, the images of these independent operations can find multiple ways to proliferate, circulate, and promote their subjects. Yet nowhere else is the orchestration of images on the same scale as SLITHU's work with the media. SLITHU is a master of the press release, an art of considerable power in a press landscape in which few papers have the resources for extensive investigative reporting and thus readily resort to the rote reprinting of these missives. Most of SLITHU's activities are noted in major papers in short paragraph descriptions collected among other minor local events on the inside front page of the *Awareness Times* and *Sierra Express Media*, for example. Even though they rarely make the front page, their exploits are usually noted without commentary or challenge. Their publicized events are implicitly "newsworthy" due to their mix of high visibility and salacious subject matter. Those outlets that wish can easily collect information of ready interest, whether or not their viewership approves of the practices on display.

Among the media figures most ready to promote SLITHU's activities is Fatmata Jalloh, the lead announcer for cultural programs on the national television station, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC).⁴¹ Formerly a State-owned network but recently privatized, SLBC remains the country's sole regular broadcaster, in spite of a number of attempts to create alternative channels. Fatmata Jalloh's earlier work in cultural activities focused on weekly

⁴¹ Jalloh is a very common Fula name. Fatmata Jalloh has no relation to cultural performer and mystic artist Hassan Jalloh.

performances of various cultural troupes at the SLBC headquarters, but restructuring in 2011 ended those programs and sent her into the field. SLITHU offers a ready source of news and activities that tie together cultural, political, and public health issues. Through her correspondent reports, Jalloh follows SLITHU on its various activities, publicizing their works. The title of her program, “Eye on Sierra Leone,” attests to the kinds of visual, observational, and revelatory productions of truth that unite the epistemes of both witchcraft and investigative journalism. While she interviews multiple participants, bystanders, and even those confessing of witchcraft, rarely do critical or skeptical views enter into the programs. Jalloh’s own presence is striking, a iconic example of the modern cosmopolitan woman reporter, typically garbed in khaki pantsuits, the kind of quasi-masculine formal wear of the international professional elite that is rarely seen on women in Sierra Leone’s city streets. Her personal charisma matches her fashion with an aggressive professionalism that conforms to global models of television journalism. This modern cosmopolitanism is fruitfully juxtaposed with SLITHU’s invocations of African traditionalism. Both SLITHU and Jalloh exploit each other’s embodiment of the modern/traditional divide. By sharing the same screen, these two agents recreate and reconfirm the boundary of each other’s difference, but also amply demonstrate their powerful abilities to cross that boundary. For Jalloh, her journalistic skill and professionalism are rendered strong enough to allow her to enter into the secret and rarified practices of African tradition. For SLITHU, their esoteric skills and techniques are rendered powerful enough to be recognized and honored by the most cosmopolitan and modern of actors. Here it is evident that not institutions, but individual dispositions and relationships help propel SLITHU into a position of authority. Jalloh is far from the only reporter to have an ongoing relationship with the Union. Each meeting I attended was

covered by a different reporter for a different newspaper, each of them having apparent long-term and cordial relations with the SLITHU council.

SLITHU's authority is, however, extremely tenuous.⁴² Its power is entirely performative, in the sense both that it hinges on highly public symbolic activities and in the sense that it must continually be renegotiated. These various sources of influence, from the media, the military, and the government, are consistently reinvoked and cross-referenced to perpetuate SLITHU's authority. President Koroma's staffing ceremony is consistently cited by Kabba and others as governmental authorization, though SLITHU still receives no direct support from the government. The media coverage of that event and the witch-finding operations are archived in the SLBC and through CD-ROMs held by the SLITHU council, along with extensive articles published by numerous newspapers. Without the permanence of a union office building or other infrastructure, these are the items that constitute SLITHU's material presence.

However mutually constitutive and supportive these actions are for the Union, the State, and the media, they inevitably come into conflicts that expose the limits of their differing forms of knowledge. More precisely, they expose breaches between the epistemes that drive the local and regional knowledges underlying traditional healing and those that drive the more internationalist claims of the Sierra Leonean State and the media. The most pressing of these breaches is that between the juridical powers the Union calls upon in order to enforce its anti-witchcraft projects and the actual legal framework in which they operate. While SLITHU is quick to enumerate the quantity of witches it has seen incarcerated in Pademba Road Prison, they are less forthcoming with the results of that imprisonment. In fact, the witches normally spend no more than three days in the jail, almost always failing to come to court. The reason for the quick

⁴² For an example of a local critique, cf. Ibrahim Samura, "Juju Society Enjoys Presidential Protection!," *Sierra Express Media*, February 9, 2011.

release of the witches is always “human rights,” establishing the line at which SLITHU recognizes it comes up against the power of internationalist opinion. It struck me that the witches that were captured by SLITHU’s efforts and made public confessions, at least those that appeared onscreen in “Eye on Sierra Leone” reports, were poor urban male youths, who remain the most disenfranchised and volatile demographic group in the country and certain those with the least to lose by being connected to witchcraft.

By the time I had arrived in Sierra Leone for extended research, the witchfinding operations had practically ended. SLITHU argued that it had largely succeeded in its operations. There were simply not many more witches to find in the Freetown area as they had all been disarmed, demobilized, and reintegrated. I suspected too that the financial drain of the operations had become untenable. In the press, SLITHU argues that the union’s activities are fully funded by dues of its membership, and Kabba will also frequently point out his own economic contributions. What the SLITHU Executive rarely describes is the vast web of patrons that it orchestrates, and upon which it leans on for its public events. Most of the witchfinding operations were fully funded by individuals who were interested in spiritual cleansing of their area. Whether this network had simply moved on from financing witchfinding operations, or Kabba’s fecund imagination had generated too many alternatives, these projects appeared to have served their purpose and now substantiated SLITHU’s past rather than its present.

Allopathic Healing and Free Medical Care

Perhaps most predictably, frictions arose between local and internationalist forms of knowledge at the level of medical practice. Approaches to traditional herbalist medicine are

based on fundamentally different forms of knowledge than Western biomedicine.⁴³ In spite of growing international interest in the value of traditional medical knowledge, commercial interests still presume this herbal knowledge can be subsumed into Western models of experimentation. These models fail to reflect the reality of quickly transforming, adaptive technologies that involve the careful assemblage of herbal, spiritual, and, most importantly, social resources. For while internationalist models suggest that these medicines are discreet and replicable formulas and chemicals, for most healers they are intimately tied to personal face-to-face interactions with both their clients and the invisible world.⁴⁴ In trying to bridge these two very different medical ideologies, SLITHU is obliged to engage in acts of radical and risky experimentation.

During the period my fieldwork, SLITHU's most successful operation was the inauguration of an allopathic clinic just across the road from Kabba's compound and SLITHU's regular meeting area in Calaba Town, part of Freetown's urban sprawl into the Western Area Rural District. At this clinic, Kabba intended to synthesize Western and traditional medical approaches, prescribing each for its optimum performance. Kabba hired a number of nurses trained in Freetown's Nursing School, and set up the project in a preexisting former clinic complete with a public pharmacy, a dozen beds in two rooms, as well as an operating theater. The Allopathic Clinic is a small contribution to a web of choices in private health providers

⁴³ cf. Mende conflicts with internationalist medicine in interpretation of pharmaceuticals and child care in Caroline Bledsoe and Monica F. Goubaud, "The Reinterpretation of Western Pharmaceuticals among the Mende of Sierra Leone," *Social Science & Medicine* 21, no. 3 (1985): 275–82; Amara Jambai and Carol MacCormack, "Maternal Health, War, and Religious Tradition: Authoritative Knowledge in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1996): 270–86; Carol P. MacCormack, "The Articulation of Western and Traditional Systems of Health Care," in *The Professionalisation of Traditional Medicine*, ed. Murray Last and Gordon L. Chavunduka (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1986), 151–62.. On Africa generally, cf. Last and Chavunduka, *The Professionalisation of African Medicine*; Janzen, *The Quest for Therapy*.

⁴⁴ Langwick, *Bodies, Politics, and African Healing*.

across Freetown's East End, from small-time storefront herbalists to a new Chinese-led high-tech treatment center.

The inauguration of the clinic was celebrated in mid-December 2011, at the leading edge of Freetown's festival season. SLITHU rented out a dance hall a hundred meters from the clinic, at which it programmed a series of speakers drawn from a list of high-level invited guests. Among these was the Minister for Internal Affairs, who might have appeared an unexpected alternative to a member of the Health and Sanitation ministry. However, his presence was justified by his key role as the interface between the national government and the chiefdoms, thus regulating the realm of tradition. SLITHU also invited multiple cultural troupes and herbalists to perform. The various groups performed simultaneously in a polyphonous series of interlocking audience circles, both competing for and compounding the attention of the guests, the press, and passing residents. The diversity of ethnically-coded performance forms was clearly meant to justify the Union's aspirations to a national pan-ethnic mandate.

Medicine, however, was meant to take the spotlight. In the interest of promoting the medical services of the clinic and of SLINTHU at large, Kabba proposed to mirror President Koroma's "Free Medical Care" Program for pregnant and lactating women and children under five. Yet in Kabba's inverted vision, SLITHU's "Free Medical Care" would not be in support of the most impoverished and threatened members of the national community. Instead, Kabba aimed to give away free samples of the herbalists' medicine to the illustrious dignitaries and members of the press sure to flood the event. Kabba argued that these men and women would try out the herbal concoctions and see for themselves the benefit, presumably passing on the medicine to their fellow passengers in airplanes and promoting Sierra Leone's traditional medical knowledge worldwide. In a mirror image of Koroma's program, which aimed to

encourage poor residents to forgo herbs and seek out Western medicine, the SLITHU project aimed to encourage the most elite to forgo industrial pharmaceuticals for rural alternatives.

The key innovation that made this project possible was the ingredient list. This instance was not the first time that I had heard traditional healers in Sierra Leone encouraged to put ingredient lists on their products. Rather than promote transparency and consumer safety, I understood that the effort, at least as the SLITHU executive explained it to their membership, was the “professionalization” of traditional medicine. Certainly there was no effort to confirm that the ingredient list corresponded to the actual materials in the medicine, nor was any evidence of any system of hygienic preparation required. Instead, the ingredient list made the medicine legible as the product of an educated practitioner for a wider, presumably modern and global, audience.

This legibility is a radical break from most traditional medical knowledge production. The contents of the herbalists’ medicines are generally closely guarded intellectual property, since an herbalist’s reputation is dependent on the accumulation of her or his own stock of secret knowledge. As I argue above, while there is considerable exchange between herbalists, the source of this knowledge is generally supernatural, the personal product of interactions with spirits and dreams. In calling for the ingredient list, Kabba was making extremely private elements of traditional practice publicly legible. Yet, in spite of the presumably secretive nature of most traditional medicine, this proposal received no apparent protest from the SLITHU membership. Most herbalists found ways to discursively integrate his revolutionary arguments into their practice without undermining their own position. When I asked about the breach of secrecy, most of the healers replied that the actual skill and secret lay in the preparation of the medicine, rather than the simple collection of ingredients.

At the clinic's inauguration, two folding tables were placed directly facing the clinic and laden with the products of the SLITHU membership. Across a plethora of containers, a broad continuum of consistencies, and a spectrum of muddy hues, the medicines lay carefully arranged and overseen by a small team of committed herbalists. Their ingredient lists proclaimed the package contents through lettering in precise computer printouts or inscrutable handwritten scrawls, and encompassed a few different languages as well. The herbalist attendants assured me that the products were being collected by dignitaries, but I saw no bottles in hand among the seated guests and the table remained fully stocked throughout the afternoon.

The slippage between SLITHU's expectations of what the global medical economy required and what they were currently able to produce was echoed in the regular proclamation that SLITHU members could cure HIV/AIDS. I first heard this argument at the earliest general SLITHU meeting I attended, when the General Secretary made a hastily but nonetheless carefully prepared speech to welcome me as a foreign researcher/resource. Among the arguments he made for the value of SLITHU was their ability to do what Western medicine could not: cure HIV/AIDS. I later heard this claim from numerous healers throughout Sierra Leone, both members of SLITHU and otherwise, paralleling the well-documented use of traditional medicine and spiritual healing to combat HIV/AIDS across the African continent.⁴⁵ When I discussed another herbalist's cures, he described symptoms that were far from the international diagnostics of HIV/AIDS (a disease that has few evident symptoms of its own), and much closer to a collection of symptoms more familiar to traditional healing practices: rolling eyes, shivers, and other epileptic-like disorders. Whether or not he was healing patients with HIV/AIDS as defined by international diagnosis, he had invented a new system of treatment for a different ailment.

⁴⁵ e.g. Peter Probst, "'Mchape' '95, Or, the Sudden Fame of Billy Goodson Chisupe: Healing, Social Memory and the Enigma of the Public Sphere in Post-Banda Malawi," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 69, no. 1 (1999): 108–37.



Figure 29. “Free medicine” at the Allopathic Clinic. Calaba Town, Western Area Rural District.

Once again, the attempt to integrate internationalist discourse created slippages or frictions that were inventive in multiple ways, in spite of failing to attain the expected goals of either internationalists or local actors.

2.4 REBRANDING CULTURE

Agendas for Change

As part of the “Agenda for Change” that brought him to office in 2007, President Earnest Bai Koroma inaugurated the Secretariat for Attitudinal and Behavioral Change (ABC). The program was meant to help Sierra Leonean citizens transform their mindsets into those of productive optimists and responsible citizens:

The state of backwardness of Sierra Leone is a clear indication that we have not been doing things in a manner that would move our country forward. The call for a change of attitudes among Sierra Leoneans is not new but is being given added impetus. There is a need for change in attitudes towards one another, change in attitudes to work and responsibilities and change in attitudes towards the nation. All of these changes should translate positively into progress and development for Sierra Leone. There are challenges the country needs to overcome in order to achieve this goal. Principal among these challenges is the “fear of change” manifested by the tendency for Sierra Leoneans to continue to do things in the particular way they have been used to doing, even if that way is not in the best interest of the country. [...] The main goal of the Attitudinal Change Campaign is to get Sierra Leoneans to change their attitudes to enable them to transform their country from a failed state to a peaceful, progressive and united nation.⁴⁶

With this act, Koroma appeared to deftly defer critique of structural and State failures to citizens’ own personal mindsets. Yet many in Sierra Leone already agreed with this assessment of their own “backwardness.”⁴⁷ The ABC Secretariat purview is vague, except for a few media

⁴⁶ Government of Sierra Leone, *An Agenda for Change: Second Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRSP II), 2008-2012* (Freetown: Government of Sierra Leone, 2008).

⁴⁷ Catherine E. Bolten, “‘The Place Is So Backward’: Durable Morality and Creative Development in Northern Sierra Leone” (University of Michigan, 2008).

sensitization programs and public talks, but its repeated invocation in the public sphere is enough to inspire discourse on the possibility and the nature of personal transformation.⁴⁸

Nationalism as experimentation

SLITHU aligns itself with the ABC Secretariat, but at first glance, many Sierra Leoneans might accuse SLITHU of participating in exactly the “backwardness” the ABC Secretariat is meant to stamp out.⁴⁹ Skeptics of witchcraft would no doubt have much to criticize about events such as their witch disarmaments, and even many fellow witch hunters and believers find fault with the Union’s programs. Many local experts, most of them members of competing associations, argue that witch guns are invisible, and the objects that SLITHU’s disarmament units uncover must have been planted ahead of time. These critics find it easy to argue that Kabba and SLITHU are inventing the very crisis they are presuming to ameliorate. By fooling the public, they potentially gain more clients and closer involvement with government resources. By manipulating their connections in the APC, they become linked to powerful national figures whose wealth and might can be associated with the Union. In spite of the fact that SLITHU has no legal license to apprehend individuals, their invocation of national law and the symbolic weight of the president’s staff give them all the authority they need. Indeed, personal opportunism is no doubt a contributing factor to SLITHU’s engagement of nationalist discourse.

A closer look at SLITHU’s self-justification offers a more charitable view of their activities, whether one believes they effectively combat witchcraft or not. In an interview with

⁴⁸ Ironically, the first ABC Executive Director, Philip Conteh, and National Coordinator, Alieu Kamara (aka “Territorial Integrity,” the former Spokesperson for the AFRC junta), were convicted in 2011 by the Anti-Corruption Commission for misappropriation and mismanagement of funds, abuse of office, abuse of position, and obstruction of justice. “Convicted – Le60m or Six Years... ABC Bosses Weep,” *Awoko*, May 20, 2011.

⁴⁹ Alie Mozart Sesay, “Traditional Healers Join ABC Campaign,” *Sierra Express Media*, August 5, 2010.

the Freetown paper Sierra Express Media, Kabba declares that the disarmament programs (here referred to as the Public Disarming Unit) are “our rebranding effort to shift the paradigm complex attitude of some malcontent persons opting to always display wicked knowledge on the innocent.”⁵⁰ Kabba’s use of the term “rebranding” collapses President Koroma’s own frequent invocation of the “rebranding of Sierra Leone,” just one of many ways in which the president deploys the language of business, with the APC’s Department of Attitudinal and Behavioral Change.⁵¹ Kabba means that by rebranding witches as healers, SLITHU is changing the witches’ attitudes and making them productive members of society. SLITHU’s mission is also about “rebranding” in its more general sense. African traditional medicinal and ritual practices have been vilified in Sierra Leone for more than two centuries: by missionaries who aided in the founding of Freetown, later waves of proselytizers of both Christianity and Islam, and, most recently, the horror movies imported from Nigeria and Ghana.⁵² The flexibility of local mystic power, its capacity for evil as well as good, make it an easy target for those who wish to cast it in its most malicious light. For many Sierra Leoneans, especially in urban areas and among Pentecostal converts, African traditional medical practices are equivalent to witchcraft and so-called “black magic.” By recasting traditional practice as a war between good and evil, and by reintegrating their captives as productive traditional doctors and witch hunters, SLITHU reinvents the public image of the herbalist. SLITHU’s disarmament campaigns are thus devised

⁵⁰ Abu Bakarr S Tarawally, “Traditional Healers President at Arm’s Length,” *Sierra Express Media*, March 5, 2012.

⁵¹ cf. Melissa Aronczyk, “Research in Brief How to Do Things with Brands: Uses of National Identity,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2009): 291–96.

⁵² On Freetown missionary efforts to eradicate African religious practice, see Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil*. On comparative conflations of African spirit worlds and forms of evil particularly in African film, see Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999); Meyer, “Ghanaian Popular Cinema and the Magic in and of Film.”

not only to save the country from witchcraft, but also to save traditional medicine and ritual from disgrace.

Through maneuvers across numerous social spheres, SLITHU has positioned itself at the locus of multiple fierce debates about modern life in Sierra Leone. Is President Kabba's elected yet lifetime reign an exemplar of democracy or damning evidence of his dictatorial grasp? How can public health and medical transparency be balanced with herbalists' right to protect their intellectual property? Can any centralized body have the right, or even the capacity, to regulate culture? Where one stands on these debates is predicated on any number of configurations and prioritizations of values. While I believe these are important arguments to have and in many cases I have my own strong opinions, my point here is not to take sides. Rather, I want to indicate that these issues are being vigorously debated in Sierra Leone, and that ad hoc grassroots nationalism is providing a platform from which to experiment with new compromises.

CODA

Dangers and Dramas

Not surprisingly, SLITHU and Kabba made their fair share of enemies. Indeed, Kabba seemed to delight in detailing the numerous spiritual attempts on his life that he had fended off with his own superior mystic knowledge. When the Union attempted to launch its branch in the Eastern Provincial headquarters, Kenema, I saw that the challenges to SLITHU were as political as they were spiritual. Before SLITHU's public ceremony, the Council of Traditional Healers Sierra Leone (COTH-SL), a breakaway organization of some of the most influential members of SLITHU, held a comparatively quiet meeting, but one that demonstrated that SLITHU was unwelcome in the region. Accusing Kabba and his executive of extensive corruption and the

theft of resources from the State, COTH-SL also criticized Kabba's self-proclaimed status as President-for-life and the manufactured chicanery of the Union's witchcraft disarmaments. The key issue at hand in Kenema was SLITHU's choice for the local chairlady. A young woman with some cultural connections, she had none of the age or experience of the most respected *soweisia* (women's society elders) but would theoretically oversee them. By recruiting Alpha Koroma Labawai, the industrious young healer whose origin tale opens this chapter, COTH-SL turned the majority of Kenema's healers and cultural performers against SLITHU.⁵³ By appropriating the discourse of the State, SLITHU had also appropriated its reputation for malfeasance and its struggles with centralized power.

The SLITHU inauguration went on however.⁵⁴ Delegations of healers, ostentatiously dressed in mystic regalia, were trucked in from across the country, somewhat disguising the fact that none of the local cultural figures supposedly now under SLITHU's authority were present. In spite of the importance that COTH-SL placed on the chairlady-elect, her installation was a minor event compared to endless speeches extolling the abilities of President Kabba. The minute after Kabba's introduction by his stalwart National Chairman Mohamed A. Kamara, he burst from the car in which he had been hiding in the parking lot, raised his ceremonial staff high and charged to the podium in the midst of a rowdy mix of *ronko*-clad Northern mystics and uniformed bodyguards. I later discovered that the entire event was funded by the chairlady-elect's brother, a strict Muslim uncomfortable with the whole program but also a prospective opposition party candidate in the upcoming parliamentary elections looking for a way to connect with his constituents. In the months after the ceremony, members still recalled with wonder that

⁵³ Koroma Labawai's early days with SLITHU are profiled in Moriba Saffa, "Traditional Healer Gets Certificate from SLITHU," *Awoko*, July 29, 2010.

⁵⁴ "Sierra Leone Indigenous Traditional Healers Union Launched in Kenema," *Sierra Express Media*, July 3, 2012.



Figure 30. Alpha Koroma Labawai (right) with the COH-SL Executive. Kenema, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2012.



Figure 31. President Alhaji Sulayman Kabba speaks at SLITHU launching ceremony. Kenema, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2012.

the rainy season storms stopped the moment the program began and resumed the moment it ended. Kabba's power was confirmed.

About six months later, when I was living on the Eastern reaches of the country far from Freetown, I saw a newspaper article describing an attack on Kabba so severe that he lay in a coma "hospitalized in an unidentified Medicare."⁵⁵ I called Chairman Kamara to express my condolences, and he described how Kabba had been ambushed by disgruntled herbalists trying to destabilize the Union. I never was able to confirm the story, and such attacks were common across the Freetown peninsula and usually connected to theft or to disputes over land. Yet the physical threat to SLITHU members was apparently real, however much they played it up for the media.

When I saw Kabba on my way out of the country three months later, he seemed like his usual, energetic self. His mission now was to fund literacy programs for union members, in part to help them with labeling their wares. SLITHU had also just completed principal photography for its first attempt at using its wide access to cultural performers to break into the burgeoning Sierra Leone film industry. Historically, West African popular cinema had emerged through the vilification of herbalists, then reversed course to exploit nostalgia for lost traditions through "elaborate visual aestheticization."⁵⁶ Now the industry had come full circle, put to use by the herbalists themselves in the pursuit of the reinvention of their image. In his breakout role, President Kabba plays the village chief: customary ruler, custodian of tradition, and bearer of the sacred staff of power.

⁵⁵ Raymond Bai-Kamara, "Sierra Leone Traditional Healer Union President Beaten to a Coma," *Sierra Express Media*, January 10, 2013.

⁵⁶ Birgit Meyer, "'Tradition and Colour at Its Best': 'Tradition' and 'Heritage' in Ghanaian Video-Movies," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2010): 19.

Item Two: "A National and International Player"

As his men fan out into a ring and commence a round of solo dancing in mock competition, Hassan Jalloh begins scanning the crowd. His finger goes to his mouth pensively, and he paces either around the circle or back-and-forth from the DJ set to the center of the playing field. He waves to one of his men, who hops to his feet nonchalantly and bounds over to his commander with a practiced combination of obedience and indifference. Jalloh whispers in his ear quickly, and the dancer skips back to the *vaahun*. Jalloh takes up the mic and turns to the crowd. He calls for a few volunteers, selecting six members representing each strata of society: male and female, young and old, wealthy and poor. In larger, more cosmopolitan towns, he identifies members from each of Sierra Leone's major ethnic groups: usually Mende, Temne, Limba, Sherbo, Fula, and Susu. This cross-section of the attending public lines up in view of the rest of the population. A dancer steps forward with a cassava leaf for each of them. Jalloh speaks at length about the power of the leaf. A gift from God, it grows freely and is shared among all people in Sierra Leone. Processed by the village women, it becomes the delicious *saki* sauce, nourishing children and giving them the strength to grow and learn. These children go out into the world to succeed and return with wealth and resources. Thus the cassava leaf truly turns into money, as it will now for these volunteers, *insha'Allah*.

Jalloh's assistant produces a dusty, unassuming black plastic bag, and fishes out a large red-bound book. Holding the tome out with the formal reverence of a clergyman bearing a Bible,

the assistant waits while Jalloh strides purposefully towards him, each step punctuated by Idrissa's aggrandizing foley percussion. Reaching out to grasp the book, Jalloh suddenly pulls his hands away; its invisible force is too great. He steels himself again and snatches the book with enough force to spin his whole body around. Springing towards the line of volunteers, he stops abruptly before them. He waves the book across the line of their torsos, and Idrissa's clattering auditory effects make it sound as if the volunteers are a bamboo fence along which the book rattles as it passes. Jalloh leaps behind their wall and repeats the gesture, then strides forward, delicately cracking open the book and unfolding a large paper creased within it. He examines it briefly and then turns it towards the audience. The image within is barely discernible under the lights of the stage, but one can make out the swirling lines of a roughly sketched serpent. The style might be familiar to those who have visited the workshops of local *kr. morimen* mystics who use such images in the preparation of amulets and power items. Jalloh makes sure that everyone in the crowd can get a quick glimpse, then lopes back to the line of volunteers. Holding the book open like a platter, he takes each leaf, looks to the sky, and places it carefully upon the drawing, before folding up the sheet and snapping shut the book. His assistant steps forward with the black plastic bag, and Jalloh gingerly draws out a long string, at the end of which hangs a small cow horn, likely stuffed with a variety of *hale* medicines. Careful not to touch the horn directly, he places it against the cover of the book, leans forward, and mutters prayers while stalking dramatically across the field. He carefully returns the horn to its plastic bag sheath with the help of his assistant, then darts back to the volunteers, repeating the process of rattling the book across them. He pirouettes once, plants himself solidly, then carefully opens the volume. He looks pleased, turns to look at the volunteers, then pitches the open book up and

out, letting six purple 5000Le notes explode into the air.¹ His men rush forward to snap up the bills and distribute them among the volunteers. Jalloh tells them that the money is a gift, and whatever they spend it on will be blessed by Allah. The smiling volunteers return to their seats, where they and their neighbors examine the bills under the glow of their cell phone flashlights.

Publics classed

The mystic book item, if and when Jalloh is inspired to perform it, usually initiates the mystic segment of the Warriors' show. Though its particular form is unique, it is but one of a number of wonders through which Jalloh bestows gifts upon members of the audience. In other, more common cases, Jalloh has his men bring forward a large blue tarpaulin. Extending it out to its full size, they pull it down to the earth, capturing air beneath it, then expertly grasp points along its surface that form the sheet into a perfect cube. From this point, 8- to 12-year-old boys are recruited to maintain and gently shake the form as Jalloh and his men perform their miracles around and inside of it. Typically, Jalloh sends one of his men, either Foday "Small" Sama or Sidike "Koidia" Sanou, under the tarp with words of encouragement and sometimes his own ring as a token of power. Standing outside, Jalloh says a prayer then has the tarp briefly pulled away to reveal that he has mystically bound the dancer inside with rope or tied him within a bag. The tarp is returned and the dancer is left concealed but incapacitated underneath as Jalloh draws forth various items for his spectators.

I saw at least ten different kinds of objects pulled from the tarp. While these various gift acts appear to share a logic of presentation and technique, they are read as distinct, individual miracles by the audience, and each present demonstrates a new ability at Jalloh's disposal. While

¹ About \$1.20 USD at the time, enough for about five bowls of prepared rice.



Figure 32. Hassan Jalloh and Foday “Small” Sama. Bo City, Kakua Chiefdom, Bo District, 2012.



Figure 33. Hassan Jalloh and spectators. Daru, Jawie Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

each gift may or may not attest to distinctly different mystical or technical abilities on Jalloh's part, Jalloh most certainly mobilized them for very different moral lessons and to highlight very different constituencies of his publics.

Before each gift, Jalloh stalks the circle and draws out new volunteers according to certain categories. One or two very small children may be selected to have the privilege of being placed under the tarp. They emerge dressed in sharp new outfits: dresses for girls, football uniforms for boys. Other children are selected to reach only their hands under the tarp. They bring out heaps of sweet candies and biscuits that they pile on a sheet in the middle of the field and then distribute throughout the audience. Alternatively, if Jalloh is feeling more pedagogical than indulgent, older children collect dozens and dozens of pens to help with schoolwork (these "blessed" pens ensure scholastic success, Jalloh insists). Once and only once, I saw Jalloh invite a group of drunks onstage to collect a flask of cheap liquor each. Another time, when his schedule had severely disrupted the plans of a women's mutual aid society that had served as his local organizers, Jalloh brought them on stage to receive a large working battery-operated clock and an extensive set of enamel cookware.

Jalloh scans the crowd and pulls forward three young women, likely unmarried. Once they are lined up in front of him, he is besought by their beauty. He feigns shy flirtation and flighty sentiment. As he directs each of them to reach into the tarp, they come forward with plastic wrapped packages and then are directed back to the *vaahun* by Jalloh's dancers. They emerge a few seconds later in matching brightly colored, tightly fitting tops and head wraps exemplifying the height of modern, if economical, fashion. In a contrasting act, Jalloh complains publicly that young ladies no longer know how to properly prepare traditional attire. He calls on four elderly or esteemed women to come to the center of the circle and share a bench. He asks

one young woman, usually more conservatively dressed than those he selects to receive fashion items, and asks her to sit amongst her “mothers.” The participants are each given a leaf to pray upon, either the Lord’s Prayer or al-Fatihah depending on their faith. The leaves are placed under the tarp by one of the dancers. Jalloh unleashes a passionate stream of Arabic, steps towards the tarp, touches the end of his fly whisk to the ground, then rushes away, tracing a line across the field. Gbessay Konteh, “the smallest warrior,” reaches underneath and pulls forth one corner of a long sheet of brightly colored, faux wax-print fabric. He slowly backs away along the line traced by Jalloh, gradually revealing the full astounding length of the material, made more impressive next to Gbessay’s small stature. At about ten yards, the dancers display it before the audience, then fold it and present it to the eldest of the women. Jalloh sends them off with the instruction that they are to divide the cloth amongst each other for kr. *lapas* (simple wrapped skirts). The elder women are to instruct the younger in how to prepare and use the fabric.

The gifts Jalloh delivers fix their recipients as particular types with particular desires and particular moral universes, each of which require distinct ethical interventions from Jalloh. The messages are different, and directed at different subsections of society, including children, students, young girls, older women, and so on. Yet they are also proclaimed publicly, such that the whole community can witness them. Jalloh’s shows attract every level of society, and even those who are not present may hear his discourse or engage in gossip about the performance after the fact.²

² The playing field is not, however, unsegregated. Sorting of different constituents of the public takes place within the spectators’ circle as well as on stage. Sometimes this division is orchestrated by the performers so as to consolidate sub-groups for Jalloh to address, e.g. the *yeni* (“mothers”) whom chorus leader Momoh Lukuley invites to one corner of the circle in order to participate in the program’s antiphonal chorus. Sometimes these divisions are imposed by the local organizers, and sometimes they follow from the habits of local courtesy, in which men cede the space closest to the performers to the women and their children.



Figure 34. Hassan Jalloh, the Warriors, and spectators. Gbeika, Njaluahun Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.



Figure 35. The Warriors and spectators. Bandakor, Kpanga-Kabonde Chiefdom, Pujehun District, 2012.

In this respect, Jalloh's address and the advice he dispenses generates a model public. While some conceptions of the "public" depict it as a site of anonymity and uniformity defined only by reason, this monotonous vision is a patent fabrication.³ Every public is divided in fractions, each engaging in different ways with the public discourse that constitutes them. As Michael Warner suggests, "To address a public, we don't go around saying the same thing to all these people. We say it in a venue of infinite address and hope that people will find themselves in it."⁴ Within any form of public discourse, there are multiple ways to orient oneself. In Yoruba popular theaters, Karin Barber describes Nigerian audience members taking up the task of their own education by actively seeking the messages depicted through the actions of the characters with the closest match to their own station in life.⁵ Jalloh's mystic acts, both more abstract and more direct than narrative drama, nonetheless place value the same kind of moral edification. While the lessons of his programs are singular among contemporary mystic artists—no one else I witnessed similarly fused mysticism with morality—they do align him closely to Mende singers and storytellers.⁶

While Jalloh intends each set of identifications and messages for certain specific constituencies, the rest of the audience, self-identifying outside of that category, may still receive the lesson and interpret it as a model for others in their community. Public advice becomes a benchmark from which to comprehend, and certainly to judge, others' positions in a pluralized society. Thus Jalloh's celebration of the young girls' sexuality both reflects and designates their current role in the community as potential wives, while his portrait of the elder women as

³ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

⁴ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2005), 86.

⁵ Barber, *The Generation of Plays*, 216–225.

⁶ Cosentino, *Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers*.

arbiters and transmitters of tradition outlines a role for women later in life. By handing out presents, he is handing out identities.

Bike Riders Union

Jalloh both reflects and influences collective identifications and their perception through his gift acts, and this ability can be exploited by any number of organizations. The ruling APC party, for example, employed Jalloh for some indirect campaigning during the 2012 electoral season, hoping to siphon some votes in a region dominated by the opposition SLPP party. At least once, one of the fabrics Jalloh drew forth for the older women was an APC propaganda print, though he did make sure that he selected a supporter to receive this gift.

One similar promotion became an extremely popular part of the cultural show program during the period in which I traveled with the Warriors. One of the most pervasive figures in contemporary rural Sierra Leone is the motorbike taxi or kr. *okada* rider (the term *okada* is borrowed from Nigeria, from which many of the first bikes were imported). In many communities isolated by poor infrastructure, they are the only means of transportation available. The bike riding industry has exploded in the years since the war, and marks one indisputable economic success story. Former commanders have used their disarmament packages to purchase bikes, and they employ a great number of former combatants. Thus the patron-client relations that marked the social lives of the war are perpetuated into peacetime.⁷ Jalloh himself owns several bikes operating in Bo, taking a cut of the riders' profits.⁸

⁷ Krijn Peters, "From Weapons to Wheels: Young Sierra Leonean Ex-Combatants Become Motorbike Taxi-Riders," *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development* 10 (2007): 1–23.

⁸ In fact, the very first bike I asked to take me to Jalloh's residence upon arriving in Bo turned out to be owned by him.

However, the distrust that most Sierra Leoneans' continue to harbor for ex-combatants severely tarnishes relations between bikers and their communities, even though as one of the few growing businesses in the country, more non-combatants than former fighters now number among their ranks. As youths with limited power in their own communities and liminal figures who enter many other communities as strangers, they are ready scapegoats for all kinds of aggression. Riders are accused of dangerous drinking and drug use (sometimes justifiably so), theft, abductions, rape, and other forms of bad behavior. Their training is inconsistent at best, and terrible accidents are frequent.⁹ In a dramatic instance of vigilante violence that immediately made national news, a biker clipped a student of a Kenema secondary school while driving through the compound, and then was dragged off his bike and beaten to death by the youth's friends. In response, the bikers banded together and attempted to torch the school in question.¹⁰ I was told that the Bo Lantern Festival, a procession of floats festooned with lights and amusing puppets made by local institutions, was apparently canceled that year when the bikers dared to enter a float that depicted a student being run over by four angry motorbikes. Needless to say, the bikers have an image problem.

Nonetheless, bikers are needed by villagers and they have become powerful enough to unionize. The Bike Riders Union (BRU) has branches in every major town in the country, each with a bureaucracy of administrative officers. The task of the BRU is to educate and defend their riders. They tax them about 1000Le each week and enforce regulations about protective gear.

They also take it upon themselves to advocate for their men. One group hired Jalloh to perform

⁹ Michael Bürge, "Riding the Narrow Tracks of Moral Life: Commercial Motorbike Riders in Makeni, Sierra Leone," *Africa Today* 58, no. 2 (2011): 58–95; Anne Menzel, "Between Ex-Combatization and Opportunities for Peace: The Double-Edged Qualities of Motorcycle-Taxi Driving in Urban Postwar Sierra Leone," *Africa Today* 58, no. 2 (2011): 96–127.

¹⁰ Moriba Saffa, "Bike Riders Vow to Burn Ahmadiyya Property in Kenema," *Awoko*, March 23, 2012; Mohamed Massaquoi, "Students-Okada Riders Clash in Kenema Leaves One Dead," *Concord Times*, March 23, 2012.

for their local community as a gesture of fellowship and as a fundraising strategy. For the program, Jalloh designed a gift act for the bikers which went on to serve as a regular staple of the Warriors' repertoire of wonders.

Jalloh begins by code-switching from Mende into Krio to take on a more cosmopolitan and less formal tone. He demands an answer from the audience: *Man en uman, u dat slip owt past ihn comphin?* ("Man or woman, which one sleeps out more than the other?") The audience members shout their answer, women insisting *na man dem* ("it's men!") and men counter *na uman dem* ("it's women!"). Jalloh fans the flames of the debate for a bit, continuing to feign ignorance by asking what it is that men can do when they go out at night or what women can do when they are left home alone. This kind of debate about which gender is better or worse is a regular staple of Sierra Leonean discourse. Many conversations in collective taxi rides running up and down the country descend at some point into such debates, each gender lobbing accusations at the other, reasserting stereotypical relationship abuses: men keep many women, women are only interested in a man's money, etc. Public discussion of proper moral behavior is channeled more often through this discourse than any other theme, including politics. The consistently reargued terms of infidelity and greed continuously re-articulate gender divisions along familiar lines, yet the anxiety with which they are reaffirmed suggests that these terms are in flux in the contemporary era, no doubt partially spurred on by women's increasing influence in national public discourse. At any rate, Jalloh taps into and perpetuates this potent stream of mutual critique and identity formation in order, once again, to delineate the separate constituencies of his audiences, as well as to capture their attention.

In the end, Jalloh does not take sides, but defers to the experts. "If you need to know the answer, ask the bike rider" as he is the one who is carrying the lovers from one house to another.

Jalloh then launches into a long speech about the many services of the BRU. They are a necessary connection among villages. Moreover, as the links between people and communities, they accumulate much knowledge about the country, knowledge that should be utilized by politicians. Jalloh then invites about a half dozen bikers to join him on stage, requiring that they brandish their keys to demonstrate the veracity of their occupation. Lined up before him, Jalloh asks them if they know any dances. In the period they take to think about it, one of the Warriors, senior dancer Alhaji Lukuley, jumps forward and suggests the “Fula Man Cha Cha.” Jalloh cries indignantly that he himself is Fula, and feigning umbrage, chases after Alhaji. He almost instantly reconsiders. Stopping and thinking over a rhythm, he quietly taps out a beat with his feet. “Cha cha cha. Fula Man cha cha. Hey o!” As he gains confidence with the tune, his gestures grow in speed and intensity, and Idrissa is ready to crack the side drum along with him. Increasingly carried away, Jalloh orders the bike riders to join him. The audience collapses in hysterics as the line of tough-looking bikers flail about, running in place with limbs flying in all directions. The whole circle is chanting “cha cha cha” as Gbessay shuffles over to the tarp and begins pulling out new plastic shoes and tossing them in a pile in the middle of the field. Jalloh brings the tomfoolery to a halt and declares that the shoes are for the bikers to protect their feet—one of the BRU regulations is that all riders must wear closed-toe footwear—and that each rider will find a pair of shoes that fits him exactly. The riders rush over to try them on and find that remarkably, they do indeed all fit. Jalloh asks only one more thing from the riders: they must exit to another refrain of the “Fula Man Cha Cha.”

The following day, the atmosphere of most villages is still peppered with outbursts of “Fula Man Cha Cha” as residents revisit the previous evening’s entertainment and reiterate the tune as a metonym of all the hilarity of the BRU skit. Jalloh’s mystic transformations made shoes

appear out of nowhere, made the bikers a recognized constituent of the wider community, and most wondrously, made them a source of merriment rather than mistrust.

Conjuring the nation

The BRU segment is notable as one of the few times Hassan Jalloh acknowledges his Fula ethnicity. He does not have to state that he is Fula for the audience to know it; the family name Jalloh betrays his lineage immediately. Yet his overt Fula identity has not stopped him from being a “cultural hero” for his primarily Mende audiences.

The Fula are a small but powerful minority. Sierra Leone’s Fula represent the southwestern limit of the Fulani or Fulbe superethnicity whose people stretch across West Africa. The Fula have utilized long histories of migration and vast regional networks to find success in trade and religion. In the postcolonial era, while many Fula continue to focus on cross-regional trade and remain quintessentially transnational, others have integrated themselves into local cultures and economies to varying degrees.¹¹ Yet however much they are integrated, Fula remain outsiders from the perspective of most Mende, both a part of and apart from local culture.

Privately, Jalloh confesses that his father would probably not approve of his current lifestyle if he was still alive. Jalloh’s father was a wealthy agriculturalist and established his homestead in the heart of Mendeland at Wunde chiefdom. While he fully integrated himself into village economics and took Mende wives, he remained apart from Mende culture through his strict adherence to more transnational interpretations of Islam. In order to maintain his Fula heritage, Jalloh must remain aligned with these religious perspectives. Jalloh’s familial and ethnic relationship to Islam color his performance and discourse. Whereas Mende mystic

¹¹ Alusine Jalloh, *African Entrepreneurship: Muslim Fula Merchants in Sierra Leone* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1999).

performers may explain their power through relationships with *gineisia* and other bush spirits or through their skills in manipulating forest herbs, Jalloh explains all of his power as the direct blessings of Allah and enacts each of his wonders amid extensive prayers in effortless Arabic.

Perhaps most controversially, Jalloh is required by his Fula ethnicity and his Islamic faith to take no part in Poro or any associated institutions.¹² While most of his men are initiated, Jalloh himself must remain aloof. As the supreme mens' society, Poro is “deep culture” for most Mende, and “the hard core of culture” according to Kenneth Little.¹³ Not only Fula, but many Mende and other ethnicities as well, must balance community practices with deference to what internationalist Islamic teachings decry as *haram* or forbidden, including masked dances. The choice between full participation in Poro and full participation in certain Islamic communities has led many locals, including many Mende chiefs and traditional authorities, to prioritize their “religion” over their “culture.” Jalloh’s choice to balance a professional commitment to culture with a strict adherence to the rules of his religion is exceptional enough to lack many preexisting models and to require ingenuity.

Without the sanction of Poro behind him, Jalloh must seek out other sources of cultural authority, and he finds them in the figure of the nation. Jalloh certainly spouts Mende proverbs, performs Mende dances, sings Mende songs, and generally extols Mende culture, but he ceaselessly stresses the importance of “Sierra Leone” culture. His audiences hear him reiterate time and again, *kr. Mi na nachunal en intanachunal playa fɔ Salone*. (“I am a national and international player for Sierra Leone”).

¹² Poro is neither strictly Mende nor closed specifically to Fula. In fact, I was present for the Poro initiation in Kailahun of one Fula who wished to cement his local political agency through the society.

¹³ Kenneth L. Little, “The Poro Society as an Arbiter of Culture,” *African Studies* 7, no. 1 (1948): 1–15.



Figure 36. Hassan Jalloh and assistants from the crowd. Kailahun Town, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2011.

As an “international player,” Jalloh represents Sierra Leone on the world stage. Attending three consecutive Kanilai Cultural Festivals in The Gambia, he was a key factor in the national team that twice won “best mystic arts.”¹⁴ The Kanilai Cultural Festival is one of Gambian President Yahyah Jammeh’s many self-aggrandizing projects, held in his hometown Kanilai and thus subsuming national culture within his own biographical narrative.¹⁵ Like many other nationalist festivals in African, the Kanilai Festival subsumes multiple local practices into homogenous demonstrations of national excess and power.¹⁶ Jalloh maintains fairly close contact with President Yahyah Jammeh, or at least a number of figures in his circle, and often travels to Banjul during the rainy season. In performance, he rattles off even more exploits in foreign countries, “The Gambia, Mali, Guinea Bissau, South Africa, Shanghai China, Venezuleula,” always emphasizing the awards he has won for the country.¹⁷ When I was in the audience, he would occasionally suggest that my presence was because he was heading next to a World Festival in America. However exaggerated, these many foreign locales attest to Jalloh’s cosmopolitanism. Yet more importantly, they imply an audience outside Sierra Leone that views Sierra Leone *through* Jalloh. By means of his lists of overseas exploits, Jalloh suggests that if he represents the nation for the world, then surely he can represent the nation to itself.

Jalloh’s relationship with the Sierra Leone government is oblique. The Warriors have seen little direct economic benefit from state support: a few plane tickets to The Gambia, a

¹⁴ The trophies are held in an office of the Ministry for Tourism and Culture.

¹⁵ The current status of the Kanilai Festival is unclear, but it may have been incorporated into the more successful Roots Cultural Festival that grew out of diaspora tourism motivated by Alex Haley’s book. Yunus S. Saliu, “Roots’ Festival NOC Pays Homage to Kanilai,” *The Daily Observer*, April 9, 2014.

¹⁶ Apter, *The Pan-African Nation*.

¹⁷ Here is another moment at which Jalloh “does his own things and doesn’t allow things to do him.” In interviews with me, Jalloh was inconsistent about the foreign nations they had actually visited. I was only able to verify materially that they had played in Liberia and The Gambia. South Africa, China, and Venezuela were each represented by dance groups at the 2010 Kanilai Cultural Festival, in which Jalloh also participated.



Figure 37. above) Sidike Kamara, President Yahyah Jammeh, and Hassan Jalloh. (below) Hassan Jalloh, “Baggie” Korvoma, and members of the Venezuela delegation. Courtesy the personal archives of Hassan Jalloh, n.d.

stipend for uniforms the one year the Ministry was able to find the resources, and token payment for performing in electoral campaigns. In 2012, The first edition of a National Cultural Festival called the Warriors away from their tour program, but after traveling all the way to Freetown, they never played and almost not even payed. Even if they had been fully sponsored, the state has no coherent national culture program for Jalloh to promote, although a unified cultural policy is in the works.

While the government is of little direct economic interest to Jalloh, it does occasionally afford him the chance to interface with the outside world and its assets, whether through a trip to The Gambia or through a government rally attended by international dignitaries or, less directly, through the visits of an American researcher. As a “national and international player,” Jalloh finds the nation to be a useful point of articulation between local and international resources. In this, he joins many other Sierra Leoneans who establish national NGOs and enlist in national political parties in order to become the channel through which assets are directed between local and global communities. These grassroots nationalists promote the nation not in and of itself, but as a vital link to elsewhere.

Moreover, Jalloh uses the nation as an alternate identity, one that offers more fluidity and individual power than either his ethnicity or religion. Through what Jean-Loup Amselle calls “mestizo logics” of cumulative identifications, Jalloh “can claim the identity of [his] choice as long as it does not threaten the identity of others.”¹⁸ Despite his mixed parentage, some might question his right to represent a specifically Mende cultural heritage, and, as a Fula and a Muslim, he could be chastised for practicing dance and mystic arts (to say nothing of his “Rasta”-inflected fashions). As a Sierra Leonean artist, he can claim not only the right to engage

¹⁸ Jean-Loup Amselle, *Mestizo Logics: Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere*, trans. Claudia Royal (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), xvi.

in these activities but also total dominion over them. “My title is King, which I deserve and merit it. King of Africa mystical power in Culture.” Nationalism is also the perspective from which he can engage in cultural relativist discourse that gives him the personal freedom to decide which elements of local culture to apply and which to discard. In one speech, he defends Sierra Leonean culture from foreign judgement (subtly highlighting transnational Islam) as “our own, not American culture, not British culture, not Saudi Arabia culture, our own culture.”

Kelly Askew suggests that this kind of grassroots nationalism—motivated by performers rather than imposed by government policy and thus troubling the division between society and state—is the foundation for lasting national culture.¹⁹ Yet Tanzanian national culture, Askew’s model, historically has been shaped by concerted efforts of state agents who struggled to impress a national identity upon its citizens, as have the sites of most other discussions of nationalist arts across Africa.²⁰ Unlike these systems in which strong government interest has instilled some sense of cultural unity, Jalloh and his like practice grassroots nationalism in a “weak state” with limited interest in arts policy.²¹ These artists do so not because the nation serves or represents them, but because the nation serves as a gatekeeper and as a source for fluid identities.

Through the mystic book act, Jalloh lines up the nation’s multiple ethnicities before themselves in what might be read as a kind of acknowledgement of difference. Then Jalloh conjures 5000Le notes, gifting each participant the currency of the nation-state. By aligning all of the country’s people towards the symbols of the government, Jalloh may be “celebrating cultural diversity while preserving a political core,” as critiques of American and British

¹⁹ Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*, 268–293.

²⁰ e.g Edmondson, *Performance and Politics in Tanzania: The Nation on Stage*.; McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*; Straker, *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution*; Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow*.

²¹ On Sierra Leone’s status as a “weak state” see Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*.

multiculturalism have alleged.²² Sierra Leone's Civil War was not divided along ethnic lines, and thus the language of ethnicity is not as charged and regulated as in, for example, Rwanda.²³ Even so, Sierra Leonean politics is shaded by ethnic divisions, with the ruling APC understood as the party of the Temne and Limba in the North and the opposition SLPP understood as the party of the Mende in the South. State and NGO propaganda insists *kr. wi ol na wan* ("we all are one"), but allegations of favoritism and corruption along ethnic lines haunt both parties, suggesting that perhaps professed unity is a front for individual gain, as when Siaka Stevens' one-party state rotted the national government out from within.

Achille Mbembe's much cited interpretation of postcolonial political pageantry as grotesque Bakhtinian Carnival depicts state power as empty, corrupt, and vulgar, but he closes with the suggestion that this power's emptiness is precisely what makes it appealing to the postcolonial nation's citizens.

By dancing publicly for the benefit of power, the "postcolonial subject" is providing his or her loyalty, and by compromising with the corrupting control that state power tends to exercise at all levels of everyday life, the subject is reaffirming that this power is incontestable—precisely the better to play with it and modify it whenever possible.²⁴

The ruler and the ruled mutual construct power, constituting the nation as a "fetish object"—that is, an object imbued with real social authority—and exemplifying what Michael Taussig calls, responding to Mbembe, the "magic of the state."²⁵ Jalloh's mystic gifts, offered in the name of

²² Avery F. Gordon, ed., *Mapping Multiculturalism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 6.

²³ On the contemporary "secrecy" of ethnicity in Rwanda, see Simon Turner, "'The Tutsi Are Afraid We Will Discover Their Secrets'—On Secrecy and Sovereign Power in Burundi," *Social Identities* 11, no. 1 (2005): 37–54.

²⁴ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 129.

²⁵ Michael Taussig, "The Magic of the State," *Public Culture* 5, no. 1 (1992): 63–66.

“Sierra Leonean” culture, could be argued to serve as fetishes of the nation; it certainly would not be the first time that money and commodities have been described as such.²⁶

Through his gift acts, Jalloh presents the “imagined” nation to itself, not through the media of print, maps, or museums, but through a spectacle that separates each citizen, even as it brings them together.²⁷ In Arendt’s words, “A world of things is between those who have it in common as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”²⁸ By distributing “a world of things,” Jalloh makes claims for the composition and configuration of Sierra Leonean public space. As a “national and international player,” he moves pieces and people about the playing field. By receiving his gifts, Jalloh’s spectators each take turns playing with the nation.

²⁶ cf. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1992).

²⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

²⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

Chapter Three: Confounding Culture

Face Off

Swollen nose. Elephantine ears. Bugged out eyes. Bald head and frayed whiskers. Distended lips drooped around mangled and meager teeth smeared with the cruddy remnants of roasted palm nuts. The repugnant mug of Gongoli is one of the most beloved in Mendeland. Unlike other performing spirits—known as *heisia* in Mende, *debuls* or devils in Krio, or as “masquerades” in academic English—Gongoli’s pervasive popularity is rooted in neither splendor nor esteem. His oversized, grotesque head is usually too ungainly to stay on the performer’s head without being held up by at least one hand and is carved from African Nutmeg or other softwoods that spoil rapidly.¹ While other carved objects such as the famed woman’s *sowei* masks have a delicate and burnished beauty that testifies to claims that they are mystically drawn fully formed from the river bottom, the Gongoli head is rough, unfinished, and looks like it was found forsaken in a refuse heap.² Dressed in rags that barely cover his mortal human flesh, Gongoli brandishes a nondescript stick as crutch, whip, and priapic prosthesis. Gongoli is the consummate party-crasher, barging into any village festivity uninvited. He is usually encountered either stumbling from one household to the next looking for laughs and handouts or busting through the ring of onlookers during live shows, distracting the crowd with flailing antics

¹ cf. Reinhardt, Loretta R. “Mende Carvers.” Southern Illinois University, 1976.

² cf. Sylvia Arden Boone, *Radiance from the Waters : Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).



Figure 38. The Warriors' *gongoli*. Kailahun Town, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2011.

and mimed sex acts to the flustered dismay of whichever dancer, devil, or ritualist thought they had sole authority over the spectator's gaze. In spite of, or because of, his profligate transgressions, Gongoli stands among the most celebrated figures in Mende tradition, so much so that his popularity has overflowed Mendeland and spread throughout Sierra Leone.

If one were to imagine Gongoli in human form, perhaps one might imagine the inimitable comedian Siloh. Siloh shares Gongoli's bald pate and poor dental hygiene. His bulgy eyes bounce between sleepy indifference, cocksure self-satisfaction, and rude indignation. With enough of an audience, he may clench his face tight and blow his cheeks out so fully that his features morph into a remarkably inhuman spheroid. He is fond of floppy dancing, much of which involves bouncing up and down on the ground, contorting into a ball with one leg behind his neck, and spinning in the dirt in a spoof of break-dancing. When I first met Siloh, he was most often seen wearing a t-shirt depicting a picturesque palm-tree-lined beach scene below the caption "Casual Friday." The garment's layers of accumulated dust and stains suggested that—Friday or not—every day for Siloh is pretty casual. Stripping off this shirt, he reveals a huge bulge of a belly tucked under the elastic strap of pants drawn high over his waist. After sufficient goading, he may be pressured into revealing the source of the bulge, an improbably distended navel that he is capable of sucking into and out of his gut in a literally stomach-turning display of somatic plasticity. A foreigner predisposed to biomedical pathologizing may point to this umbilical herniation as a sign of malnutrition suffered when Siloh was an infant, while his stubby digits may be indications of congenital anomalies, but I never heard anyone describe Siloh as anything other than Siloh.

Siloh is one of Mendeland's most surprising celebrities. Often when I traveled with him, children would run after our vehicle chanting his name, a privilege normally reserved for



Figure 39. Siloh and spectators. Joru, Gaura Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2012.

politicians, cultural superstars like King Hassan Jalloh, and reluctant foreigners. Like these other visitors, Siloh is exceptional, but unlike those dignitaries whose fame aligns with prevailing status hierarchies, Siloh flips these hierarchies as unreservedly as he somersaults through his dance program.

The widespread adoration of both Gongoli and Siloh, two paragons of inelegance, challenge the essence of Mende *heisia* as noble, potent, and dangerous. Indeed, they even make a mockery of *heisia*'s constitutive mystery, for not only does Siloh perform like Gongoli, he openly performs *as* Gongoli. Unlike like most other *heisia* dancers, yet in common with the wider practice of Gongoli performance, Siloh does little to disguise his individual quirks. Through comical fumbling with his mask, his identity is frequently exposed, and fellow performers even introduce him as "Siloh Gongoli." Siloh's performance as Gongoli enacts his own personality, rather than making the assertion "I am not myself" ascribed to most African masking.³ Through his radical subversion of *heisia* principles, Siloh Gongoli lives out the paradoxes of famed masked dancer, adored outsider, sacrilegious spirit, and unpredictable tradition.

Siloh Gongoli is just one of dozens of members of the Mammy Yoko Cultural Dance Troupe, an ungainly *ad hoc* assortment of touring entertainers, misfits, and malcontents.⁴ Collectives of itinerant performers have a long history in the region.⁵ Warren d'Azevedo's descriptions of Gola dancing troupes in the 1950s are practically indistinguishable from those

³ Herbert Cole's formulation is already purposefully paradoxical, stressing the power and play of the contradictory impulse within any claim to self-effacement. Herbert M. Cole, "Introduction: The Mask, Masking, and Masquerade Arts in Africa," in *I Am Not Myself. The Art of African Masquerade* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History University of California, 1985), 15–27.

⁴ Named for but not directly related to Madame Yoko, a famed woman paramount chief of the colonial era. See below.

⁵ Migeod, *A View of Sierra Leone*, 105–109.



Figure 40. Siloh Gongoli. Mofindor, Luwa Chieftdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

seen today, despite being separated by fifty years and a devastating war.⁶ One difference lies in d’Azevedo’s note that, though he chooses to apply the category of “artistry” to certain practices, Gola do not have a distinct term for artist or art.⁷ Today however, most performers in Mendeland proudly self-identify as “artists,” using that English term. They do so in order to stress their gainful employment in creative and commodified pursuits, establishing equivalencies with the industries of painters and carvers. Equally important, they do so as performers in order to identify with rap and reggae “artists” from Freetown and beyond, singers also depicted as social underdogs who nonetheless profit from their talent. Today’s cultural troupes style themselves after globalized “Rasta” and hip-hop icons as much as they do after local idioms, though perhaps not as systematically.

The performers’ appropriation of globalized music fashions opens a space for the reconsideration of the role of Sierra Leonean “artists” through the lens of *subculture*. Subculture and related concepts such as “youth culture” and “global imaginaries” have been applied throughout urban Africa, but rarely in more rural settings.⁸ Many scholars have explored resistance and marginality through ritual and spiritual practice, but usually through social actors’ affiliation with coherent religious sects, rather than through individual lifestyle choices.⁹ While the livelihoods of carvers and other material artists have been a preoccupation of African art history for many decades, such discussions have usually stressed how the artists are integrated

⁶ d’Azevedo, “Sources of Gola Artistry,” 311–320. Gola are a neighboring ethnicity and share a great number of practices. Some Mende consider Gola to be originators of Mende culture, others argue the reverse.

⁷ Ibid., 282.

⁸ cf. Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil*; Jesse Weaver Shipley, “Aesthetic of the Entrepreneur: Afro-Cosmopolitan Rap and Moral Circulation in Accra, Ghana,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2009): 631–68; Brad Weiss, *Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops: Global Fantasy in Urban Tanzania* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

⁹ Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*; Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

into their societies, rather than exploring the tensions between artists and their community that the category of subculture suggests.¹⁰

The previous chapter examined how national culture is used as a frame through which to experiment with diverse combinations of local and global practices; but what becomes of those practices that are provisionally rejected but not entirely eliminated? As cultures are consolidated, especially beneath a sweeping national culture, certain practices and people are marginalized, exempted from convention but also excluded from its benefits. In social margins, alienated individuals may perpetuate traditions, borrowings, and innovations. They may also share and nurse resentments. Through entertainment and comedy in contexts of playful ambiguity, they maintain a site of encounter with the rest of their society, but one that can be ultimately frustrating. As d’Azevedo notes, these performers “are feared, despised and intensely admired at once, and their members are considered always to be strangers from afar which no one would wish to have as village neighbors.”¹¹

In the spirit of restless nomadism personified by Siloh’s wanderings, this chapter ranges in progressively wider circles, from the individual performing artist’s place in Mendeland to Sierra Leone cultural troupes to the global “Rasta” movement. Each is an uncertain interstitial space of cultural production, license, and defiance, that is to say “subculture.” Dragging local masking traditions, British youth culture, Caribbean spiritual ideology, and rebel militias into conversation with each other may appear spurious, but this sort of unpredictable interface of

¹⁰ cf. Warren L. d’Azevedo, ed., *The Traditional Artist in African Societies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973); Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, “One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art,” *History in Africa* 11 (1984): 163–93; Joanna Grabski and Carol Magee, *African Art, Interviews, Narratives: Bodies of Knowledge at Work* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).

¹¹ d’Azevedo, “Sources of Gola Artistry,” 320.

practices and beliefs makes subculture, and especially its instantiation in touring performance troupes, fascinating, potent, and hazardous.

3.1 SUBCULTURE AS EXCEPTION: LETTING THE MASK SLIP

The Outsider as Act

Whether performed by Siloh or not, Gongoli's antics mock a host of sacrosanct Mende values. The character's creaky frailty upends reverence for the elderly. His poor management of libido and bodily functions, expressed through copulatory pelvic spasms and nasal mucus, are an affront to propriety. His boastful yet disastrous attempts at athletic feats like high jumps and racing satirize the masculine bravado fundamental to Mende social action.

Perhaps most thoroughly, Gongoli subverts the vaulted status of the Mende pantheon of *heisia*. Unlike most other devils, he is never accompanied by an aggrandizing entourage of assistants. More likely, he is surrounded by an unruly mob of uninitiated children. Rather than carefully proscribed choreography, his gait vacillates anywhere between a creaky totter of aged infirmity and a heedless, headlong dash of frantic cowardice. When he does dance, his futile attempts at mimicked virtuosity tumble into parodic exaggeration of other devils, skilled dancers, contemporary disco steps, or vulgar gestures of fornication. While many Mende *heisia* speak or sing, Gongoli is the only one to use the vernacular, but with a voice so laden with a thick, nasal twang and so muffled by his enormous wooden visage that he often has trouble getting his point across. Most of what he says is boastful balderdash anyway.

Yet these lampoons of form are eclipsed by Gongoli's mockery of the very essence of masking practice: the anonymity of the performer. His slipshod appearance is an inversion of the carefully crafted construction of most devils, and his meager coverings barely disguise the

identity of the dancer within. In his attempts at Islamic observance, Gongoli falls to the ground and prostrates himself in a flustered simulation of the solemn and precise ritual of *Salat* prayer, muttering a stream of rough Arabic. When he drops his forehead to the earth in supplication, he discovers to his chagrin that his bulbous cranium is too massive to lift from its dusty bed. With increasingly frantic scrambling and dizzy gyrations around the immobile pivot of his corpulent forehead, Gongoli struggles to stand. In a final fit of frustration, Siloh's head pops out of the mask, face fully uncovered, and he is finally able to get the leverage needed to hoist the mask off the ground and back over his head. Siloh stands frozen for a moment, as if to check if anyone has noticed his indiscretion, then, in spite of the audience's boisterous snickering, he jumps back into his antics as if nothing had happened.

Mammy Yoko, the touring cultural troupe Siloh follows most regularly, often exploits this irreverence as the cap to their evening program of acrobatics, dance, and mystical displays. Following the show-stopping wizardry of the troupe's resident *bɔwui* devil, Siloh Gongoli takes the stage.¹² Attempting to mimic the mystically awesome ability of the *bɔwui* to grow to inhuman heights, Gongoli enjoins the troupe's drum set to underscore his own demonstration. Punctuated by each staccato rap of the side drum, Gongoli ratchets his head higher and higher. Unfortunately for Gongoli, his raffia crown is much scantier than the *bɔwui*'s lush, billowing cloak, and within a few cranks, Siloh's wide-eyed visage is fully revealed to the cheering crowd. Suddenly aware of his exposure, Siloh drops the mask and flees the scene, dissolving the crowd and the night's festivities with a wave of uproarious mirth.

¹² The *bɔwui* is a "haystack"-style devil known in other regions as *gbetu*. Like many devils including *gongoli*, it is interethnic. Siegmann and Perani, "Men's Masquerades of Sierra Leone and Liberia," 46.

The Outsider as Archetype

Through acts of exposure, Gongoli undertakes a meta-commentary on masking that acknowledges the artifice of the mask and violates its sacrosanct principles of anonymity and self-effacement. Clearly, Siloh and other dancers can only perform these acrobatic reversals of hallowed Mende values thanks to the nature of Gongoli's classification among the *heisia*. Mende audiences and other devil aficionados, including art historians and anthropologists, make clear distinctions between categories of *heisia*, roughly differentiating those reserved for "society business" from those who are available for general kr. *gladines* ("amusement")—what Durkheimian scholars might classify as an opposition of the sacred to the profane.¹³ Donald Cosentino uses the more flexible category of "antithesis" to distinguish between more formal and more playful *heisia*.¹⁴ Ruth Phillips notes that "parallelisms, oppositions, and contrasts" highlight the specific qualities of each *hei* but their structural relationships remain ambiguous and fluid.¹⁵ For example, the anonymity and "secrets" of a masked dancer are closely protected in *both* initiatory society and more secular contexts.

While the forms and activities of particular *heisia* offer some indication of their hierarchies, their relations to each other and to audiences become more transparent through their relations with patrons. A scalar view of *heisia* patronage reveals a continuum of communities whose declining size and influence correspond almost precisely with diminishing restrictions upon performance, including the accessibility of a masked dancer's identity.

¹³ Loretta R. Reinhardt, "Mende Secret Societies and Their Costumed Spirits," in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, ed. Justine M Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 231–66; Siegmann and Perani, "Men's Masquerades of Sierra Leone and Liberia"; Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1915).

¹⁴ Cosentino, *Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers*, 17.

¹⁵ Phillips, *Representing Woman*, 72.

At the weightiest end of the continuum is the patronage of the Poro and Sande initiatory societies. These associations have the most rigid restrictions on their devils, and, ostensibly, performers may only be called to play for society events. Although membership of societies is limited to initiates of one gender or another, both societies represent the community at large through spiritual negotiations with ancestors and the bush and through broad oversight of social action in their communities. The societies' activities, and consequently those of their devils, influence the entire community and, in a significant cosmological sense, all of humanity. Lower on the scale, other kinds of patronage define more limited communities. As Warren d'Azevedo notes, the identities of most performers and craftsmen are subsumed under the title of their patrons. In his day, "when one admired the work of a singer, a musician, or wood carver, one was usually informed of the name of a patron as though the identity of the actual producer was insignificant."¹⁶ Chiefs may assemble and promote the work of artists within their community, calling on them as servants of the chieftaincy for any number of civic functions. Representing a smaller network, a wide array of local associations and clubs sponsor *heisia*, including agricultural work groups, mutual aid societies, and organizations of village youths. These groups often decide to create or commission a devil to raise funds and promote their activities. Other *heisia* are sponsored by touring cultural troupes led by men and women who are often performers themselves, usually singers or mystic artists. Here, the devils' individual identities are subsumed under the figure of that star performer. In the rare case in which a masker *is* the troupe leader, his identity does become widely acknowledged. This was the case with Kpetema Seiya, long the most celebrated mystic performer in Eastern Sierra Leone and a famous performer of the *falui* devil. Healers, usually independent practitioners without any unified social

¹⁶ d' Azevedo, "Sources of Gola Artistry," 332.

group (at least until recent attempts to unionize the profession), may perform as devils in order to drum up business through the demonstration of their mystic skill set.

At the very base of this scale dawdle various disenfranchised performers like Siloh and many other Gongoli dancers. In the midst of a veritable efflorescence of Mende traditional culture in the twelve years following the close of Sierra Leone's Civil War, Gongoli stands alone. Practically every other devil or traditional performer is the visible arm of a proud collective whose members now enthusiastically proclaim their ability to resurrect prewar culture and thus restore some degree of normalcy and stability, however illusory that may be. Women's Sande societies and their famed *sowei* devils continue to exemplify these displays. Most audiences recognize devils as representatives of prominent associations. Not so with Gongoli. Every time I met a Gongoli at a festival or campaign rally, he was uninvited and few bystanders had any idea where he had come from. By the event's end, Gongoli had disappeared, and hardly anyone cared where, in spite of the mirth he had brought with him.

Across the continuum of *heisia* patronage, the risks and consequent restrictions of performance are proportional to the scale of the community represented. Broader concerns equal greater risks, greater responsibility, and greater protective restrictions. On one extreme is the exorbitant penalty imposed upon the dancer of the *gbini*, Poro's most significant devil. If he should fall while carrying his mask, much less allow his identity to be observed, he will be fined an impossibly costly array of damages including barrels of palm oil, livestock, and cash.¹⁷ While I never witnessed a *gbini* fall, I was told time and again about the potential fine. This common and open knowledge suggests that the identity of the *gbini* dancer is not secret. However, any such matters can only be discussed in reference to the awesome coercive power of the laws of

¹⁷ cf. Frederick William Hugh Migeod, "The Poro Society: The Building of the Poro House and Making of the Image," *Man* 16 (July 1916): 108.



Figure 41. Various *gongoli*. (left) Blama, Small Bo Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2012. (right) Tissor, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2013.

Poro. The stakes of masked performance diminish from this extreme, as failure to defend the integrity of the devil affects diminishing communal interests: from chiefdom to village to club or association, professional troupe, and finally to personal profit. At the end of this spectrum, a performer might be quite blasé about maintaining his anonymity, tossing off his headdress as soon as he leaves the stage or wearing parts of his costume after a performance.

In such a dynamic, the greater the public whose interests the devil promotes, the more its privacy is vigorously guarded. The inverse is true in conceptions of global neoliberalism wherein individual autonomy is presumably preserved via greater protections of individual privacy, while the broader the public, the more open to transparent scrutiny it must be. Yet, the anonymity of the masked performer cannot be understood simply as a model for abdicating individual agency and subsuming personal interests for the good of a collective.

For most Mende, initiation and integration into progressively larger social networks are precisely the pathways towards recognition of one's own agency. Many of the smaller devil clubs have names along the lines of *tegloma*, technically meaning "progress" but often interpreted to me as "unity." At first I thought this collapse of "unity" and "progress" simply parroted the mainstream nationalist propaganda that followed the country's divisive civil war. I soon discovered that declarations of togetherness are much more foundational, especially for communities with no external support and who depend on radically collective action, for example in the slow process of rebuilding war-torn villages and economies. Thus, individual agency is always understood in relation to the collective, not in opposition to it.

As one ascends through the ranks of larger and larger community networks, one accumulates the material and social resources to act out one's own program. Once attaining the status of patron, one is understood as exceptional and capable of mobilizing radical action. This

ideal is the model for *gbini* performance, which enacts the incontrovertible power of the Poro and models the aspirations of most other manifestations of *heisia*. At the same time, exceptionality is embodied to another extreme in Gongoli. Rather than manifesting the “big man” patron through whom a community is imagined, Gongoli is the outsider through whom the community is imagined in reverse. Both are excepted from the rules and regulations of societal norms. Both have the liberty to display inordinate personal difference and to propose radical social transformations. The difference is that the actions of *gbini*/patron, in representing a wide public, carry incredible personal and social risk. The actions of the Gongoli/outsider, without communal ties, carry risk to no one but himself.

3.2 SUBCULTURE AS ECCENTRICITY: THE MANY MISFITS OF MAMMY YOKO

Siloh is just the most recognizable of literally dozens of misfits and outcasts who have found their way into the spacious truck bed of the touring Mammy Yoko Cultural Dance Troupe as it picks its way across the Sierra Leone countryside. Mammy Yoko and Hassan Jalloh’s Warrior troupe are the two troupes in Southern Sierra Leone that are successful enough to own vehicles, set their own touring schedules, and play a show almost every night of the dry season. Both run two nights of programs in each village they visit, both pull from the same hodgepodge of performance practices—most of which are ostensibly tied to Mende ethnicity—that make up a “cultural show,” and both close out their programs and further pad their incomes with all-night disco parties. However, the similarities stop there.

Jalloh’s Warriors may appear to be a gang of maverick rebels, but compared to Mammy Yoko, they are a unified regiment of dreadlock-wearing “rastas,” Bob Marley’s “buffalo soldiers” as it were, whose uniform is the latest Chinese-produced, reggae-print fashion and

whose common posture is the aloof confidence of the superstar artist. In contrast, Mammy Yoko hosts a motley assortment of players drawn from across the full spectrum of Mendeland's social margins. Aside from a core group of about twenty members, it is impossible to pin down Mammy Yoko's constantly shifting performers, producers, roadies, groupies, girlfriends, and other hangers-on. The makeshift, slapdash character of the troupe is partially a product of Mammy Yoko's history.

Rebellion and Reinvention

Mammy Yoko (c. 1849-1906) was a remarkable figure in colonial Sierra Leone, one of a handful of female paramount chiefs in Mendeland, a significant patron of the women's Sande society, and a noted collaborator with the British administration.¹⁸ During the flurry of nationalism surrounding the fall of the corrupt APC regime in the early years of the civil war, Mammy Yoko became one of a handful of historical figures to rise to the status of national hero.¹⁹ Aside from her significant impact on Sierra Leonean history and culture, neither she nor her former chiefdom are directly connected to the troupe described here. At least two other troupes in Sierra Leone have taken up the title of Mammy Yoko because she has become a symbol of Mende culture and Sierra Leone in general. While many other institutions, including one of the oldest luxury hotels in Freetown (now operated by Radisson Blu Hotels and Resorts), likely use the name for its air of local nobility, this grandeur is an aspiration but not the emphasis of the troupes' leaders.²⁰ Rather, they recognize Mammy Yoko as a "society woman" and as an established brand for cultural activity. Alongside their woman's *sowei* devil, the Mammy Yoko

¹⁸ Lynda Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone: Women Chiefs of the Last Two Centuries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹⁹ Opala, "Ecstatic Renovation!"

²⁰ Nor do I believe they intend the title as parody or ironic gesture.

troupe hosts a “Mammy Yoko” dancing devil, but I believe they acquired it in honor of their name, not vice versa. Rather than historicizing Mammy Yoko in terms of a founding myth like that of Hassan Jalloh’s Warrior troupe, here I narrate the troupe’s history via the prosaic path of finance.

Moriba Koroma was raised in a village near Joru on the edges of the Gola forest, between Kenema and the Liberian border in the region that was the homeland for most artists I met traveling across southern Sierra Leone. In his early years, Moriba had no interest or aptitude for the performing arts.²¹ Before he could enter university, he became among the first villagers to be forcibly recruited into the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) as the rebels entered Kenema District. He uses the term “abduction” to describe his recruitment into the rebel forces, but, as is the case with many other former-RUF members, his phrasing does not necessarily reflect a lack of choice so much as it frames his experience to correspond with postwar narratives depicting rebel fighters as “forced” into violence.²² Moriba rose quickly in the RUF ranks. In his narration of wartime, he casts himself as a wry, detached sage, observing a sequence of events only partially within his control, frequently sidestepping disaster through foresight and common sense, and occasionally stepping into the conflict at key moments with keen advice and strategies that ultimately led him to be promoted to RUF leader Foday Sankoh’s inner circle.

Moriba is many things—businessman, ex-rebel, Evangelist, amateur intellectual—but he is not an artist. His route to Mammy Yoko was far from romantic. Following the Civil War, Moriba used his dispensation from the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program to purchase a “set,” meaning the mixer, speakers, and generators that make touring discos

²¹ From this point, I use Moriba’s given name, since the family name of Koroma is too common across Sierra Leone.

²² Peters and Richards, ““Why We Fight.””



Figure 42. The Mammy Yoko devil of the Mammy Yoko Dance Troupe. Mende Buima, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

possible, with the intention of hiring it out to patrons across Kenema District. Even though he provided his own transportation, his Moonlight Disco Set never took off. Moriba recognized that he had to provide his clients with more than just the *equipment* for an event. He needed to provide them with the *reason* for an event. He assembled a cultural show in order to add value to his gear, rather than acquiring gear to add value to his cultural show. The latter equation is the predominant dream of troupes whose struggles to arrange transportation and amplification leave them at the whims of village producers who often spend much more on drivers and DJs than on performers. Moriba had thus stumbled into a profitable situation. By stepping forward to address the business end of cultural troupe activities, he and his resources have become a magnet for independent performers lacking access to the tools necessary to make a living on tour. Moriba's open-ended invitation to cultural performers bolstered his company but also led to chaotic personal relations that have required Moriba to develop his own virtuosic skills in the management of often clashing personalities and egos.

Moriba is very clear about his indebtedness to Benjamin Vandy "Professional Baggie" Korvoma, who has served as the artistic director of Mammy Yoko for the past four years. Baggie is a member of a society of magicians based out of his home province in Moyamba district. In Freetown, he had been drafted into a company of disaffected members of the National Cultural Troupe. This collective became one of the original Mammy Yoko Cultural Troupes, and found reasonable success in the capital until one of the co-founders emigrated to the United States. Baggie returned to the provinces to tour his Mende-speaking territory, bringing a core group of musicians and dancers with him. Moriba offered Baggie a level of economic consistency that the troupe found indispensable, so Baggie became Moriba's star player and artistic director, and the troupe inherited the name "Mammy Yoko" from Baggie's earlier ensemble.



Figure 43. Moriba Koroma. Kailahun Town, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

Baggie initiates new members into his magician society and maintains a fairly strong hold over respect for its codes. For example, any company business is discussed with shoes off in consonance with the laws of Baggie's society. Furthermore, many troupe members take time during their tours to find, prepare, and sell herbal medicines. They benefit from the free transportation of the tour to find new customers, and they usually spend most of the second morning in any village touring the area with a plateful of wares, walking for hours before returning in time to take the stage. They also use the tour as a chance to exchange medicinal techniques and recipes with each other and local herbalists.²³

Cast of Characters

With Baggie's team at the core, Mammy Yoko continued to grow, collecting all manner of followers as it moved throughout the provinces. A dramatis personae of a few regular members suggests their diversity:

Lansana Lebbie is Baggie's long-suffering second-in-command. A small, soft-spoken man with a quiet lilt in his voice, he has taken over the position of lead magician from Baggie without managing to reach celebrity status. His acts are more convoluted than most, involving audience participation in drawn-out, obscure rituals which end with him spitting out a frog or pulling a string from his mouth long enough to snake around the playing space five times over. Lansana also performs a version of Hassan Jalloh's signature box act, in which he emerges from a locked chest in new clothes, but with several minor variations. Rather than Hassan's regal processual preparations, Lansana undresses to the funky grooves of a song about a villager facing troubles in the big city. While Hassan appears in the high-status clothing of imams or

²³ Not a single Mammy Yoko player was a member of the Sierra Leone Indigenous Traditional Healers Union (SLITHU) described in the previous chapter, and few were aware of the organization.

soldiers, Lansana will most often appear as a policeman with a walkie-talkie and handcuffs, or dressed in a tight rainbow dress and stylish wig in order to dance suggestively with audience members who have been corralled into helping with the act. Such gender play was largely foreign to Jalloh's shows.

Joseph "Smohl Pehpeh" Korvoma (kr. *smɔl pɛpɛ* or "small pepper," referring to his size and surprising virtuosity) is Baggie's young son and probably the hardest working member of the troupe. He is smaller than the other members, and maintains a boyish appearance that verges on androgyny. On stage he cultivates an attitude of studied indifference verging on lethargy, but this apathetic affect is a dynamic counterpoint to his acrobatic virtuosity. Pehpeh usually warms up the crowd with a solo repertoire of acts that runs from plate-spinning through hula hooping to juggling. With each of these acts, the stupor suggested by his languid stumbling across the arena is belied by his adept manipulation of the objects and a keen choreography that implies a kind of rhythmic possession by the music, which consists of an assortment of locally produced techno/electronica. Pehpeh learned many of these techniques through apprenticeships with the National Dance Troupe. Moriba continues to push Pehpeh to continue his studies to include fire juggling and other acrobatic techniques, even as the boy serves double duty as one of the troupe's lead group dancers. Meanwhile, as Baggie's child, he works without pay.

Musu is Mammy Yoko's most constant woman player, part den mother, part provocateur. Her contribution to the program consists of playing the *shegburai* rattle to accompany the drummers or escorting the troupe's *sowei* devil. She holds other administrative duties, including overseeing the distribution of meals. Musu has a tendency to throw conventional Mende propriety to the wind, openly claiming witchcraft powers, bathing in public, mock-challenging

men to fights, and explicitly flirting with me. In spite of her lack of decorum, her compassion is evident, and women in many sites we visited knew and respected her well.

Fatoma Kamara is Musu's brother from the same father. He too is a member of the Sande society. I never understood exactly how he had been integrated into the women's society, but he explained that his mother was a strong *sowei*, in this case meaning "Sande elder" in addition to the Sande devil.²⁴ Fatoma, like a few other Mammy Yoko players, wears his hair tightly plaited styles of the kind normally worn by women, tapping into the mystic powers of transvestite play that demonstrate the performers ability to transcend gender categories.²⁵ He is also as soft-spoken, dainty, and feminine as his sister is brash and coarse. Fatoma traveled with Mammy Yoko for a period before returning to his wife and children in Kailahun District, where I later met him with another, smaller *ad hoc* company performing for a Poro funeral before losing track of him again.

Sheikh, a muscular young man wearing dreads and the latest fashions, carries the air of a rock star. He spends most of the day lounging about with his girlfriend, even as other performers are busy doing backstage work. It took me a few days to figure out why he was allowed such liberty. Sheikh is the dancer of the *bɔwui* devil, one of the troupe's surefire crowd pleasers, which he performs with incredible energy and precision. Moriba proudly claims responsibility for Sheikh's training. Moriba hired a famed group of *bɔwui* dancers to play with the troupe for one season, and had Sheikh learn the techniques as their apprentice. The next season, Moriba fired the other troupe and kept the *bɔwui* for Mammy Yoko through Sheikh's skills.

²⁴ I am not aware of any literature on male members of Sande. The men's society Poro contains a ritual position for a female member, *mabole*, and has been known to initiate female chiefs and forcibly induct women who seek out their secrets. None of these is precisely analogous to Fatoma's participation in Sande.

²⁵ Moran, "Warriors or Soldiers?: Masculinity and Ritual Transvestism in the Liberian Civil War."

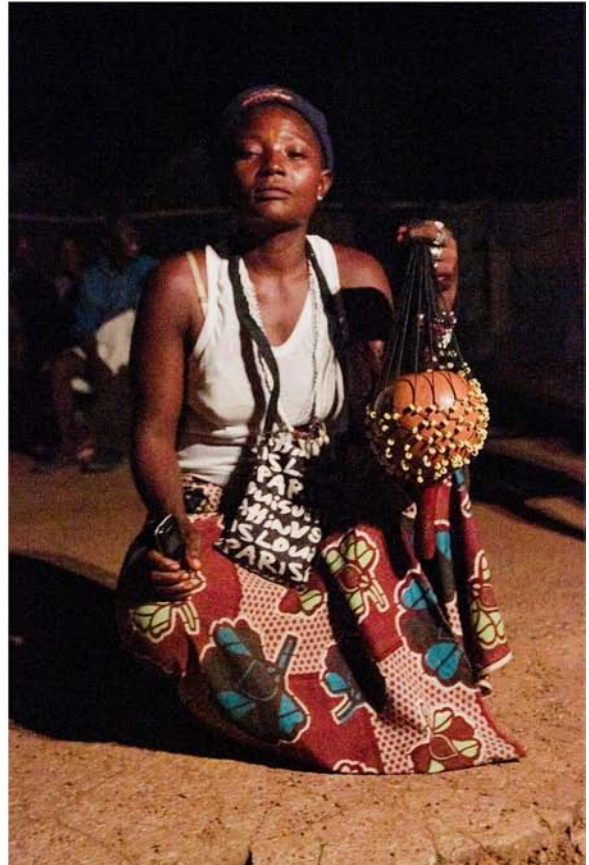


Figure 44. (top) “Smohl Pehpeh.” Mofindor, Luawa, Kailahun District, 2012. (left) Lansana Lebbie and other Mammy Yoko members. Joru, Guara, Kenema District, 2012. (right) Musu. Konjo, Dama, Kenema District, 2012.

Many of the most striking characteristics of these individuals are precisely those that set them apart from the rest of village society: extravagance, rebelliousness, nonconformity, cross-gender behavior, and, though not mentioned above, kr. *diamba* (“marijuana”) use. In rural Sierra Leone, few subcultures have crystallized in the way they have in Freetown or other more cosmopolitan spaces. Instead of coherent communities united around common forms of identification, groups like Mammy Yoko come together out of opportunism and mutual experiences of exclusion. Their amorphous congregation on the fringes of society—or more literally rattling along the roads between societies—hosts an abundance of practices and beliefs that do not quite “fit” with wider practice in manifold and volatile contexts of “subculture.” To recognize its inchoate indeterminacy, I suggest considering “subculture” as a mass noun, like “water” or “violence” innumerable and indivisible.²⁶

3.3 SUBCULTURE AS EXCESS: JUGGLING POSSIBILITIES IN THE POSTCOLONY

“Sub-” Stance

Although originating in studies of so-called “deviance” in early 20th century American cities, subcultural studies had its most formative and influential iteration in the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in post-WWII Britain, drawing on Gramsci’s conceptions of “hegemony” to clarify the force against which various youth communities were struggling.²⁷ The CCCS scholars brought needed attention to the operations of

²⁶ “Mass nouns” are contrasted with “count nouns,” modified with numbers and plural forms, and “collective nouns” indicating a group of things, such as “group” or “troupe.” cf. Brendan S. Gillon, “Towards a Common Semantics for English Count and Mass Nouns,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 15, no. 6 (1992): 597–639.

²⁷ cf. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. Joseph Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

political power in subculture and the importance of style as a semiotic mode of rebellion.²⁸

However, their approach collapsed working-class and youth struggles, leading to a simplistic narrative Jack Halberstam describes as an “oedipal framework that pits the subculture against its parent culture.”²⁹ At the height of 1990s postmodernism, many academics favored concepts such as “lifestyle” and “consumer creativity,” painting a more individualistic view of culture no longer bounded by community and freed from social codes by the plethora of choices afforded by globalized capitalism.³⁰ Furthermore, the rapid flux and semiotic voracity of contemporary popular culture “beamed up” (a metaphor itself beamed up from *Star Trek* fandom) elements of isolated subcultures via media exposure.³¹ The proliferation of subcultures and their successive integration into mainstream culture became so advanced that Martin Roberts could argue that they included the jet-setting lifestyles of global DJs.³² Over the course of a century, the academic concept of “subculture” had moved from the purview of the “deviant” and those outside class, through the working class, into a global aristocracy.

In spite of subculture’s increasingly indefinite definition, the concept needs to be revisited with a more critical focus on the lived logistics and limitations of contemporary cultural practice. In its celebration of individuated choice, the “post-subcultural” moment has ignored

²⁸ Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1979); Phil Cohen, “Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 86–93; Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

²⁹ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 160.

³⁰ David Chaney, *Lifestyles* (London: Routledge, 1996); Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris, *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2004).

³¹ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).

³² Martin Roberts, “Notes on the Global Underground: Subcultures and Globalization,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 575–86.

both the inescapably communal pull of subcultural groups and the multitude of continued power inequities played out within and between subcultural communities.³³ Jack Halberstam notes that “youth culture” and “subculture” cannot be collapsed because subculture is not merely a phase that individuals pass through on their way to adult- and parenthood.³⁴ Similarly, African “youth culture” cannot be not defined as subculture since youth status, though not age-based, is a transitional stage of life, even if it often becomes “a state of permanent ambiguity” as youths await in vain the symbols of adulthood, such as jobs, marriage, and property.³⁵

Along with “youth culture,” many of the themes investigated here have been productively explored in African contexts through other concepts, though none fits precisely with “subculture.” “Global imaginaries” reflect how specific subcultural styles are transmitted across great distances and assimilated in new ways locally, but does not readily account for power relations.³⁶ “Popular culture” also speaks to novel configurations of local and global aesthetics, but it may be more appropriate to members of aspiring “intermediate classes” than to socially marginalized figures.³⁷ Several scholars have equated subcultural practice with liminality, including Victor Turner himself.³⁸ However, unless one takes a processual position that contends that sub- or countercultures provide transitions to new social formations—an untestable argument—they cannot be counted as liminal phenomena. Subcultures are better defined as

³³ Ken Gelder, *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007), 104–06.

³⁴ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 6.

³⁵ Marc Sommers, *Stuck: Rwandan Youth and the Struggle for Adulthood* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 3. cf. “waithood” Alcinda Honwana, *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012).

³⁶ cf. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Weiss, *Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops: Global Fantasy in Urban Tanzania*.

³⁷ Barber, *The Generation of Plays*, 2. cf. Karin Barber, ed., *Readings in African Popular Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); Johannes Fabian, “Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures,” *Africa* 48, no. 04 (1978): 315–34.

³⁸ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, 261–65.

marginal. In Turner's words, "Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution to their ambiguity."³⁹

The prefix "sub-" implies certain relations. Coining a new term might seem more appropriate: perhaps "Alterculture" or "alloculture" to stress difference, "paraculture" to stress coexistence, or "periculture" to stress marginality. However, in spite of all its baggage, the "sub-" in "subculture" and its stress on power relations is too important to reject. Subculture is perceived as lying "below" some other culture, frequently expressed as some kind of inferiority to convention. Subculture is both inside and outside the value boundaries of a perceived hegemony, "a part of and apart from" another culture.⁴⁰

Rasta and the Artist

"Rasta," a diffuse body of practices and beliefs that serves as both noun and adjective in Krio, is the closest thing Sierra Leone has to an established subculture, one that most performing artists identify with at least to some degree. Sierra Leone's ties to Jamaica lead all the way back to the founding of Freetown, as a contingent of Maroons became only the second group of freed Africans to emigrate to the new colony following the first settlers from New Brunswick. Direct cross-regional exchange was no doubt amplified through Kingston and Freetown's shared links with London. While not all Sierra Leoneans are equally mobile, Freetown's youth of all classes found their life prospects increasingly frustrated amid the economic decline of the 1970s, and they shared angst amid common social spaces (e.g. *pote*), activities (e.g. *Ode-lay* masking), and

³⁹ Ibid., 233.

⁴⁰ John Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class," in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 94–104.

transgressions (e.g. *ganja* or kr. *jamba*).⁴¹ By the late 1970s, newspaper reporters in Freetown could remark that “slowly but inexorably the Rastafarian breeze is creeping over Freetown,” at once decrying *jamba* smoking and poor work ethics and praising the boost to “the African image and the world Black Community at large.”⁴²

In today’s Sierra Leone, marginalized and unemployed young men most ardently adopt Rasta idioms. The general public takes anxieties about unintegrated male youth and maps them onto the identity of the Rasta. Among the most innocuous manifestations of this reduction is the conjunction understood between dreadlocks and Rasta; one superficially implies the other. Among the most pernicious of the elisions is that between *ganja/jamba* and the Rasta, wherein all Rasta-style devotees are presumed to be smokers and sellers and vice versa.⁴³ For such reasons, young men risk further marginalization by embracing Rasta, so most youths adopt ambiguous relations with Rasta identity. Almost all youths with whom I conversed agreed with Rasta philosophy and accepted Rasta views as “truth.” However, few wore dreads or the oversized and varicolored uniform of the Rasta, preferring instead to maintain a conservative appearance that would not conflict with opportunities for jobs, however rare they may be.⁴⁴

One social context has comparatively more social freedom to assume Rasta styles: the “artist”—a term reserved primarily for performers, especially musicians, when employed by Sierra Leoneans. Many aspects of the artist’s profession overlap with the style and ethos of Rasta, including appeal to youth, political critique, and travel. Most Sierra Leonean artists embrace at least some elements of Rasta style voluntarily, not least because it ties them to many

⁴¹ Abdullah, “Bush Path to Destruction.”

⁴² quoted in John Nunley, “Images and Printed Words in Freetown Masquerades,” *African Arts* 15, no. 4 (August 1982): 44.

⁴³ In my experience, the widespread but underground use of marijuana had little correspondence to Rasta identities.

⁴⁴ cf. Weiss, *Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops: Global Fantasy in Urban Tanzania*, 89.

of the most successful global images of performing artistry. This confluence has affected the contemporary shape of “culture.” Both true Rastafarians and performing artists are invested in the idea of “culture” for slightly divergent reasons. For Rastafarians, “culture” perpetuates a connection to “authentic” African roots. For African artists, “culture” is a source of pride and income. By invoking Rastafarian imaginations, African artists amplify the authenticity of their own cultural practices.⁴⁵ Using globally recognized cues that have been mediated through international Rasta culture and affiliated pan-Africanisms—including dreadlocks, a red-yellow-green palette, and outlines of the African continent—they reify the African-ness of their practices for both international and local audiences.

In Sierra Leone, Rasta has proven durable even as generational dynamics have shifted focus to the widespread influence of global hip-hop. Hip-hop has successfully used the affective paths forged by reggae to become legible for contemporary African audiences. If in the West, hip hop has been understood as a reaction to reggae’s failures to enact change, in Africa, the two styles share more commonality than conflict.⁴⁶ The Sierra Leonean use of the term “artist” itself is inflected by its popularization in Western hip-hop, suggesting that the Rasta/Artist confluence is also a confluence of Rasta and hip-hop imagery. Artists see both as models, convincing global images of the forms of power and truth open to African men.

⁴⁵ During a performance that happened to take place on Bob Marley’s birthday (itself almost a national holiday among youths), Hassan Jalloh took a moment to inform his audience that RASTA stands for “Real African Society Through Awareness.”

⁴⁶ Louis Chude-Sokei, “Roots, Diaspora, and Possible Africas,” in *Global Reggae*, ed. Carolyn Cooper (Kingston, Jamaica: Canoe Press, 2012), 231.

Spirit(s) of Subculture

The ambiguous relationship most youth maintain to Rasta identities suggest that consideration of subculture requires complicating reductive top-down or bottom-up power dynamics. The previous chapter argued that the frame of national culture provides actors with more agency to experiment with practices and beliefs than they may have within categories of local or international culture. In conducting these experiments, practitioners continually reorganize and re-hierarchize individual practices, style elements, and tropes. Many of these are outright rejected within the hegemonic discourse, but an unstable and ambiguous relationship remains with even these practices. Subculture allows for a discursive space where these practices can be perpetuated, isolated from the hegemony, but accessible at any time for appropriation.

In a sense, subcultures are like Bakhtin's Carnival, a zone in which creativity, criticism, and license are provisionally permitted.⁴⁷ Rather than a separate temporal interval, subculture is construed as a separate social order. Subculture offers not just "ludic temporalities" but also ludic space.⁴⁸ Sierra Leone's touring cultural artists are communities upon whom the rest of society projects a perpetual condition of carnival. Their everyday lives are composed of the extraordinary or aberrant occasions of their spectating public.

The events that Gongoli crashes are often village-wide festivities precipitated by either the preliminaries for Poro initiations, visits from dignitaries and returning émigrés, or political rallies. Often the invitation to perform is open and a variety of independent cultural associations and individual performers arrive to promote their projects, find new sources of patronage, or enjoy themselves. Multiple different performances engage in a friendly competition for

⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 34.

⁴⁸ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 5.

attention.⁴⁹ Devil associations with a large number of followers have a built in crowd of spectators and rapidly attract more participants. Meanwhile, independent mystic artists, dancers, and devils like Gongoli flit among different crowds and try to snatch the spotlight. The particularly powerful figures in town can wait for each association to come to them. Often one might witness a few scattered dancers meet and form a brief alliance, improvising some unforeseeable collaboration that may or may not lead to future projects beyond the day's event.

Abstracted, such events suggest a microcosm of broader social processes. If each group is understood as a collective representing certain shared interests, the devils can be considered nodes of invested interest. Those members who have a close relationship with the association have contributed the most to the devil and spend the most time in its presence making sure the performance is well-received. Other participants are more fickle and move from performance to performance. Spectators become performers, then performers become spectators. Individuals draw attention to themselves then draw away. Nodes of interest emerge then dissipate. Particularly intense crowds form around symbols of particularly intense power, including "big persons" and virtuosic talent. Not everyone will try to join the largest crowd. Finding themselves in closer proximity to another performance of a smaller scale, they might choose to commit to their attention there. Some figures end up at the outskirts, but there they find yet other alliances and opportunities that might initiate something new. This abstraction oversimplifies the complex dynamics of both a single festive event and the grander processes that lead to the contingent coalitions of subculture. However, the model of disordered festivity does illustrate how interest and social power build upon both individual ability *and* collective investment almost

⁴⁹ Conversely, at events with a single group of performers such as formal Poro ceremonies or pay-to-enter cultural shows, attention is comparatively unilateral. However, even the Warriors and Mammy Yoko will often pull a few different kinds of devils in the afternoon, creating a pell-mell environment throughout the village that increases anticipation for the paid show.

exponentially, and how certain players and practices can fall out of the center of attention while remaining active on the fringes of awareness.

3.4 SUBCULTURE AS EXCLUSION: BAD HUMOR

Dissent and Dissolutions

Early in the 2011-12 performance season, Moriba overreached. Having accumulated dozens of performers, he decided to split the troupe in two, theoretically doubling his profits but ultimately doubling his difficulties.⁵⁰ When Moriba sent me to join “troupe B,” tensions were already strained, as the players had arrived in town to discover that no one knew they were coming. In the end, it was revealed that a youth had received the troupe’s posters but failed to otherwise follow through on initiating arrangements on the town level. In the interests of hospitality, some rice and sauce was scrounged up and troupe members were invited to spend the night in the school classrooms. However no program could take place as most of the town’s young men were in the *Poro* bush for initiation, and it was “too dangerous” for women and children to be out at night. Miscommunications are all too frequent when responsibilities are distributed so diffusely across producers, promoters, players and local coordinators, and while such difficulties are not limited to any one troupe, they are certainly endemic to Mammy Yoko.

The Troupe regrouped and managed to find another village a few miles away that was eager to welcome the entertainment at the last minute. Early the following day, the troupe made the trip and the village’s youths descended upon the football field to clear the overgrown grass. Within a few hours, the space was prepared and the program went on with little difficulty.

Posturing passionately and unevenly, the members of Troupe B charged on stage to electronica

⁵⁰ For example, in a not entirely unpredictable twist of fate, both of his vehicles broke down within a month of each other, requiring the extra cost of truck rental.

featuring sensationalized thunderclaps and guitar riffs not dissimilar to those of a glam rock anthem. Continued melodrama and the lead performer's use of prestidigitations familiar to me from the how-to books of my youth echoed European stage traditions more than any other troupe I had yet seen.⁵¹ Even so, the players sustained a frame of Sierra Leonean culture through dance, costume, music, and song. The performance was well-received, but the night's successes were short-lived. The speedy preparation of the performance field belied the other struggles the town was facing to host its unexpected guests. Communal rice took three hours to be delivered, and by then the night's disco had already shifted into high gear. While I was standing outside with some of the men of the troupe, a sudden uproar suspended the revelry. We rushed in to find rice spread liberally around the DJ booth. One of Moriba's men had upended the wide plastic bowl and spewed everyone's meal across the dance floor in a fit of pique over the distribution of rations. The leader of Troupe B, effectively silenced by this explosion, charged off into the night, fuming.

Not until the afternoon of the next day did we realize he was gone and had taken half the troupe with him. They had begun walking in the late hours, carrying their belongings south some 30 kilometers to the next major town and then on to Kenema.⁵² Stripped to a DJ booth and a few acrobats, the remnants of Mammy Yoko's Troupe B and local promoters were forced to cancel any plans to continue. Those few remaining players returned to Moriba to rejoin Troupe A. Not until the next season did I run into the Troupe B leader and his followers again, camping out in his family's village compound a few miles outside Kenema, and struggling to find regular gigs because he lacked reliable patronage.

⁵¹ For example, one act featured water magically poured out of a rolled-up magazine.

⁵² The contrasts with the situation described earlier, when Hassan Jalloh decided to withdraw from a village, are illustrative. Jalloh's performance was public, feigned, and resulted in the escalation of his status. The leader of Troupe B's departure was invisible, genuine, and ultimately failed to benefit him.



Figure 45. Mammy Yoko Troupe B's *gongoli*. Moinmandu, Yawei Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

The hodgepodge construction of the Mammy Yoko troupe is an open invitation to frictions, further exacerbated by the troupe's unorthodoxly decentralized power structure. Depending on who is present and the issue at hand, responsibility lies with either Moriba, Baggie, Lansana, lead musician Hona, driver Fatoma, local producers and organizers, or any number of other individuals. Additionally, each member of the company has his or her own social networks and various chains of authority to maintain, and responsibilities to a close colleague can often trump those to leaders like Moriba or Baggie. The hyper-composite structure of the Mammy Yoko troupe is thus inherently risky, and both Moriba and Baggie have learned to either negotiate with it or roll with the fallout of intra-group frictions. This is not to say that conflicts were foreign to other troupes—far from it. Even Hassan Jalloh's regimentally organized squad was riven by numerous personnel schisms, including a serious but ultimately temporary break in the time I traveled with him and a few other significant rifts over his troupe's ten-year history. Mammy Yoko, though, always seems on the brink of total dissolution. Without legal recourse for either Moriba or his players, the terms of engagement are strictly within the informal yet highly structured realm of patronage relations, constrained by personal bonds, and subject to the often unstable effects of jealousy, suspicion, and the emotional stress of life on tour. While these conflicts are frequently unpredictable, they are never without structure and they arise expressly from constantly renegotiated chains of responsibility and authority, motivated by the players' understanding of their own proximity to shifting power resources.

License and Play

While relations within Mammy Yoko are often strained, relations between the troupe and the towns they visit suffered from misunderstandings or worse, with scheduling messes such as

Troupe B's bad timing with *Poro* initiations serving as such one variety of discord. While villagers are happy to host the troupe and most of the players are model guests, very occasionally conflicts between troupe members and locals erupt. As transients, cultural troupe members receive both license and disdain. In some cases, the artists do bring problems upon themselves, yet in my experience much less frequently than villagers may presume. More often, players were ready scapegoats for a variety of accusations. One exemplary disaster befell a member of Hassan Jalloh's Warrior Troupe. While we were touring a town in Liberia, this dancer used some of his recently received wages to purchase a t-shirt from a young boy. While wearing the new shirt the next day, he was attacked by a group of youths who accused him of stealing it off a drying line. Without heeding his alibi, the young men beat him, stole the remainder of his wages, and shaved off his carefully maintained dreads. The Warrior's outsider status made it easier to accuse him than the member of the community who had actually committed the crime, as well as to dispense vigilante justice and commit outright theft without sanction.

Drug use is another arena of contention. Sometimes members are arrested for possession—especially when traveling across the border in Liberia where laws are more frequently enforced—though rarely long enough to disrupt performances. More often, the frequent illicit consumptions of certain troupe members, mostly kr. *jamba* (“marijuana”) and cheap liquor, take place through a variety of careful evasions. *Jamba* smokers could always partake in their *vaahun* (“preparation space”) as a private area forbidden to outsiders. Those members who were regular drinkers or smokers also maintained networks, surreptitious if not exactly underground, throughout the range of their tours. At many tour stops, these members knew or quickly discovered the small speakeasies that welcomed lazy consumption of hard liquor and *jamba*. In such places, troupe

members and other village youths engage in social transgressions expected and tolerated by the community, as long as they were hidden away.

Most varieties of misconduct occurred in the generally bacchanalian atmosphere of the cultural show and disco. Discos attract not only youth of the host community but also people from all villages within walking distance. Generally young guests arrive in the early evening and expect to spend the whole night at the disco, stumbling out of the *barri* at first light. The atmosphere is one of general sexual permissiveness, and one that clearly has an effect on the high rate of rural teenage pregnancies and unwed mothers that has prompted significant disapproval from village elders. As one young man put it to me as we passed couples walking to the disco site, “something will happen tonight,” before clarifying, “a lot of babies will be born.” Many of the touring performers maintain girlfriends at a few sites in regions they frequent or at key crossroads with access to multiple villages, such as Kenema or Daru. Almost every tour leg that I traveled with Mammy Yoko’s troupe featured a different assortment of artists’ girlfriends. In some cases the young women had recently met the troupe and traveled as what Western rockers would call “groupies.” I never learned from the girls how their communities judged these excursions, but bystanders often criticized the practice, blaming parental neglect and the dancers’ opportunism.

Subculture is loaded with practices and beliefs that are circumstantially acceptable by many but not fully embraced or sanctioned, such as limited recreational drug use and romantic experimentation. While most individuals may temporarily borrow such license, deviations from the norm are understood as a necessary part of the persona of the artist, and are appreciated as part of the process of entertainment. The arts and entertainment have such freedoms because of

their invocation of a frame of play.⁵³ A performer's persona both on and off stage—his or her “theatricality”—is demonstrably constructed. By engaging humor, the veracity and thus the risk of any social transgression is held in suspension.

Play may grant liberty, but it also limits activity. Public opinion that the arts are easy, drawn from a well of talent rather than toil, occludes the labor of the artist. Thus the artist slips into the register of the layabout. The artist's frequent consumption of drugs, specifically *jamba*, links creativity, leisure, and inebriation through “‘fuzzy’ logic.”⁵⁴ The fact that spectators encounter artists in the same circles as they enjoy leisure time and intoxicating substances enhances this perception. When “play” threatens to become “all *too* real, all *too* possible,” as Steven Nelson suggests occurred at the very different site of subcultural expression in Dakarais cinema, the artists become available to censorship and castigation.⁵⁵ The frame of play allows individuals more personal liberty, but also undercuts how seriously they are taken. Ironically, if all one's acts are just an “act,” one cannot participate in wider social action. Ineffectuality can be a source of deep frustration.

Mammy Yoko Enfuriated

Late in the touring season, the Mammy Yoko troupe played in an isolated corner of Kono District along the Guinea border. A new road had only recently been cleared by a South African mining consortium prospecting in the area. Most of the road was easy traveling compared to

⁵³ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 39. cf. Mike McGovern, “This Is Play: Popular Culture and Politics in Côte d’Ivoire,” in *Hard Work, Hard Times: Global Volatility and African Subjectivities*, ed. Anne-Maria Makhulu, Beth A. Buggenhagen, and Stephen Jackson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 69–90.

⁵⁴ “Fuzzy” logic “can only generate systematic products with an approximate, fuzzy coherence that cannot withstand the test of logical criticism. [...] Logic can be everywhere only because it is truly present nowhere.” Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 87.

⁵⁵ Steven Nelson, “Karmen Geï: Sex, the State, and Censorship in Dakar,” *African Arts* 44, no. 1 (2011): 74–81.

routes barely maintained by the Sierra Leone government, but the company had not yet installed durable bridges across the streams that snaked between and irrigated the many roadside rice paddies. For a small 4x4, the pairs of solid wood planks that spanned these little rivulets might have been sufficient, but Fatoma, Mammy Yoko's sanguine driver, had to pilot his gargantuan Mercedes transport carefully. The troupe's system was well practiced. As the truck rolled down the hill towards a bridge, three or four troupe members would leap from it and jog ahead to guide Fatoma's steering with shouts and gestures. Fatoma would pick up speed, surge across the bridge, and gain enough momentum to take the vehicle up the often inordinately steep and slick hill leading away from the riverbank. The troupe members escorted the truck on the way up, sliding wooden wedges under the tires if they started to slip backwards and scrambling back in as the truck crested the incline. Their system allowed the team to speed through the countryside with minimal delay—until they literally fell through. Barreling over one of the plank bridges, Fatoma miscalculated; while the front wheels crossed the gully effortlessly, one of the rear wheels slipped off the plank just before it reached the far side. The rig was powerful and robust but not, unfortunately, all-wheel drive. The rear tires spun impotently as the faulty carburetor spewed smoke over the bed of the truck. The whole troupe disembarked but the weight reduction did nothing to help the cause. Half of the group sought out sparse areas of shade on the roadside, while the other half set to work dislodging the vehicle, a process that ultimately took seven of the hottest hours of the scorching dry-season day.

A few troupe members stripped to their boxers and waded into the brackish water up to their waists. In the muck beneath the truck, they dug away at the thick dirt with their hands and attempted to wedge heavy stone slabs into precarious towers reaching up under the wheels. The truck's starter had failed weeks ago, so without a downhill slope to jumpstart the ignition Fatoma

could not stop the engine and the troupe members toiled within the continuously discharged cloud of exhaust beneath the truck. When they felt they had successfully braced up the machine, all the men were called to surround the truck, seek out a handhold, and attempt to force it up onto the road. Fatoma lay on the accelerator, spewing huge, suffocating billows of exhaust over us as we tried to wrap our faces in whatever rags we could find. After two to three minutes of tortuous and futile labor, the troupe would disperse again to seek out the shadows and attempt to recuperate. The situation was not unusual, and most of the troupe took it in stride, but nonetheless, tensions began to run high.

Among the troupe members on this run was a performer I had not met before, although he acted as if he considered himself an old hand. On stage, he never figured in any of the key acts, but he nonetheless took the attitude of a lead performer, hogging center stage on group dances, ordering younger members about, and mugging for my camera. His bossy behavior continued as the work on the truck wore on. An argument broke out between the newcomer and one of the star mask performers, himself something of an outsider due to his Temne ethnicity. The newcomer accused the masker of shirking his duties by not helping to push the vehicle. The Temne man shot back that he was paid to perform, not to labor, and tried to return to tending to his pregnant girlfriend. The newcomer chose to retaliate by sitting out the next attempt himself. Amidst the protests of the other members, he claimed that he was the longest serving member in the troupe. He shouted at anyone who would listen and began to threaten violence. Some of the members tried to calm him down and separate him from other members, but the newcomer only turned his wrath on them. Increasingly agitated, he was dragged to the back of the truck where suddenly he froze, his finger outstretched directly in front of him in a paralyzed gesture of indignant rage. Eyes bulging, he evinced only minimal sporadic twitching.

He stood frozen for twenty minutes in the same position. One or two troupe members walked up and quietly tried to speak to him, but after a few attempts at one-sided conversation, they went back to work on the truck. Moriba had driven up with his motorbike and was sitting nearby. I gave him a look of concern about the newcomer. Moriba asked, “How do you like his performance?”

Circumstances clouded whether the newcomer’s apparent paralysis was an involuntary seizure or a purposeful act meant to emphasize his anger and avoid strenuous work. A frame of play and performance allows performers the liberty to assume atypical lifestyles by making their intentions ambiguous. Are they “really” eccentric or just entertaining? Are they “acting” or “being” exceptional? Are they mocking social norms or mocking deviance? Play gives the dancers personal freedom, but it simultaneously undermines their potential to be “taken seriously,” to participate in collective action and to enact social change.

The newcomer eventually relaxed, muscle by muscle. Somehow the truck made it out of the ditch and the show went on. No one offered any further commentary on the newcomer’s “performance” and when I caught up with the troupe a month later, he was gone. Moriba explained that he had been a member several years before, but that he had threatened to kill Baggie and was forcibly suspended for several seasons. He had returned provisionally but after another violent outburst, he had been permanently ejected. Moriba also revealed that the newcomer had been a fighter for both the rebels and the CDF forces.

War Games

Subcultural play is a context that allows for increased personal freedom at the expense of social exclusion and powerlessness. Frustration follows. Play is not all fun. Richard Schechner

describes play as maintaining “a regular, crisis-oriented expenditure of energy” that may be converted into action or “fight energy.”⁵⁶ While Schechner’s formulation is perhaps an oversimplification, it does gesture towards the thin line separating play from conflict and the minimal effort necessary to move from one frame to the other.⁵⁷ In Mende, *kɔ* refers to both “war” and “game,” suggesting, as Johan Huizinga does, that the connection is more than metaphor.⁵⁸

As the Sierra Leone Civil War intensified, a furious debate unfolded about the causes of the conflict, many academics responding to a neo-Malthusian model promoted by journalist Robert Kaplan in “The Coming Anarchy.”⁵⁹ From this pernicious perspective, the globe, lacking structure provided by the Cold War, was descending into a long spiral of intrastate conflict driven by overpopulation, intractable and timeless ethnic hatreds, and lack of resources. Kaplan argued that this chaos was fomented by disaffected young men, “unstable molecules” pulsing throughout the globe’s poorest countries, epitomized in his article by the street kids of Sierra Leone. Anthropologist Paul Richards was among the first to condemn this view as dehumanizing ignorance of the legitimate complaints of Sierra Leonean youth. Drawing from direct contact with rebel soldiers and their own literature, especially the RUF handbook “Footpaths to Democracy,” Richards argued that the fighters were acting from legitimate grievances rooted in the contemporary political order, not enduring ethnic enmity or self-interest.⁶⁰ A group of exiled Sierra Leonean scholars countered Richards by arguing that the RUF and the military had been

⁵⁶ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 99.

⁵⁷ cf. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 39.

⁵⁸ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 89.

⁵⁹ Robert Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994. cf. Shaw, “Robert Kaplan and ‘Juju Journalism’ in Sierra Leone’s Rebel War: The Primitivizing of an African Conflict.”

⁶⁰ Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*.

hijacked by criminal behavior, and “Footpaths to Democracy” was a post-facto justification for brutal plunder. In Ibrahim Abdullah’s history of the rebel movement, revolution began in the mixed-class quarters of the *pote* (informal hangout places) and the *odelay* (underclass devil societies) as geographic and social places that exemplify the experimental mixing I describe as “subculture.” However, the RUF lost credibility as a revolutionary force the minute it militarized, as the few noteworthy students and intellectuals that had planted the seeds of revolution abandoned the movement in the face of increasingly indiscriminate violence. Using Marx’s definition of the *lumpenproletariat*, Abdullah argued that the RUF was mostly populated by miscreants and thugs drawn from the uneducated dregs of Sierra Leonean society. When the APC government moved to shore up the military with fresh recruits, they drew from the same indisciplined core of petty thieves, drug peddlers, and other outsiders. With soldiers on both sides driven more by self-interest and greed than by any clear ideology, the public fell victim to constant criminal depredation.⁶¹ As the war reached its resolution, the argument that the RUF was populated by misfits and miscreants became a popular narrative for the government, and in the years since the war’s conclusion—and in spite of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee’s findings that placed the blame largely on the failings of the corrupt APC regime—the rebel remains publicly equated with the criminal.⁶²

These three theses—Kaplan’s neo-Malthusianism, Richards’ legitimate grievance theory and Abdullah’s *lumpenproletariat* approach—while far from equal in explanatory value, are not as diametrically opposed as they might seem at first. Their relationship is made legible within the lens provided by subculture. Subculture accommodates angst and anti-authoritarian behavior,

⁶¹ Abdullah, “Bush Path to Destruction.”

⁶² cf. Krijn Peters, *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

whether of legitimate revolutionaries or criminals depending on whose perspective is being described. The rules of the subculture might be opaque to the parent culture, but they also might be in a constant state of experimentation and renegotiation. Kaplan's invocation of "unstable molecules" might have been apt but for reasons that he did not intend.

CODA

The Outsider as Individual

Donald Cosentino's exegesis of the Mende narratives of Musa Wo captures the thin line between comedy and horror in certain branches of Mende thought. Musa Wo is an *enfant terrible*, unreserved id, and his epics are stockpiles of the most absurd and terrible ideas that fail to fit into other story structures. Cosentino connects this errant Rambler with the pastiche of disaffected youth in Freetown, whose exasperation was already palpable in the years before the war erupted.⁶³ Yet Musa Wo does not represent the only response to subjection and marginality. If Musa Wo is the Mende answer to Fredric Jameson's "pastiche" and the amoral "cannibalization" of style, Gongoli might be the Mende answer to parody, which retains some degree of moral judgment even as it reverses moral norms.⁶⁴

Whether or not he is aiming for parody, audiences likely find Siloh Gongoli humorous for any number of personal reasons. Some must relish the feeling of their own self-aggrandizing superiority provoked by his foibles. Some clearly enjoy a kindly, if patronizing, affection for Siloh Gongoli's childlike naïveté. There are those who applaud his satirical critique of local

⁶³ Donald J. Cosentino, "Midnight Charters: Musa Wo and Mende Myths of Chaos," in *Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies*, ed. W. Arens and Ivan Karp (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 21–38.

⁶⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 16–18.

characters and institutions. Certainly many must appreciate what Cosentino recognizes as the core pleasures of “Mende ribaldry” and the humor of the grotesque: a release of “the tension between reality and appearance.”⁶⁵ Siloh Gongoli’s bungled efforts at anonymity epitomize liberation from the exhausting maintenance of the mask of public propriety.

However, the point is not to define why spectators find Siloh Gongoli hilarious, but rather how finding him funny is permitted at all. Like much broad comedy, this humor is predicated by a transgression (“He slipped and fell!”) followed by the relief of realization that the transgression is harmless (“but he’s not really hurt...”). Unlike slapstick rooted in bodily mishaps, Siloh’s transgressions are not physical or personal but social. If Gongoli stood for any particular community, his actions would be appalling. If he had a family, his impropriety would reflect their moral failures. If he had a distinguished patron, his recklessness would undermine his leader’s prestige. If he had an initiatory society, his indiscretions would suggest the weakness of their unity. Having none of these, Gongoli, the consummate loner, shames no one but himself.

Having first met Siloh with Mammy Yoko, I had thought him to be one of the core members of the troupe and presumed that one of his fellow performers had “cast” Siloh as the troupe’s *gongoli*. I was surprised to hear that Siloh had fallen in with the troupe with his *gongoli* mask already in tow. Throughout my subsequent travels around Eastern Sierra Leone, I frequently ran into Siloh without Mammy Yoko, roving from highway community to highway community and presumably living off simple manual labor and the generosity of his neighbors.

Siloh Gongoli’s appeal is no doubt rooted in the consonance between the personality of the performer and the character of the devil he portrays. This otherwise delightful congruity extends into Siloh’s personal life. He is the consummate vagabond artist, free from both the

⁶⁵ Donald J. Cosentino, “Mende Ribaldry,” *African Arts* 15, no. 2 (1982): 67.

support and constraints of a community of his own. In truth, this bittersweet alienation, perhaps the inevitable outcome of social exception, never seemed to bother Siloh too much. He was always surrounded by a different provisional assemblage of companions, whether children, unemployed young men, or fellow performers. In this sense, his lifestyle mirrored not only Gongoli, but that of most disenfranchised and displaced young men whose lives have been upset by past wartime violence and present-day poverty.

Despite these somber circumstances, there is something unquestionably “sweet”—both “enjoyable” in the sense of the Mende term *nɛngɔ* (“sweet,” “delicious,” or generally “pleasant”) and “adorable” in the sense given by colloquial English—about those disarming moments when Siloh Gongoli, sitting on the sidelines while other devils perform, is playfully teased by the women around him for lifting up his mask so as to watch his colleagues. In the anxious fumbling with which Siloh reburies his abashed and all-too-exposed visage, we lose track of the distinction between where Gongoli stops and Siloh begins. This blurring of identities only reiterates Gongoli’s fundamental essence as individuality overflowing.



Figure 46. Siloh. Gboaama, Njaluahun Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2013.

Item Three: "..."

Jalloh's acts, alongside a number of other mass spectacles in Sierra Leone, constitute a postwar public sphere, a discursive space of reflection and social transformation both for the nation and for the Mende ethnic community that constitutes the majority of Jalloh's performers and his audience. This chapter describes one of the most vivid instances of the mutually transformative power initiated by Hassan Jalloh's public discourse. Ironically, it is an act he no longer performs.

Playing with blood

Among the most widespread mystic demonstrations currently performed by cultural dancers are a grotesque repertoire of sanguinary acts of mutilation and regeneration. According to most performers, these displays have appeared relatively recently in the general repertoire of Mende mystic acts, but they are now widespread. Every troupe I met contained at least one professed practitioner. One indication of these performance forms' recent arrival is the foreign nature of the terms Mende use to describe them. Performers often use the English- or Krio-derived term *blakmagikii* or the Krio phrase *ple wi blud* ("play with blood") rather than *njosoi* or any of a number of other more localized terms for mystic acts. The most frequently cited title among performers is "*sokobana*," and perhaps best indicates the origins of the practices.

According to my Mende informants, *sokobana* is borrowed from the Temne, the ethnicity that dominates northern Sierra Leone. They argue that *sokobana* acts emerge from the mystic performances of the Temne men's societies.¹ *Soko* members from Poro societies in Bombali, Tonkolili, and Port Loko District sometimes perform bloody spectacles in Freetown.² A handful of Mende performers claimed to be trained in *sokobana* practice within their own Mende societies, but generally, these bloody demonstrations were widely described as foreign.³

Whatever its provenance, by most accounts the forms only began circulating among the Mende during wartime. Two factors led to *sokobana*'s proliferation. The first was the massive displacement of almost half the national population across Sierra Leone, whether into refugee camps, to large towns, to the capital Freetown, or across national borders in Liberia, Guinea, and beyond. These migrations introduced Mende villagers to a wide spectrum of alternative lifestyles and practices, particularly those of other Sierra Leonean ethnicities that they would otherwise have had little reason to interact with. The second important factor in *sokobana*'s spread was the proliferation of mystic defense technologies used by combatants. Jalloh's own faction, the Civil Defense Forces (CDF), depended on the performance of mystic protection for much of its recruitment. Initiations into the militia were accompanied by herbal baths and amulets that provided the combatants with defensive abilities including invulnerability and invisibility. These powers were frequently demonstrated publicly through exhibitions of "bulletproofing" in which

¹ Rosalind Shaw (personal communication) confirms that *sokobana* is the term for the highest officials of Temne Poro society. cf. "The membership of *Poro* may be broadly bifurcated into *asoko*, one who has been initiated, and *asokobana*, 'big *soko*,' or official. [...] All [officials] are believed to possess the knowledge to sicken and kill people by supernatural means" Vernon R. Dorjahn, "The Initiation of Temne Poro Officials," *Man* 61 (February 1, 1961): 37.

² According to author and playwright Mohamed Sheriff, "the display epitomizes the healing powers of the Soko, their ability to heal the physical, psychological and social wounds of society." Sheriff, "Sierra Leone," 174.

³ However, longer histories of "blood magic" in Mendeland are suggested by Frederick Migeod's description of Mende njoso performances during his 1925-26 sojourn, including acts in which "a man's tongue will be cut out and restored; and his eye-ball pulled out and put on a stick and handed round to show there is no deception." Migeod, *A View of Sierra Leone*, 253.

the newly initiated would be fired upon with rifles and escape unharmed.⁴ *Sokobana* acts similarly became part of the demonstrative repertoire of many enterprising initiators.

Today these acts are performed ostensibly for entertainment and lack the blatant functionality of either initiation society or wartime contexts. They remain a regular item for the Mammy Yoko Cultural Troupe, the Warriors' chief rival. The following provides a description of a typical, contemporary *sokobana* display.

The DJ hits the music, the bouncy, distorted electronica of a local dance hit, appropriately entitled "Razor Blade." Batilo Bockarie lopes onstage with characteristic swagger, wearing patterned cloth pants low in the style of global hip-hop, dusty now after an hour of athletic dancing and acrobatics on the open-earth courtyard. Across the waist of the faded motifs of these scruffy pajamas, he ties a white cloth, a gesture of mystic purity and protection, as well as an empty canvas that will highlight the rich red of any stray spurt of blood. With a studied flourish, he reveals a fresh razor blade and skips in time with the music around the circle of spectators as he unwraps the tiny package. At least a dozen crowd members snap on the LED flashlights they use to negotiate nocturnal village paths, and Batilo is peppered with a flickering array of surreally blue light. After all assembled have witnessed the glint of fresh metal, Batilo bounds directly under the warm glow of the exposed bulbs that strain to illuminate the stage. He plants himself firmly, hitching his loose pants into position to take a wide, bent-kneed stance. His hands flutter towards his mouth, and then, almost forgetting, he opens wide in order to unroll the full extent of his dully fleshy tongue before the crowd. As if the meat was especially fragile and tender or perhaps hot to the touch, he gingerly gropes the tip of the tongue and draws it out towards the waiting blade. With nimble flicks, he begins striking across the surface of the

⁴ Hoffman, *The War Machines*, 230–47; Włodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare*.

tongue, drawing thin slivers of blood that are only slightly visible to the audience. They do not have to wait long, as Batilo hops towards the crowd, strikes up his position, and, once more bathed in the eerie light of the LEDs, he continues his self lacerations. After taking this pose at three points of the circle, he returns to the illumination of center stage, and once again extends his tongue to its fullest. Now the sawing is more violent and insistent, the blade thrusts behind his folded fist, his eyes narrow in what one would imagine would be pain. In a swift but careful motion, he stows the knife in the knot of the white sheet around his waist and returns his hand to his mouth to gingerly pull out the contents in both hands. His mouth firmly closed, stained by a dribble of blood along the edges, he slowly unfolds his fingers to expose a bloody lump of indeterminate flesh. He leans forward as if led by the grisly morsel, and rushes towards the crowd, forcing it towards faces which either recoil in horror, stretch in intrigue, or both. Spinning back to center stage, Batilo stuffs his burden back into his mouth with two hands, makes dramatic facial contortions and chewing motions, then flings open his mouth and disgorges his tongue, now once again whole and wiggling towards the queasy public.

Batilo unsheathes a long carving knife from his white sheet and, pulling down his eyelid, begins to insert the blade behind his eye socket. The crowd reacts in horror and his colleagues rush up to temper his growing bloodlust. Keeping his white sheet but stripping off his shirt, Batilo hands his knife to his colleague Lamin and lies down on a mat. Lamin sits, takes Batilo's head in his lap, and using a rag to mop up excess fluid and shield the audience from the direct view of his gory work, twists the knife into Batilo's eye. Batilo's legs quiver with spasms of discomfort, but otherwise he lies in a state of comatose oblivion. His work done, Lamin steps away from the body and bids the audience to witness the fruits of his butchery. The spectators surge forward from all directions in an agitated mass that is shaped by a wide gamut of various

examinations and reactions. Some stare in quiet disbelief. Some push as close as possible but are forced back by Mammy Yoko players who ensure enough space is provided to keep Batilo's prone body visible. Others take a moment to offer Lamin or the other players quick words of appreciation (or in some rare cases, admonishment). The most conspicuous spectators are the young women who, dragged up to the stage by their boyfriend or girlfriends, take one quick look at Batilo's face and race back to their seats with a terrified yet exuberant yelp. This swarming morass of bodies itself becomes the spectacle, a space in which each audience member delights in dramatizing their own reaction to the violence of Batilo's disfigurement, whether cringing repulsion, stoic endurance, welcoming congeniality, disapproving critique, or skepticism.

In the midst of this melee, intermittently visible among the multitude of heads jockeying for their own quick glimpse, Batilo lies still with his right eye socket a pulpy red mass. Once the furor has subsided, Lamin returns to his sinister labor, kneeling and setting after Batilo's neck, every so often leaving crimson stains across Batilo's white sheet as he wipes down his blade. The knife seems to awaken Batilo and his legs convulse in bursts of feeble twitching. As Lamin steps away, a line of viscous red liquid trails across Batilo's collar and the audience tumult is repeated. Finally, Lamin saws into Batilo's exposed belly, once again exposing a bright red furrow along the torso and once again inviting the crowd to clamor over the gore. Once the crowd has been forced back by the Mammy Yoko troupe, Lamin unties Batilo's white sheet and gathers it with the rag he has been using to keep the blood from spilling everywhere. He uses it to wipe down Batilo's body, holding it over the wounds in order, perhaps, to give the flesh time to regenerate. The last step returns to Batilo's face, and with an understated quiver, Batilo's hands reach up to grab the cloth and hold it to his eye as he sits up. Drawing the cloth away, he blinks in mild disorientation as Lamin steps away to expose his fully rejuvenated comrade.



Figure 47. Batilo Bockarie. Mofindor, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.



Figure 48. Spectators. Mofindor, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.



Figure 49. Musa and Mammy Yoko spectators. Gbangbatoke, Upper Banta Chiefdom, Moyamba District, 2012.



Figure 50. Mammy Yoko Troupe and spectators. Ngeihun, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

Two kinds of “blood magic” are usually performed together, with tongue-cutting serving as a preview for eye-gouging and throat-slitting, although tongue-cutting is also often performed on its own.⁵ These appear to be constituted by two distinct categories of technique, and while these classifications are not noted by the performers or audience members, differentiating the two helps to clarify the source of the acts’ impact. On the one hand, there are those acts of self-mutilation that, although minor, were concretely “real”; there was no doubt that the initial slashes of the razor blade across a performer’s tongue actually broke blood vessels. Similar acts in which, to my eye, the skill involved is the ability to somehow mitigate the damage done to one’s body included swallowing sand (though in this case, most of the earth would fall out of the performers hands and mouth), eating and stepping on bottle shards, and chomping razor blades. I saw one performer in Freetown drop an audience members’ trousers and lick between the cheeks of their buttocks. Not incidentally, all of these acts are very rare among rural Mende performers, but are quite common in Freetown among urban mystics. These displays are absolutely repulsive to their audiences and depend more on the affective force of disgust they engender than any material impossibility. The performer’s ability to transgress the corporeal boundaries of his nausea and the social boundaries of communal revulsion convinces the audience of his supernatural powers just as effectively as any ability to transgress physical cause-and-effect laws of violence and injury. On the other hand, acts like the dismemberment of the tongue and the gouging of the eye, followed by their mystic regeneration, more concretely counter everyday causality by reversing processes of mutilation. These acts are perhaps more feasibly enacted

⁵ In another indication that my informants were not entirely accurate in arguing that bloodletting is a recent phenomenon in Mendeland, Kenneth Little describes extremely similar practices of the *Humoi* medicine society: “An advanced grade of the *Humo* also specializes in medical as well as ritual washing and is known as *Kpekili* [...] (literally, the heart of the razor) on account of the razor used in the ceremony. The upper part of the patient’s tongue is scratched with a razor or needle to wipe away all impurity.” Kenneth L. Little, “The Role of the Secret Society in Cultural Specialization,” *American Anthropologist* 51, no. 2 (1949): 207.. *Humoi* associations still exist in postwar Sierra Leone—I met at least one professed member—but their activities are extremely quiet.

through sleight-of-hand skills supplemented by the representation of pained and involuntary reflexes. In performance however, no differentiation is made between these two apparently distinct skills. The off-hand methods by which performers display their fully reformed bodies, whether via a quick smack of the lips or a blink of an eye, lack the intimate confrontation with the audience that is occasioned by their displays of bloody vivisection and suggest that the healing act, or rather the ability to return to the status quo, is not the focus of the performance. Instead, wonder is generated by the performers' ability to experience violence and the transgression of bodily limits, mediated by the staged space of play.

Blood acts, more than any others, depend on the crowd for their efficacy. The cumulative experience of communal confrontation with gore is fractured and multiplied among the shared sensory experience of the multitude.⁶ One looks to the body for evidence of horror, but one looks equally intently at one's fellow spectators. With opinions ricocheting through the crowd, the visual evidence of a streak of red liquid is kaleidoscopically interpreted through the social evidence of others' reactions. For many this amplifies the experience. Again and again, I was told performers "cut open" bellies or "showed their insides," even though those performances I witnessed were decidedly more modest. Such explicit descriptions might have been part of our mutual experience of imaginative play, in which audience members, myself included, could contribute to the performers' conspiracy of wonder through the suspension of disbelief and nurturing of awe within the supposedly innocuous discursive space of entertainment.

However, these bloody displays have not been so innocuous that they avoid controversy. At a handful of tour sites, middle-aged or older men disrupted Mammy Yoko's performances and took one or two of the troupe leaders aside to discuss the programs. In each case I witnessed,

⁶ Mazzarella, "The Myth of the Multitude, Or, Who's Afraid of the Crowd?"

the show went on, but it was clear that many in the crowd were less titillated than disturbed by the acts. In discussions with spectators, these acts were often the least liked, whether or not they garnered the most reaction.

By all accounts, Hassan Jalloh's *sokobana* displays were among the most spectacular of all. Jalloh not only sliced his compatriots; he eviscerated them, drawing lengths of intestines and lumps of organs from their bodies. Not content with emptying their corpse, Jalloh would then build a bonfire over the shelled-out torso. Over this flame, he would fry a delicious pot of sweet rice-flour donut cakes, which he distributed to the crowd. In the absence of a *sokobana*-style mutilation element, the culinary segment of this act was not completely unique; I saw it enacted by one rural mystic performer in Kenema as well as by a Freetown-based member of the Sierra Leone National Dance Troupe. Rather than developing original techniques, Jalloh's brilliant intervention lay in his synthesis and juxtaposition of the grotesque, viscerally nauseating *sokobana* acts with the delectably saccharine succulence of the donut cakes. Jalloh mobilized bodily sensation through sight, sound, smell, and taste in a manner in which attractive and repulsive responses bounced off each other in an escalating feedback loop of alternating correspondence and contrast, internalized through processes of abjection and consumption. This complex, internal reaction was then reiterated through those kaleidoscopic external processes of crowd reaction common to all the blood magic acts.

Public opinion

Blood magic acts' physical immediacy, the mutual mimetic affect of their spectators, and the escalating impact of shared emotional engagement hew more closely to analyses of crowds



Figure 51. Gbessay “Lolia” Toi (standing) and assistants. Gbandoma, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2013.

than to theories of publics.⁷ Even so, these performances facilitate open, rational debate and subsequent social transformation. To claim Hassan Jalloh's performances constitute a public sphere runs counter to contemporary models that insist on the primacy of written or recorded media as the engines of public opinion. Yet even Jürgen Habermas' ideal model of the public sphere, based on mythical democratic processes of early Capitalist Europe, is rooted in a dual structure: on the one hand, the transmission of information between strangers through the mediation of printed literature, and on the other, the exchange of opinion and reasoned discussion in collective settings such as coffeehouses and salons. "Discussion became the medium through which people appropriated art."⁸ It is the interplay between these two sites that constitutes the public sphere, not the printed literature itself. Filmmaker and theorist Alexander Kluge conceives cinema as a co-production of the screen and the spectator. Every spectator supplies the labor of emotion, fantasy, and experience to the media, which then vampirically assimilates and negates that productivity.⁹ In an example more immediately germane to Jalloh's postcolonial context, Debra Spitulnick draws attention to the difference between the content of media circulating in Zambia and its reception, discussion, and interpretation among the Zambian public. The media serve as "reservoirs and reference points for the circulation of words, phrase, and discourse styles," providing a repository of images and ideas from which to draw shared experience and points of debate, but they do not by themselves mechanically shape public opinion.¹⁰ Spitulnick also argues that this "detachability" of media applies equally well to

⁷ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*; Mazzarella, "The Myth of the Multitude, Or, Who's Afraid of the Crowd?"; Jeffrey Thompson Schnapp and Matthew Tiews, eds., *Crowds* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁸ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 40.

⁹ Alexander Kluge, "On Film and the Public Sphere," trans. Thomas Y. Levin and Miriam B. Hansen, *New German Critique*, no. 24/25 (Autumn 1981): 206–20.

¹⁰ Debra Spitulnick, "The Social Circulation of Media Discourse and the Mediation of Communities," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1996): 162.

proverbs and folk sayings as to technological innovations such as radio and television.¹¹ Sandra Barnes discusses post-mortem analyses and assessments by local attendees of chiefly ceremonies in Lagos, and in Sierra Leone, similar kinds of analyses comment on public acts of mysticism and artistic virtuosity.¹² For all the importance of mediated knowledge exchanged anonymously, public opinion itself is formulated at the level of encounters between individuals.

Hassan Jalloh's spectacles engage both the anonymous and the personal dimensions of this public sphere. Through performance acts and discourse, Jalloh presents his work as an open-ended message "for the people, of the people, to the people." This message transcends the boundaries of communities of known individuals and generates an imagined community of strangers both present in the instance of any one performance—at which members of multiple, neighboring villages and communities come together without necessarily any preexisting familiarity—and, more importantly, across the *longue durée* of Jalloh's performances throughout the region.

His exploits have become a topic of regular conversation at multiple sites of informal discussion, including motorbike stands, markets, chop houses and bench restaurants, *kr. potes* (the hidden gathering areas of *kr. jamba*, i.e. marijuana, consumption), and, of course, Sierra Leone's exemplary site of public discussion, the *kr. ataya* base (tea shop). Hassan Jalloh makes regular visitations to these public sites of general commentary, for example dropping in on ataya bases and restaurants at rest stops along the troupe's road trips. His presence immediately reshapes the conversation, and he clearly delights in holding forth on any number of pressing

¹¹ Ibid., 166.. After Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1990, 74.

¹² Sandra Barnes, "Political Ritual and the Public Sphere in Contemporary West Africa," in *The Politics of Cultural Performance*, ed. David Parkin, Lionel Caplan, and Humphrey Fisher (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), 34–35.

topics. Most members of Jalloh's audience in these intimate settings, whether young or old, are clearly pleased to be receiving personal teachings.¹³ Their pleasure lies in hearing further extrapolations on arguments Jalloh makes in his performances, as well as anecdotes and gossip drawn from Jalloh's fascinating personal history and extensive national and international travels. Yet in spite of being the focus of attention at these visitations, Jalloh entertains contributions from those around the table, and often remarks that this is one way he learns what is happening in the country.

In addition to providing topics that feed conversations at informal sites of interpersonal contact, the Warrior Cultural Troupe program and other cultural "plays" are sites of contact themselves, quite distinctive and vital ones at that. Unlike the market, the ataya base, and most other spaces mentioned above, the Warrior Cultural Troupe programs are not divided by gender or class difference. The zone outside the field's rice-bag walls is especially interactive, where ticket sales, biscuit buckets, and drink stands encourage loitering before the gate leading to the main entertainments. The disco, too, though primarily a space for the young, attracts a broad sweep of the population of the village and neighboring communities. Granted, both Jalloh and his spectators do orchestrate divisions within these spaces, both spatially and discursively as discussed previously. Yet in spite of some boundaries, the *fiti ya*—translated literally as the prepositional phrase "on the field," but meaning both "the playing field" and "out in the open for all to see"—is a public arena open to all, a space of contact with all kinds of individuals.

¹³ They are, however, primarily male, a result of Sierra Leone's largely gender segregated public space.

Unspeakable acts

Ultimately Jalloh decided to stop performing *sokobana* several years ago. The reasons he offers vary depending on the listener. In his announcements to his audiences, he claims President Earnest Bai Koroma asked him to stop performing blood magic within the country as part of the nation's program of positive "attitudinal and behavioral change" (discussed in earlier chapters). This explanation places the authority of the State behind Jalloh's decision making, while alluding to his intimate relations with the leader of the nation, yet it is not the explanation he offered to me. Jalloh's men argue that the reason they stopped was because in villages "where people don't know," youths might try the acts and hurt themselves. Rather than demonizing blood magic and undermining its popularity, this explanation displaces the acts' annulment onto the presumed ignorance of villagers. Yet again, Jalloh made no mention of this rationale when we discussed the issue. One of Jalloh's former dancers offered a more prosaic rationale: there are simply too many performers. When even small boys play with blood, it has lost its novelty. Indeed, the ease with which dancers pass on these techniques, whether by migrating through various cultural troupes' fluctuating rosters or by inventing their own variations, does appear to have diluted their quality when viewed throughout the overall sweep of Sierra Leonean cultural shows. Many *sokobana* acts are so poorly done that their mechanics are laid bare to all but the most willfully suggestible audience members.

Despite these various practical rationales, I would like to take seriously the reasoning Jalloh gave me, not to privilege my position, but because it feels true to the experience of Jalloh's performances, both in the immediacy of the event and its reverberations across discussions between neighbors and among strangers throughout Mende publics. As Jalloh explained, his inimitable syntax broke as he searched for the right way to put it.

For nowt we maximum that one. We cannot only do it in Sierra Leone because— Like me, I was one of the man that took part in war... this bloodsheds. And I will not take it to be that appointment again back. To stand before peoplet. Do that one which people still they fear to about my— [...] Well, sometimes, when I look to the audience, not everybody would like to see that scenes. Some were [frightened sound]— But I say why I am should be entertaining if people would be scared about what I am doing? It's not much fair. So that's how we maximumized that one, put it down, we never do it, just do it. [...] Sometimes, [taking the voice of an elder] “Sincerely speaking, Sir,” say “If I were you, I would not do that one again.” So I said “why?” He say, “but its very fearful [frightening] to do that one... to people.”

Despite earlier arguments that the acts had become clichéd, Jalloh’s former dancer agreed that audiences were less comfortable with *sokobana* than they had been in the past. As he explained it, blood had been an everyday something in wartime, kr. *e no bin firful* (“it was not frightening”). Now the public, kr. *dey don wan si blud* (“They don’t want to see blood”).

The reasoning Jalloh shared with me echoes one of his favorite onstage maxims. In performance, he frequently declaims *ngu bi yaun loi*, (both “I am performing for you” and “I am seeing your face”). Jalloh is always watching, always listening to his audiences both on and off the stage. His spectacles are not simply unidirectional demonstrations of ways to live a life but also a space for potential dialogue and mutual change. This shared decision to phase out a violent act from the cultural troupe repertoire exemplifies Alexander Kluge’s view that “the public sphere is the site where struggles are decided by means other than war.”¹⁴

The preceding condensed social history of a mystic practice narrates its brief rise and fall in the public sphere of Mende performance. *Sokobana* emerged (possibly) among rituals demonstrating advanced mystic ability within the purposed obscurity of foreign initiatory societies. The acts circulated alongside millions of people displaced during the turmoil of the

¹⁴ quoted in Miriam Hansen, “Unstable Mixtures, Dilated Spheres: Negt and Kluge’s The Public Sphere and Experience, Twenty Years Later,” *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 179.. This is likely an inversion of Carl von Clausewitz’s famous claim “War is a continuation of politics by other means.” Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 87.

Sierra Leone Civil War. They served as an index of supernatural healing power in a time of horrifyingly brutal physical violence. They proliferated amid the entertainment arts of touring mystic performers seeking fame and fortune at war's end. When the everyday violence of wartime receded into memory, the public began to associate these acts not with their healing power but with the "fearful" horror of their bloodshed. Through a variety of public fora and private discussions, performers and spectators determined that *sokobana* no longer conformed to the ideals of Mende culture and self-image. Hassan Jalloh's public and playful performances provided one crucial venue around which these ideals were imagined, explored, and ultimately banished from proper public life, perhaps back to private practices of mystic society power. There they lie, like the dancer's eviscerated corpse, ready at any moment for another resurrection.

Chapter Four: Defending Culture

Private Publics

Young Mohammed sat regally, despite being dwarfed by his plastic chair throne and almost lost in the piles of fabric draped over him.¹ Radiant with concentrated energy, his presence dominated his home's humble mud-brick porch. His regalia was finely pressed and brightly patterned, and his head was enveloped in a cloth wrap resembling the headdress of an Egyptian pharaoh. His face was a silent, stoic mask, at least the parts visible behind his oversized plastic sunglasses. By his side beat the family boom box, for once in his full control and equipped with fresh batteries.

His father Lamin asked me to take Mohammed's picture. I was happy to fulfill the favor, but afterwards, I shared some concerns with a local friend and confidante. The government decrees that Poro and Sande societies are not permitted to initiate children younger than eighteen, when they can make their own decision about whether or not to undergo rites of passage featuring circumcision and confrontations with undisclosed dangers. Mohammed could not have been more than six years old. "Won't they get in trouble if these pictures get out?"

¹ The names of Mohammed and his family are pseudonyms.

My friend's response was simple. "They would not dare. The government makes such declarations in order to placate the whites. But they would never dare to interfere in our *privacy*."

Privacy, rather than secrecy, is what is now at stake for these so-called "secret societies," even if secrecy remains the primary form of their interaction with outsiders.² Yet in spite of their private nature, they are undeniably a public force, engaging in dramatic hyper-visible spectacles, shaping relations between genders, age groups, and ethnicities, and implicating themselves in local and national politics on an unfathomable scale. Poro's public actions demonstrate that for rural Sierra Leoneans, the divisions between public and private and those between secret and spectacle—if such divisions exist at all—are far from fixed, and their constant renegotiation is the source of social power.

This chapter tracks Poro from its resurrection following the end of the Civil War to some of its interventions in Sierra Leone's 2012 election cycle. Poro aesthetics underpin much cultural production in Mendeland and Poro serves as a primary model of public spectacle in the region. Even non-members such as Hassan Jalloh must reckon with its impact. Two funerary performances, held almost back-to-back, exemplify how Poro aesthetics generate a public, how the society influences local and national political power struggles, and the limits of its influence in an increasingly cosmopolitan environment. As the Sierra Leone State seeks to consolidate its power in the postwar era, Poro stands—as it has throughout histories held in archives and memory—as an alternative political mechanism that sometimes helps, sometimes hinders centralized authority, while always offering to its public models of personal and social transfiguration.

² cf. Georg Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 4 (January 1, 1906): 441–98; Mary H. Nooter, ed., *Secrecy: African Arts That Conceals and Reveals* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993).

4.1 PARTICIPATION

Poro examined

The male initiatory society Poro has shaped lives throughout the region of present-day Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea for at least 450 years.³ Along with Sande (or Bundu, as it is known in Krio and Temne), the women's association, its influence pervades most aspects of social life, rendering Poro a model Maussian "total social fact."⁴ Its effects are so all-encompassing that a colonial acting district commissioner declared that Poro "embodies everything or anything good or bad in the country, that requires framing into order, keeping secret among the masses, guarding as public property, and making into law."⁵ These many activities, though they may appear disparate, are intimately tied together and constitute different manifestations of the same processes of discretion.

Poro oversees a wide range of territories as well as social institutions. Though some claim Poro originated with the Mende, its origins are likely a diverse assemblage of local practices originating throughout the region.⁶ Poro is "pantribal and intertribal," practiced by many neighboring ethnicities and inspiring Warren D'Azevedo to define a "Poro cluster" as a fundamental constituent of a regional cultural complex of peoples that he dubs the Central West Atlantic region (CWA).⁷ Cultural commonalities are political commonalities, and Poro gives groups a collection of shared practices irrespective of language that, especially in the volatile 18th and 19th centuries, served as an anchor of consistency. In otherwise radically unstable contexts of

³ Kenneth L. Little, "The Political Function of the Poro. Part I," *Africa* 35, no. 4 (October 1965): 350.

⁴ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967), 76–77.

⁵ Wallis, "The 'Poro' of the Mendi," 183.

⁶ On origins as Mende, see George Harley, "Notes on the Poro in Liberia," *Peabody Museum* 19, no. 2 (1941): 3.

⁷ d' Azevedo, "Some Historical Problems in the Delineation of a Central West Atlantic Region," 516.

continuous antagonism, “Poro could act as a common-denominator lubricant for the inevitable inter-group and intra-group compromises and even be the bearer of standards for inter-group conflict,” in the words of Richard Fulton.⁸ The common practice of Poro facilitates individuals’ efforts to “switch ethnic identities” and thus contributes to what Mike McGovern identifies as regional “tactics of mutable identity.”⁹ As totalizing and singular it presents itself, Poro is also widely varied across its range. In many cases, Poro practices are more recognizable between neighboring ethnic groups than between communities of the same ethnic group in different areas. For example, the Poro of the *Koo* Mende of Kenema and Kailahun Districts may share more with the Poro of neighboring Gola and Kpelle in Liberia and Guinea than with *Sewa* Mende in Moyamba District, for whom the *Wunde* society is often more influential as Poro. Thus, as Beryl Bellman found, “any singular structural description of the Poro is inappropriate and incomplete. Instead the Poro should be considered a diversity of associations that differentially share some ritual practices.”¹⁰ The following discussions are rooted in my own subjective experience of Poro, and thus cannot be taken as descriptive of all Poro activities throughout its range. I draw from research on other ethnic communities if it appears to resonate with the situations I describe. However, no generalizations about Poro can be entirely credible. The essentially fractured and subjective experience of Poro is as constitutive of its character as its sweeping influence. Poro resists objective definition in all forms, at least in its dealings with the outside world.

“Poro” has many local interpretations, attested to by a variety of etymologies of the term. Colonial official Braithwaite Wallis’s early translation of “Poro” as “law” or “one word” probably collapses too many different Mende terms to be linguistically relevant; *sawa* and *ngo*

⁸ Richard M. Fulton, “The Political Structures and Functions of Poro in Kpelle Society,” *American Anthropologist* 74, no. 5 (1972): 1220.

⁹ McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*, 28, 39.

¹⁰ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 42.

yila are more precise translations of each term respectively.¹¹ Yet Wallis's definition does indicate how Poro is locally conceptualized as the combination of a form of regulation with a socially unified voice. Another translation holds Poro means "of the earth," reflecting the importance of land to Poro power.¹² "Land has a sacred quality and the Poro society is its guardian," as William Murphy notes, and Poro elders are largely from landowning lineages.¹³ Perhaps most relevant to how Mende describe Poro today is the definition offered by Kenneth Little, who claimed that "Poro" originates from *poe*, meaning literally "no end," or "far behind" and suggests Poro's eternal and primordial authority.¹⁴

Even if Poro is understood by most participants as eternal, its interpretations by European investigators have been far from consistent over time. Early colonial critiques suggested that Poro fed into African credulity, claiming "mystery permeates the whole of the African's life by day and night," and displacing the colonists' confusion onto the colonized.¹⁵ This perspective was instrumentalized by some colonial officers who suggested Poro could be a useful form of social control parallel to great European secret societies like Freemasonry.¹⁶ Later interpretations focused on parallels of religion by stressing Poro's notable role in communication with ancestors, with Kenneth Little arguing that the influence and mystery of Poro is "analogous to the medieval church in Europe."¹⁷ At the same time, Poro and Sande's initiation practices

¹¹ Wallis, "The 'Poro' of the Mendi," 183.

¹² George Schwab, *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland* (Cambridge, MA: The Peabody Museum, 1947), 266–278. quoted in Little, "The Political Function of the Poro. Part I," 354. Innes holds that "earth, soil" is *polo*, not *poro*. Innes, *A Mende-English Dictionary*, 126. In Mende, "r" and "l" sounds are both often dropped in speech.

¹³ William P. Murphy, "Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders versus Youth," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 50, no. 2 (1980): 195, 201–202.

¹⁴ Little, "The Political Function of the Poro. Part I," 354.

¹⁵ Frederick William Butt-Thompson, *West African Secret Societies* (London: Witherby, 1929), 55. Quoted in Jędrej, "Structural Aspects of a West African Secret Society."

¹⁶ cf. Phillips, *Representing Woman*, 17–18.

¹⁷ Little, "The Political Function of the Poro. Part I," 356.

inspired analogies to education systems, leading to the common euphemism of “bush schools.”¹⁸ Each of these interpretations employed the structural-functionalism typical of colonial-era anthropology. In the immediate independence era, Poro was subject to all the trends of Western cultural scholarship. Structuralist theorists stressed its organizational force as a mediator between men and women, nature and culture, and other familiar binaries.¹⁹ Feminist scholars saw Sande women’s masking practice, atypical for West Africa, as an expression of gender solidarity and alternative cultural models of female empowerment.²⁰ Marxist analysts countered this view, reading Poro and Sande as systems of influence by elder landowning classes over youth labor and reproduction.²¹ The accommodation of so many different and often conflicting viewpoints shows that Poro and Sande’s totalizing social influence combined with its radical ambiguity and opacity to non-members have rendered the associations *tabula rasa* for outside interpretation.²²

Different forms of analysis may reflect not only a historical progression of different academic fashions, but also of different internal priorities and methods of self-representation as they change within Poro itself. To hint at such internal transformations risks a challenge to Poro members’ ideological claims to eternal immutability, but to insist otherwise is to argue that Western researchers have been the sole authors of Poro and Sande representation and to reject the likely influence of their multiple and contradictory informants. Reading between the lines of

¹⁸ Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West African People in Transition*, 118.

¹⁹ Jędrej, “Structural Aspects of a West African Secret Society”; Cosentino, *Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers*.

²⁰ Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*; Carol P. MacCormack, “Sande : The Public Face of a Secret Society,” in *The New Religions of Africa*, ed. Bennetta Jules-Rosette (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1979), 27–38.

²¹ Caroline Bledsoe, “The Political Use of Sande Ideology and Symbolism,” *American Ethnologist* 11, no. 3 (August 1984): 455–72; Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics”; Murphy, “Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders versus Youth”; Warren L. d’ Azevedo, “Gola Poro and Sande: Primal Tasks in Social Custodianship,” *Ethnologische Zeitschrift Zürich* 1 (1980): 13–22.

²² I make no claim to break from this pattern.

academic commentary may offer counter-histories of Poro transformation that suggest that the association is a force for social change as much as it remains a basis for conservatism.

Poro out of and into conflict

One category of local foundational myths depicts Poro's origins as arising from within the crucible of widespread warfare, when men replaced an ancestral women-run society with a secret association whose primary purview was the arts of politics and warfare.²³ Warren d'Azevedo has posited that Poro gained its interethnic character and its role in diplomacy during the period of destabilizing warfare that began in the 17th century. At that point, the focus of trade reversed course, away from the Saharan routes oriented to the northeast and towards coastal trade with Europeans oriented to southeast. Warfare and community divisions ignited by the transatlantic slave trade gave rise to secular warlord politics, and d'Azevedo has hypothesized that Poro was a reactionary effort to protect any remaining older traditions of land-owning lineages.²⁴ The era's conflict, though destructive, also inspired the development of novel and wide-ranging confederacies.

[T]hough these confederacies were usually short-lived as centers of political hegemony, they have left a legacy of local ethnic complexity, territorial flexibility, population mobility, multilingualism, and a wide diffusion of cultural patterns that stamp the region with a peculiar character of diversity and pluralism which even a century of colonial policies and boundaries have not obliterated.²⁵

Poro's militarism became a major obstacle to British attempts to establish a protectorate in 1898.

The upheaval that became known as the Hut Tax War was easily the most awe-inspiring demonstration of Poro's political influence in the colonial era; In response to taxation and other

²³ For Gola, see d' Azevedo, "Gola Poro and Sande," 15–16..

²⁴ d' Azevedo, "Some Historical Problems in the Delineation of a Central West Atlantic Region," 516.

²⁵ d' Azevedo, "Gola Poro and Sande," 13.

new impositions by the colonial administration, Poro facilitated a systematic and drastic surprise attack on the offices of colonial and European power, murdering Europeans and razing missions and trading posts to the ground.²⁶ While concurrent Temne attacks were led by recognizable chiefs and warlords including the famed Bai Bureh, Mende forces were frustratingly opaque to colonial forces. Poro disguised the identity of Mende military leadership, and its widely coordinated actions were only communicated via enigmatic symbols such as burnt palm fronds run from village to village. Despite their terror and confusion, the British managed to “pacify” the hinterland in short order through force of firepower. Yet ties with Poro remained strained.

The imposition of British power challenged both Poro and the colonial administration, and relations complexified. In order to maintain some degree of control over local-level politics, Poro societies became more clandestine. Greater secrecy permitted acts of both resistance to and collusion with the colonial government by obscuring the identities of society agents and precluding personal censure from either the State or local constituents. Many conflicts surrounded economic projects, including resistance to “whiteman” goods. In their attempts to protect local industries, Poro and Sande became identified with “repositories of local culture and political identification.”²⁷

Following the independence movements of 1960s, the three nation-states surrounding the “Poro complex” took three very different approaches to engaging initiatory associations. Guinea, experimenting with pan-African socialism, embarked on a program of iconoclasm and demystification. President Ahmed Sékou Touré denounced Poro as outmoded gerontocratic mysticism that contravened the new “people’s” republic. Masks and paraphernalia were

²⁶ Kenneth L. Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West African People in Transition*, Rev. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 43–59. Of course, most available accounts are from the colonists perspective.

²⁷ Fanthorpe, *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*, 8.

destroyed or sold to European markets, ritual dance forms were appropriated by secular youth troupes, and practitioners were forced underground or traveled across borders into Sierra Leone and Liberia for initiations.²⁸ Liberia, in contrast, continued a long pattern of appropriation. Exploiting idioms of Freemasonry, Americo-Liberian settlers founded their own secret societies in Monrovia and encouraged cooperation amongst initiatory networks, with the president overseeing all as head Poro elder. This experiment in synthesizing the scale of nation-state politics with regional practices of secrecy ultimately led to widespread cronyism and authoritarianism, undercutting the authority of village Poro elders. The chaos of the Liberian Civil War has been partially attributed to such “privatization” of networks of spiritual power by state authorities.²⁹ Sierra Leone’s government largely maintained *laissez-faire* relations with Poro. As part of a more general withdrawal from direct governance, especially over the provinces, both the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) era of the Margai brothers (1961-67) and the All People’s Congress (APC) administration of Siaka Stevens (1968-85) essentially allowed Poro free reign. Individual politicians certainly exploited their relationships with Poro, especially in electoral contests, and when the SLPP, largely understood as a Mende party, was outlawed by President and Northerner Siaka Stevens, Poro harbored its members’ continued anti-government resistance, at least symbolically.³⁰ However, these developments were not related to any systematic governmental policy.

When war struck Liberia and Sierra Leone, Poro was severely compromised. The gerontocratic power of Poro, sustained in collusion with both local chieftaincies and the national governments (directly in the case of Liberia and indirectly in the case of Sierra Leone), was

²⁸ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 15; McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*.

²⁹ Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, Rev. ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 233.

³⁰ cf. Ferme, “Staging Pòlitisi: The Dialogics of Publicity and Secrecy in Sierra Leone.”

singled out as one of the main motivations for voluntary inscription among rebel soldiers.³¹ Poro materials and sacred bushes, along with elders and chiefs, were targeted by certain rebel operations in order to radically invert rural social order and situate themselves at the new apex of power. At the same time, Poro tactics were appropriated, perhaps “privatized,” by the rebels through their own employment of idioms of abduction, initiation, and transformation reminiscent of Poro as they forcefully conscripted child soldiers.³²

Richard Fanthorpe reports on a number of chiefs who attempted to mobilize Poro for defense against the rebels, but failed because they did not have the authority to “disclose the secret” to the State. The Civil Defense Forces and the Kamajors bypassed this problem by essentially inventing a new society, built out of Poro-like practices, but assembled into a more translocal, populist, and, commercial blend.³³ In the later days of the war, the rebels tried to influence Poro directly, with Issa Sesay attempting to sponsor initiations in the Northern town of Makeni, possibly as a way to reintegrate rebel soldiers.³⁴ I was told of similar attempts at Poro appropriation in the rebel headquarters at Kailahun, as several RUF figures sponsored brief appearances by *gbini* in the last days of the conflict.

In spite of its historical role in precolonial warfare, Poro appeared no longer capable of warding off or adapting to widespread chaos by the time of the Civil War. In the midst of direct attacks and general uncertainty, public Poro activities like funerary celebrations and initiations were forgone. Elements endured in other forms, such as the initiatory structure adapted by both the CDF and the RUF, but Poro itself was suspended. From what I was told, even covert

³¹ Peters and Richards, ““Why We Fight.””

³² cf. Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*; Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*.

³³ Fanthorpe, *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*, 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

meetings among Poro initiates were exceedingly rare. The coinciding interruption of both Poro's open performances and its closed meetings may suggest that the former constitute the latter, or rather that without public spectacle, other secret or private ventures were impossible.

However total the disruption to social order, however great the damage to ritual materials, and however much its failure to avert the violence undermined its authority, Poro returned with the ferocity of its totem, the leopard, in the postwar era. For men in Kailahun, reigniting Poro activities became a method to restore a nostalgic sense of prewar culture and "normalcy." In 2004, the town of Ngeihun, seven miles from Kailahun and a historic competitor for local prominence, hosted the first initiations in Luawa Chiefdom. Four-hundred-sixty initiates participated. I frequently heard the story of how the town awoke on the morning of the final ceremony to see all their sheep lined up along the main road in a kind of imitation of the queue the initiates would make later in the day. This mysterious ovine behavior was taken to be a miracle demonstrating Allah's divine benediction of the event. Since that time, the many communities surrounding Kailahun Town have instituted a cycle of initiations, attempting to meet the continued high demand stemming from youths who missed their chance during wartime.

Poro initiations are considerably more "public" than those of Sande, in the sense that they use common spaces and call for the involvement of the general population. Whereas Sande initiations take place by neighborhood, Poro initiations, at least those in the region of Kailahun, encompass larger areas. Whereas Sande hold ceremonies throughout the dry season, Poro is limited to a very distinct period of a few weeks following Christmas holidays. The Sande initiation ceremonies that I witnessed featured about a dozen young women, while Poro initiations featured hundreds of young men. When hosting Poro celebrations, the whole

community is recruited for the event, whereas Sande ceremonies have become more and more focused within compounds and family units. The demands that Poro initiation places upon whole communities are so great that several villages abruptly stopped hosting them, not out of disinterest or disapproval, but because the strain of accommodating such large numbers of initiates became logistically impossible for the local population to bear.

Revolutionary United Front Party (RUF)

The popularity of contemporary Poro attracts many attempts at alliance and influence. At the onset of the 2012 electoral season, the *gbini* of the Kailahun Town region, Poro's fiercest and most sacrosanct devils, were called forth in the name of a very surprising patron: the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUF), the bedraggled remnants of the rebel forces' political aspirations.

Kailahun District played unwilling host to the rebels for almost the entire duration of the Civil War. In the early days of the conflict, the region's proximity to the Liberian border made it a ready target for militias supported by Charles Taylor and Liberian mercenaries. Long government neglect energized numerous early recruits to the RUF. Yet once the war's protracted and attritional nature became evident, the rebels became a more hostile occupying force. The RUF acted as the de facto government for close to a decade, as Kailahun's extreme isolation from the capital kept it out of the reach of government or UN troops until the rebels finally laid down their arms in 2001. Thus the district stands as both the rebels' adopted homeland and the site of the RUF's most prolonged depredation. This paradoxical legacy still colored how locals viewed the rebels. Most Kailahun residents, many of whom had returned from exile after fleeing rebel violence, harbored resentments, but a large body of locals alternately affirmed and denied

affiliation to the RUF, remaining both sympathetic and critical of an association made up of rebels and relatives, captors and comrades.

The RUFP was created in 1999 as a condition of the Lomé Peace Accord, the first major effort at a peaceful resolution to the war. According to these negotiations, the RUF was promised political legitimacy via the creation of their own political party. The terms of the Lomé Accord collapsed before they could be fully implemented, and the peace process was sidelined as RUF second-in-command Sam “Maskita” Bockarie refused to surrender and took the war into a new, more brutal phase. Following the end of the war in 2001, the RUF insisted that they be allowed to participate in the 2002 elections under the Lomé Accord. Yet their negative public image, their political inexperience and disorganization, and (according to RUFP members) destabilization fomented from within by the then-ruling Sierra Leone People’s Party, led to an absolute rout at the ballot box. During the following election cycle in 2007, the RUFP failed to even field a candidate. The former leadership of the RUF had dissolved, and many of the more infamous commanders had been indicted by the Special Court of Sierra Leone. Most of the more charismatic and influential members who remained at liberty had been recruited by the APC and SLPP parties, and many of the more recalcitrant members had disappeared or died as mercenaries in neighboring conflicts.

The RUFP was scattered at the beginning of 2012. However, partially through the effort of RUF stalwart Moriba Koroma as he toured the country with the Mammy Yoko Cultural Troupe, a network of former combatants and sympathizers began to take shape. Early in the year a few presidential hopefuls stepped forward, and by April, the RUFP network had reformulated its mission and embarked on its most essential political project: image management.

In order for the RUF to attest to a new image—an image which party officials insisted had always been the old image—their most extensive promotional program returned to the party's roots. Over three days in Kailahun, the party leadership held a series of allegedly non-political funerary ceremonies to salute each constituency of the local establishment, designed for maximum favorability and visual impact. Each of these ceremonies addressed a different body of the population that had died anonymously during the war and had never received proper rites. On the first day, local chiefs were celebrated by Poro *gbini* dances. On the second, Sande societies were invited to dance *soweisia* in memory of fallen women. That night, a Christian vigil was led by three local preachers of different denominations, and the following morning, a sacrifice and prayer-reading marked the Muslim contribution. Plans for a libation at the site of RUF leader Foday Sankoh's base in nearby Ngiema were announced although never carried out. Meanwhile, other non-ceremonial activities took place, including party meetings and free t-shirt distribution. A friendly football match pitted Kailahun players against visitors from the RUF party office in Freetown, and the locals, mostly high school ringers, trashed the visitors. This was according to plan; the objective was to use the match to recruit local youths with limited memory of the war to the party platform.

At each of these sites, the RUF carefully framed the discourse so as to ingratiate themselves with the local community without confessing any wrongdoing. The funerals were held for those who had died during the conflict generally, and no mention was made of specific individuals or those who the RUF forces had killed or starved through their exploitative tactics. The memorial commemorated both RUF and pro-government forces, and it followed a week of



Figure 52. *Sowesia* of the local Sande greet the RUF. Kailahun Town, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

meetings of solidarity with ex-CDF figures in Bo and Kenema that included the famous Mama Munda Fortune, the CDF's leading woman herbalist.³⁵

During the Muslim *sara* (sacrifice) on the final day of the event, I ran into the RUF's current leader and presumptive presidential candidate, former RUF spokesman Eldred Collins. He asked what I was doing in the crowd, and when I said I was studying culture, he replied with an enigmatic smile, "no party does culture like we do!" Collins' attitude verged on contempt for the proceedings.³⁶ Indeed, the RUF specifically targeted Poro and Sande elders along with many other community leaders.³⁷ Yet through this spectacle of memorialization, the party sought to completely reinvent its relationship with local society by reframing itself as a valued patron of local culture. At one time, the RUF had used the total disruption and inversion of Poro and Sande to demonstrate its aspirations for the total disruption and inversion of Sierra Leonean society. Now, the RUF used its total embrace of Poro and Sande to demonstrate its aspirations to be embraced by Sierra Leonean society in return.

Each of these projects and dialogues was intended to reshape opinions about the RUF, especially among the Kailahun public that the party hoped would once again serve as a political and geographical base. To some extent, they succeeded. The events were very well attended. Every local I talked to approved of the programs and declared them "very nice" (in those specific, restrained English words). The programs alerted Kailahun residents to the continued existence of the resurrected party. Local RUF members, once reticent about their participation in the rebel struggle, were now wearing yellow t-shirts with pride.

³⁵ Profiled in Hoffman, *The War Machines*, 76–79.

³⁶ At the risk of editorializing, Collins was easily among the most disingenuous of Sierra Leone's politicians, and that is really saying something. He was fully capable of spinning any argument into the discursive zeitgeist, but never had the evidence to back up his claims.

³⁷ Hoffman, *The War Machines*, 82.



Figure 53. Eldred Collins and the RUF. Kailahun Town, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

Ultimately the RUFPP's aspirations produced little fruit however. Moriba confessed to me that the true goal of any third party was not to win, but to divide the electorate in such a way that one's constituents would be required by the major parties to win a run-off, at which point one can bargain for concessions and political posts. The model here was Charles Margai's establishment of the People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC), a splinter group of the SLPP that Margai "sold" to the APC through his endorsement of Ernest Bai Koroma during the 2007 elections.³⁸ However, this tactic was already transparent to the public in 2012, and both the RUFPP and the PMDC failed to attract any significant votes. Towards the beginning of the campaign season proper, the RUFPP was seen with a new 4x4 vehicle, and Kailahun rumor claimed that the APC regime had provided it to them with the assumption that they would siphon votes away from the SLPP party.³⁹ Whatever the party's resources, multiple campaign days designated for the RUFPP came and went without any significant promotional activity. I finally visited the Freetown RUFPP offices a week before the elections to find out what had happened to their plans, and while the party line was that campaigning was being undertaken in face-to-face meetings rather than grand rallies, one person suggested that the RUFPP had been awaiting more payouts from the APC to no avail. It appeared the RUFPP leadership's greed had allowed the party to be sold too soon.

Poro in public

The RUFPP's attempt to appropriate Poro and Sande in order to sway public opinion was the first indication that, whatever its insistence on secrecy and privacy, Poro constituted a type of

³⁸ cf. Christensen and Utas, "Mercenaries of Democracy."

³⁹ Although it was also possible that the RUFPP was using finances provided to all parties by INGOs

public. Influencing political opinion is but the least of Poro's activities impacting the broader public. In every one of these varied actions, Poro is always depicted by Mende commentators as a singular agent, rather than as disparate people or separate organizations.⁴⁰

Commentators frequently resort to extensive lists to cover such operations. For example, Little listed "general education, in the sense of social and vocational training and indoctrination of social attitudes, regulation of sexual conduct, supervision of political and economic affairs, operation of various social services, ranging from medical treatment to forms of entertainment and recreation."⁴¹ George Harley indicated that the *Ge* spirit of the Gio Poro in Liberia was involved in:

all important events: to stop village quarrels, or control fighting warriors; to catch, try, condemn, punish, or even execute social criminals; to intensify the holiday spirit of great occasions; to promote fertility and bountiful harvests; to cultivate public sentiment, regulate hygiene, build bridges and sacred houses; and to conduct and administer the Poro school which was all things to all men.⁴²

Poro is further tasked with the management of the spirit realm, including ancestral spirits (protectors of lineages), *genii* (trickster spirits with individualized powers, the term is derived from Arabic), and the particular spirits of the associations, who are "the worldly representation of supernatural forces personifying the will of 'god' or the mysteries of life."⁴³

Meanwhile, as many Poro spirits are "tutelary spirits," the society is deeply engaged in community education.⁴⁴ Jędrej has noted Sewa Mende initiation progresses through five stages,

⁴⁰ Here I draw from a wide range of sites in order to suggest the range of public activities in which Poro might participate. By no means does this suggest that all Poro collectives engage or have engaged in all these practices.

⁴¹ Little, "The Role of the Secret Society in Cultural Specialization," 200.

⁴² Harley, "Notes on the Poro in Liberia," 31.

⁴³ Fulton, "The Political Structures and Functions of Poro in Kpelle Society," 1226.

⁴⁴ William C. Siegmann, "Spirit Manifestation and the Poro Society," *Ethnologische Zeitschrift Zürich* 1 (1980): 89–95.

each “publicly marked” even if any actual change is “esoteric and secret.”⁴⁵ In William Murphy’s research on Kpelle communities, subsidiary societies “exemplify the Kpelle ethos that whenever there is an important cultural skill, it is usually appropriated and controlled by a secret society”⁴⁶ In addition to educating youths in life skills and social formations, Poro initiation serves as a way to integrate migrant settlers.⁴⁷

Poro has been known to oversee a number of different economic interests. In agriculture, Poro prohibitions limit the harvesting of communal fruit and produce.⁴⁸ In the early colonial period, Poro was characterized as the “co-ordinator of native industry,” including the manufacture of country cloths and gowns, and the operator of the “Vanjama Bank,” including the conversion of Western money into twisted iron “Gissy money” (also known as “Kissy pennies”).⁴⁹ The main antagonisms between the Poro and the British following the violence of the Hut Tax War were characterized by the colonial literature as “abuse and mischief” of the Poro emblem. When Poro officials placed it upon goods destined for the coast and further global trade, they effectively removed the goods from market circulation in a form of protest. The British government’s “Poro Ordinance” forbade this kind of interference with colonial commerce.⁵⁰ Even into the postcolonial period, public works projects fell under Poro’s

⁴⁵ M. C. Jędrej, “Medicine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture,” *Africa* 46, no. 3 (1976): 251.

⁴⁶ Murphy, “Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders versus Youth,” 196.

⁴⁷ Fanthorpe, *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*, 5.

⁴⁸ Wallis, “The ‘Poro’ of the Mendi,” 188.

⁴⁹ Geo. W. Brown, “The Poro in Modern Business: A Preliminary Report of Field Work,” *Man* 37 (1937): 8–9. cf. d’ Azevedo, “Some Historical Problems in the Delineation of a Central West Atlantic Region,” 527.

⁵⁰ Wallis, “The ‘Poro’ of the Mendi,” 188.

jurisdiction, as the chieftaincies were “ineffective,” dependent on state governments in Monrovia and Freetown for their authority rather than custom.⁵¹

Local policing has often fallen under Poro’s purview. Beryl Bellman noted of the Liberia-Sierra Leone border area: “virtually all of the criminal laws are laws of the medicine,”⁵² including “in-town fighting, murder, rape, the violation of a girl before puberty, land-tenure disputes between towns, and the breaking of major laws of the medicines.”⁵³ In other cases, Poro agents have acted less as enforcers and more as “advocates” or lawyers, perhaps most properly in the sense of prosecutors of “social crimes” such as witchcraft.⁵⁴ Again, in spite of the fact that legal jurisdiction ostensibly lay with the chiefs or district government, villagers’ lack of trust in these corrupt or foreign organs in many cases meant Poro has overseen dispute settlement and justice for multiple transgressions, including homicide.⁵⁵

Poro engages in other forms of community protection. William Murphy has cited a prewar instance in which Poro proclaimed that water must only be drawn from a stream from small cups rather than large buckets in order to prevent clouding the stream and “creating a community health hazard.”⁵⁶ Following the war, Poro’s efforts to protect local interests from invasive and opportunistic outsiders include defending community plantations from government

⁵¹ Richard P. Fahey, “Poro as a System of Judicial Administration in Northwestern Liberia: Its Intraclan and Interclan Functions,” *African Law Studies* 4 (1971): 13–14.

⁵² Beryl Bellman, *Village of Curers and Assassins: On the Production of Fala Kpelle Cosmological Categories* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 125.

⁵³ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 26.

⁵⁴ William A. Hart, “The ‘Lawyer’ of Poro?: A Sixteenth-Century West African Masquerade,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 23 (1993): 83–95.

⁵⁵ Fahey, “Poro as a System of Judicial Administration in Northwestern Liberia: Its Intraclan and Interclan Functions,” 16–19.

⁵⁶ Murphy, “Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders versus Youth,” 195.

agencies that attempted to waltz on rent payments, making outright threats against political adversaries, and clashing violently with Muslim trading communities.⁵⁷

These protective practices were intensified in the era of precolonial war and conflict. An early account of the hinterland, published in 1788, reported that Poro society rules were regularly invoked to put an end to disputes between communities and that those who refused to obey these laws risked having their lands placed under ritual curfew and ransacked.⁵⁸ The earliest colonial records refer to “Peace *poro*,”⁵⁹ and in times of war, the Poro council acted as “a reservoir of negotiators” and “a mechanism by which two systems of independent values can be transcended by a third shared system to achieve a solution to a common problem.”⁶⁰ Sande societies too could play a role in mitigating or authorizing warfare.⁶¹ Even as recently as the 1970s in Liberia, mock battles between society masked spirits led either to peace or to escalating claims of inter-Poro poisonings, before palaver and reconciliation.⁶²

Poro has long been involved in internal political contestations as well as external ones. Colonial powers aspired yet failed to appropriate the political influence of Poro upon village matters.⁶³ The society has nonetheless become integrated as a significant force in postcolonial democratic processes, hosting and swaying many of the covert debates that decide public

⁵⁷ Fanthorpe, *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*, 12–13.

⁵⁸ John Matthews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone on the Coast of Africa* (London: B. White and Son, 1788), 82–85. Quoted in Hart, “The ‘Lawyer’ of Poro?,” 86–7.

⁵⁹ Wallis, “The ‘Poro’ of the Mendi,” 187.

⁶⁰ Fahey, “Poro as a System of Judicial Administration in Northwestern Liberia: Its Intraclan and Interclan Functions,” 23.

⁶¹ Harley, “Notes on the Poro in Liberia,” 6.

⁶² Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 26–28.

⁶³ “Their suspicion of the white man will disappear, and the poro that in the old days was often used as a means of evil, will, under our—let us hope—elevating influence to higher and better things, be enlisted upon our side for good.” Wallis, “The ‘Poro’ of the Mendi,” 189.

pronouncements of political unity.⁶⁴ According to William Siegmann's analysis derived from Robin Horton's influential theorizations, Poro as an institution "could ignore or cross cut the lineages and the lines of division that they create."⁶⁵ The discursive unity of Poro is described as *ngo yila* ("one word").⁶⁶ Even so, like some Nigerian masquerades, Poro may "outwardly display a certain uniformity of identity," while being "in fact an arena of competing interests" and considerable internal debate.⁶⁷ Such an arena, however disavowed, might be characterized as a public.

Publicity/privacy/secretcy

It may seem perverse to apply the term "public" to a social formation so resolutely closed as Poro. Yet the Western conception of "public" collapses what-is-common with what-is-open and that correspondence does not hold across all social contexts. Jeff Weintraub notes two kinds of imagistic divisions along which public and private are divided: between what is hidden and what is accessible—a question of visibility—or between what is individual and what is collective—a question of divisibility.⁶⁸ While globalized neoliberal democratic discourse confounds these two categories, by no means are they ever entirely reducible to each other, even in Western democratic governments. Poro offers a very different configuration of the relationship between the "in/visible" and the "in/divisible" aspects of publics.

⁶⁴ Ferme, "Staging Pólitisi: The Dialogics of Publicity and Secrecy in Sierra Leone," 179; Murphy, "Creating the Appearance of Consensus in Mende Political Discourse."

⁶⁵ Siegmann, "Spirit Manifestation and the Poro Society," 93; Robin Horton, "Stateless Societies in the History of West Africa," in *History of West Africa*, ed. J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, vol. 1 (London: Longman, 1971), 78–119.

⁶⁶ Little, "The Political Function of the Poro. Part I," 350.

⁶⁷ William R. Rea, "Rationalising Culture: Youth, Elites and Masquerade Politics," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 68, no. 1 (1998): 99.

⁶⁸ Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, eds., *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

As Mariane Ferme argues, colonialism helped to confound European public and private spheres by forcing contests over public opinion into covert spaces while, out in the open, actors perform unity. Debate “took place elsewhere: in domains where restricted access made them antithetical to those normally associated with institutions of the public sphere.” In this way, the dangers of open disagreement, which could foment real violence in the periods of both precolonial war and colonial oppression, led to twinned spaces for the discussion of public good: open meetings at day, closed meetings at night.⁶⁹

If the use of “public” and “private” seem to be Western linguistic impositions, so is true of “secret.” Many commentators have noted the lack of a direct translation of “secret” in Mende and related languages.⁷⁰ However, the idiom of “secrecy” has proven useful to Mende culture, demonstrated amply by the common use of the English loanword *sikriti*. In seeking translations for “secrecy” in Mende, many commentators have suggested ways in which those same terms might be rethought as “privacy” or “publicity.” William Murphy notes that many such terms are expressed in terms of place:

The demarcation of meetings into village and forest arenas reflects a fundamental contrast in Mende ideology and practice between public and secret domains of talk and social activity. This cultural ordering of social practice is emblematically expressed by the symbolic contrast between village and forest. Holding clandestine meetings behind closed doors, for example, is referred to by the metaphorical idiom of the forest. A world composed of public and secret layers is also encoded in the locatives of everyday language which distinguish public from hidden domains: for example, outside (*ngitiya*) versus inside (*hu*) and in front (*kulɔ*) versus behind (*pooma*).⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ferme, “Staging Pɔlitisi: The Dialogics of Publicity and Secrecy in Sierra Leone,” 163.

⁷⁰ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 43., cf. Nooter, *Secrecy*.

⁷¹ Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics,” 572.

Ferme notes similar spatial conceptions of secrecy in attention to the “underneath of things” and images of entombment.⁷² One might consider a translation of public and private as geography, a contrast between what happens in the open and what is hidden in the forest, locked behind closed doors, or buried.

Other ways to consider “secrecy” involve objects and energies as much as spaces. *Hale* has typically been translated as “medicine” and indeed, Western pharmaceuticals are referred to as *puu haleisia* (“European medicine”). Yet Jędrej suggests that *hale* is a much wider and more potent concept. Noting that Poro and Sande and their respective “devils” are all referred to as *halei* (*hei*, the general Mende term for masquerade, is a contraction of *halei*), Jędrej defines *hale* as a mystery, a “ritual separator.”⁷³ We can compare this to Kpelle contexts where *sale* “is a secret possessed by a person or a small group of people.”⁷⁴ Such a sense of an object held by an elite group must be activated however, in order for it to be legible as a transformational force. Little defines *hale* as “something which is generally latent, and which requires only some special kind of action or some special circumstances to be made manifest. [...] In other words, they may be likened metaphorically to electric batteries. They are charged with energy.”⁷⁵ Understood as *hale*, secrets are objects constituted by volatile configurations of accumulated social force.

Secrecy can also be translated as prohibition. Beryl Bellman notes that “although secrecy is relevant to virtually every aspect of daily life, the Kpelle have no single word for secret. Instead they use the phrase *ifa mo*, literally translated as “you cannot talk it,” as their warning to

⁷² Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*.

⁷³ Jędrej, “Medicine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture,” 247–248.

⁷⁴ William E. Welmers, “Secret Medicines, Magic, and Rites of the Kpelle Tribe in Liberia,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1949): 211. Quoted in Murphy, “Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders versus Youth,” 197.

⁷⁵ Kenneth L. Little, “The Function of ‘Medicine’ in Mende Society,” *Man* 48 (November 1948): 127–9.

practice secrecy."⁷⁶ The Mende analogue for this imperative statement "do not explain it" is *baa huge*.⁷⁷ Secrecy is thus conceived as control over communication in addition to control over knowledge. Thus the public secret is understood as the fact that one may know, but that one may not speak aloud. As Michael Taussig notes, "the pomp and circumstances of secret societies [are] merely crafted caricatures of the skill essential to being a person, a social person, no less than a storyteller or a poet—knowing what not to know."⁷⁸ The ability to distinguish what is acknowledgeable from what is not permitted is not only central to personhood, but also central to effecting communal change. Limitations on speech are both restraints and channels for transformative social action.

Publics revealed

Ironically, academic discussions of secrecy and covert knowledge often obscure the crucial role of publicized, visible spectacle in the construction and manipulation of secrecy. "Secrecy must itself be performed in a public fashion in order to be understood to exist."⁷⁹ For Taussig, the secret is precisely designed to be disclosed, and more importantly, to shape the form of its disclosure. Following Walter Benjamin, Taussig asserts that "truth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it."⁸⁰ In the interpretation of Taussig and many other commentators, the revelation of the identity of the masked dancer, such as Poro's *gbini*, within the sacred context of initiation, is the paradigmatic

⁷⁶ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 43.

⁷⁷ *Baa huge* was one of a number of Mende names I was dubbed by my local friends... ironically, I hope.

⁷⁸ Taussig, *Defacement*, 195.

⁷⁹ Michael Herzfeld, "The Performance of Secrecy: Domesticity and Privacy in Public Spaces," *Semiotica* 2009, no. 175 (2009): 135.

⁸⁰ Taussig, *Defacement*, 2.

moment of this kind of revelation.⁸¹ If *gbini* is understood as a “manifestation” or as an invisible reality pulled into visible proximity, we can see that *every* Poro event is a kind of revelation.⁸² As a “secret” society and a discursively restricted space of action, any public appearance and activity constitutes nothing less than a revelation of its covert activities, a moment at which the society divulges truths in a fashion that does justice to them.

Poro requires the public demonstration of the secret to establish its reality. Michael Taussig paraphrases Simmel by stating, “secrecy magnifies reality,” but then counters with the assertion that obsessions with the secret “make a mockery of neat distinctions between reality and unreality.”⁸³ Introducing the potential of the secret into performance both magnifies and undermines the entire production, as the truths revealed may be partial or compromised. The visible becomes a signifier of a volatile mix of contradictory forces. Imagined materially, what is seen may be the entire actuality. Imagined metaphorically however, what is seen might stand in for a similar but intangible actuality. Imagined metonymically, what is seen may be just a small part of a much greater, more potent actuality. Imagined suspiciously, what is seen might be a distraction from an alternative actuality. Imagined cynically, what is seen might be the exact inverse of actuality. The competing forces of these possibilities, as they are imagined by spectators, animate extraordinary visual performance. Secrecy exhilarates and destabilizes spectacle and vice versa.

Bellman’s other major contribution to the understanding of secrecy’s operations in this region is its role in shifting “meaning context” or “frames.” Bellman notes that secrecy is

⁸¹ Taussig commits a full chapter to discussions of Poro and related associations’ practices in his treatise on public secrecy.

⁸² Reed, Dan Ge Performance, 5; Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, 565:1–2; Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*, 12–15.

⁸³ Taussig, *Defacement*, 56, 108.

“metacommunicative,” in the sense that the information comes with instructions, creating “double frame” of meaning.⁸⁴ These frames are described as *meni*, which Bellman translates as “auspices,” “meaning context,” and, following Schutz, “multiple orders of social reality.”⁸⁵

Secrecy is the means with which individuals navigate such frames.

The revealing of that information provides grounds for a different interpretation of the social reality. Essentially any item of information can be the content of a secret. What is important is that the knowledge, once obtained, leads to a new definition of the situation. [...] It is best to consider secrecy, not as a power struggle between those who know and those who want to know, but according to the ways concealed information is revealed.⁸⁶

Changing *meni* means changing the rules of social interaction. For example, the transference of venue from town to Poro bush also transfers the jurisdiction and outcome of any dispute.⁸⁷ The ranking of Poro elders depends on the specific *meni* at hand.⁸⁸ “Every *meni* is recognized by members as transcending local situations.”⁸⁹ Members change *meni* through informal means and through signs. The equivalent Mende term is *hinda* or *hindei*, generally translated as “business” or “affairs” but more precisely understood as a context for specific types of activity.

Sorting out one *hindei* from another, differentiating different social contexts and learning one’s place and potential within them, is fundamental to becoming a social being. Thus McGovern, following Bellman’s analysis, insists that “secrecy” in the context of initiatory power associations like Poro should be redefined as “discretion.”⁹⁰ This reconceptualization highlights two crucial skills needed for participation in these communities. The first is the ability to be

⁸⁴ cf. “double frame” Goffman, *Frame Analysis*; Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 6.

⁸⁵ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 43–44.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹⁰ McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*, 196–208.

discreet, to know how and when to speak and, more importantly, to know how and when *not* to speak. The second is the ability to discern and distinguish different categories of beings, actions, and the social contexts in which they come together. What business is whose? What business is one's own? What business is none of yours? In this, we return to both the definition of *hale* as a "ritual separator" and to the Latin roots of "secrecy," *secernere*, meaning "to separate" or *secretus*, a "class" that has already been "set apart," emphasizing privilege and difference.⁹¹ This sense of classing reveals that both speech and discretion are fundamental forms of social action: dividing, categorizing, and thus controlling information, individuals, and activities. As Simmel's oft-quoted passage argues, the secret offers precisely the means by which to navigate and shape adult social life:

The secret in this sense, the hiding of realities by negative or positive means, is one of man's greatest achievements. In comparison with the childish stage in which every conception is expressed at once, and every undertaking is accessible to the eyes of all, the secret produces an immense enlargement of life: numerous contents of life cannot even emerge in the presence of full publicity. The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former.⁹²

Secrecy may be understood in the Mende context as the means of defining, negotiating, and commanding different *hindeisia*, and *hindeisia* may best be understood as arenas that host certain specific kinds of discourse and social action: in other words, "publics" of varying degrees of privacy.

⁹¹ Thomas O. Beidelman, "Secrecy and Society: The Paradox of Knowing and the Knowing of Paradox," in *Secrecy: African Arts That Conceals and Reveals.*, ed. Mary H. Nooter (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993), 42; Suzanne Preston Blier, "Art and Secret Agency: Concealment and Revelation in Artistic Expression," in *Secrecy: African Arts That Conceals and Reveals.*, ed. Mary H. Nooter (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993), 189.

⁹² Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), 330.

4.2 ACTION

Publics enacted

Poro's public nature is belied by the harsh prohibitions surrounding the society, specifically those that deal with speaking about Poro itself. In the tradition of Jürgen Habermas, "the public sphere" is conceived as a singular space of rational-critical debate whose purpose is to act as "critical judge" of a state.⁹³ His formulation assumes that flows of information are completely open to an educated populace trained in Enlightenment thinking and that the public "acts" only as a check on state power. Conceptions based on these premises leave little space for alternatives to democracy as envisioned by Western bourgeois classes, and cannot explain political contestation and social change in other contexts.

Hannah Arendt offers a much more productive vision of the public. Arendt allows us to think of the public (meaning public-as-common rather than public-as-open) as a space of social action, rather than debate. For Arendt, "action" represents those human activities that are neither concerned with cyclical maintenance (labor) nor with crafting an enduring creation (work), both of which are conceivably solitary and relatively predictable endeavors. Action, on the other hand, is activity between humans, and thus the unstable core of politics.⁹⁴ Like Habermas, Arendt conceives of the private life as a necessary precursor to public participation, but crucially, the private persona is *not* the form in which public participation takes place. In Greek theatre, the private personality of the performer is necessary, but the art itself and the personae therein only come into being in the presence of spectators.⁹⁵ The spectacular revelations of secrets and the unstable realities they produce are often framed in theatrical metaphor, for example through the

⁹³ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 2.

⁹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 187–88.

spatial distinction of front and backstage.⁹⁶ Arendt's performative public is therefore a suitable lens through which to examine Poro's manipulation of the principles of exposure and concealment. Michael Warner describes Arendt's model as profoundly local, as opposed to Habermas's universalized public, making it more applicable for ethnographic analysis.⁹⁷ Poro suggests a localized public in which the exemplary expression is neither the printed novel, nor the theatre, but the immersive spectacle of Poro's *gbini* spectacle.

The *gbini* is the "public face" of Poro and is ostensibly restricted to activity during funerals and initiations when Poro's actions emerge into common view.⁹⁸ Amidst its many contrasting parts, the *gbini* is difficult to fully comprehend from any one perspective. It bears a squat, brightly mottled, cylindrical crown accented with sheep skin, mirrors, and flaps that echo warriors' *kololewengoi* armor.⁹⁹ Its body is shielded in a mass of raffia, which also covers the *gbini*'s wrists and feet. On its back is a collection of wooden tablets inscribed with protective Koranic passages. When the *gbini* is at rest, it leans over, its crown and limbs disappear under the raffia, and it appears like an inert basket filled with talismans. Beneath its armored back, most *gbini* sport a red and black striped tail. The *gbini*'s "front" is covered by a large apron composed of leopard skin, a totem that ties it to the paramount chieftaincy.¹⁰⁰ This apron distinguishes *gbini* from the *goboi*, an otherwise similar devil that is usually available for more

⁹⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday, 1959); William P. Murphy, "The Rhetorical Management of Dangerous Knowledge in Kpelle Brokerage," *American Ethnologist* 8, no. 4 (November 1981): 667–85; Murphy, "Creating the Appearance of Consensus in Mende Political Discourse." Taussig argues that orchestrating secrecy is "a finely-tuned theatrical process, thanks to which [...] the revelation shall do justice to the secret." Taussig, *Defacement*, 2.

⁹⁷ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 59.

⁹⁸ cf. Ferdinand De Jong, *Masquerades of Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 128.

⁹⁹ Hart, "Kololewengoi and the Myth of the Big Thing."

¹⁰⁰ Siegmann and Perani, "Men's Masquerades of Sierra Leone and Liberia," 43–45.



Figure 54. A *gboi* from Bomboma village. Tissor, Nongowa Chieftdom, Kenema District, 2013.

secular performances.¹⁰¹ For example, although Hassan Jalloh is not a Poro member, his men are permitted to dance a *goboi* in his name. Similarly, I was always allowed to photograph *goboi*, while only once did I manage to obtain permission to photograph *gbini*.

Gbini's performances center on demonstrations of its supreme and unpredictable force. Rather than the public address and self presentation exemplified by Arendt's understanding of Greek theatre or Hassan Jalloh's loquacious exhibitions, the *gbini* generates spectacle through volatile reformations of communal space and reclassification of its viewing public along hierarchies of participation. As the next vignette demonstrates, the *gbini*'s public is nonetheless a site for social action and radical collective change.

All People's Congress (APC)

The weekend following the RUF memorial services, many of the same *gbini* that had performed for the erstwhile rebels emerged for yet another funeral sponsored by a competing set of patrons. When a young entrepreneur announced that a funerary ceremony for his late father would be attended by leaders of the ruling APC party, many political operations long bubbling out of public view burst into play.

Kailahun is a remote town, but agriculture and cross-border trade have made some families very wealthy, among them the Kaikais. Arriving from Pujehun District (a neighboring Mende region to the Southwest), their patriarch Maya Kaikai developed an enormous agriculture business and inserted himself into local politics through multiple leadership roles: Chairman of the Kailahun District Council, Chairman of the Sierra Leone Produce Marketing Board,

¹⁰¹ Siegmann and Perani note that the *goboi* serves the role of *gbini* in some regions, while Migeod's research seems to suggest they are essentially the same spirit by two different names. However, all my informants made much of the distinction. Ibid.; Migeod, "The Poro Society: The Building of the Poro House and Making of the Image," 107.



Figure 55. The Warriors' *goboi*. Komende Luyama, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2012.

Chairman of the Kailahun East SLPP Constituency, and the director of an anti-smuggling border patrol. Aside from the three foundational chiefly families, his progeny are perhaps the most influential dynasty in Kailahun Town and the Luawa chiefdom, and their influence extends nationally. For instance, Maya Kaikai's son, Septimus Kaikai, has played a major role in national politics as spokesman for the Tejan Kabbah presidency, Minister of Information and Broadcasting, and Chair of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation.

The late Maya Kaikai's grandson and namesake, Maya Stanley Moiwo Kaikai, is a rising star of local entrepreneurship. The young man raised a small fortune in the diamond business towards the end of the war.¹⁰² Following the declaration of peace, he entered the hotel industry in Freetown, and in 2010 he mobilized some of his mining funds for the construction of a luxury hotel compound, the Luawa Resort, on the outskirts of Kailahun. Billed as an accommodation for visiting politicians, NGOs, and business leaders, the collection of concrete "huts" is the only hotel in the district that boasts air-conditioning, televisions, and wifi.

At the time of the funeral, young Maya Kaikai's reputation had recently fallen under suspicion. Kaikai had recently "crossed the carpet" to the ruling APC party, positioning himself as President Ernest Bai Koroma's leading promoter in the region, a surprise move for any resident in the fiercely SLPP-supporting Kailahun District, no less the grandson of a staunch SLPP leader. Rumors in town suggested that Kaikai had been too profligate in his spending on the hotel and that he had mishandled his loans. Kaikai also likely misjudged the demand for his hotel. Visits by wealthy figures who did not already have accommodations in town were very few and far between, and there was almost no international tourist presence over the time I spent in Kailahun. Kaikai was rumored to have turned to President Koroma for a bailout, in exchange

¹⁰² The more salacious aspects of his work are suggested in an *Esquire* profile of one of his British patrons. John H. Richardson, "The Opportunist," *Esquire*, January 1, 2001.

for his services to win over the Kailahun District community. To my knowledge, these rumors were conjectural, but they did speak to local conceptions of the operation of State power. A Kailahun resident was usually understood to sever loyalty to the SLPP party only under duress and in exchange for the financial remuneration offered by the ruling party.

Presuppositions of party allegiance spoke to local understandings of power rooted in personal relationships. Politicians express the personalization of party politics in metaphors of kinship, and the SLPP, APC, and RUF all described themselves as families at certain points of the election cycle. Party affiliation, at least during the presidential election cycle, was a site of more fierce identity politics than ethnicity.¹⁰³ In contrast to this hardened, predetermined view of party loyalty, a discourse of *kr. Salon fɔs* (“Sierra Leone first”), combined with an ideology of rational choice promulgated by many international aid groups, promotes the argument that voters should follow whichever candidate would *kr. le wi go bifo* (“make us go forward”). This counter-narrative provided a rationale through which APC converts in Mendeland could frame their political mobility.¹⁰⁴

Kaikai’s defection was not the only one to rankle the Kailahun public. About two weeks earlier, Tom Nyuma, the Kailahun District Chairman and thus the most powerful executive in the district, crossed carpet as well. His defection had thrown the entire district into disarray, as the rest of the council, all SLPP, refused to work with him or even let him sign checks. As with Kaikai, Nyuma’s change in party affiliation was glossed in the personalized terms of betrayal by commentators, both SLPP and APC supporters. SLPP members insisted that Nyuma was

¹⁰³ However, party and ethnic identities overlap to a large extent—Mendes and Southerners to SLPP, Temnes and Northerners to APC—and it is difficult to judge how much ethnic rivalries have been subsumed within political party rivalries.

¹⁰⁴ This is not to argue that SLPP supporters did not use rational critique to support their views. In fact, they regularly cited a litany of APC failings that were hard to counter.

avoiding the Anti-Corruption Commission, as he was well known to have mismanaged District funds. Others, mostly APC members, argued that Nyuma's personal reasons for changing sides went much deeper. Nyuma, along with Valentine Strasser and Maada Bio, was a member of the inner-core of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), the young army officers who overthrew the APC regime in 1992 at the onset of the Civil War. Strasser had assumed the presidency and the other officers received plush ministerial positions. As the NPRC regime floundered, the international community pushed for democratic elections. Once Strasser resisted, Maada Bio staged another coup and briefly took power in order to ensure a transition to a democratically elected government, one ultimately led by the SLPP and President Tejan Kabbah. As a result, Tom Nyuma went into exile in the US, but was deported for alleged domestic violence in 2007.¹⁰⁵ During the presidential elections of that year, then-candidate Ernest Bai Koroma's bodyguards, a group composed of former RUF members led by the infamous rebel "Leatherboots," beat Nyuma into a coma on the pretext that Nyuma was attempting to assassinate Koroma. Under a less-than-transparent judicial process, Nyuma was exonerated and the APC bodyguards arrested.¹⁰⁶ Many believe that the SLPP offered Nyuma the "flag" (or nomination) for the Kailahun District Chair because of that incident, rather than because of his qualifications to lead. In spite of this handout by the SLPP, many suspect that once Bio was nominated as the SLPP presidential candidate for 2012, Nyuma began planning revenge against him for stripping the NPRC of power in 1993. In this rumored narrative, Bio's disloyalty to Nyuma, a secret hidden and rotting for almost two decades, led to the retaliatory and revelatory disloyalty of Nyuma towards the SLPP.

¹⁰⁵ "NPRC Colonel Tom Nyuma Deported From United States For Domestic Violence," *Standard Times Press*, July 20, 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Kabs-Kanu, "Tom Nyuma Speaks to Cocorioko from Hospital Bed in Bo ...denies Allegations.....exonerates Apc Leader Ernest Koroma," *Cocorioko International Newspaper*, July 24, 2007.



Figure 56. *Goboi* from the Jawie region at an APC rally. Daru, Jawie Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

The tomb of the late Maya Kaikai lies beside the Kaikai family home and is a stone's throw from the city's central crossroads. There his grandson, young Maya Kaikai, convened a meeting between the Kaikai family and village chiefs from throughout the chiefdom. As more chairs were added, the configuration of seats shifted subtly as individuals maneuvered into position or saw flaws in the arrangement of seats, giving the sense of a communally subconscious tic of anticipation. Along with the young Maya Kaikai and Kailahun Town Chief Maada Alpha "Bringoo" Ndoleh, a number of elders arrived on foot. A few sleek SUVs drove up and let out "big men," who sat opposite the elders on the Peace Garden side of the triangle. A flashy, silver Land Rover Defender with a strangely bubbled window and racing decals roared up and District Chairman Tom Nyuma, a big man (literally in this case) in a white t-shirt and red cap emerged to a warm reception. Apparently he had picked up the car on a trip to Freetown the week before, suspiciously near to the time he had crossed carpets to the APC. As the Chairman greeted the guests, his driver left the vehicle in gear and cockily walked outside the truck as it slowly drove up the hill by itself. His men spent the rest of the day careening through town in the 4x4, possibly for business, but more likely for pleasure and self-aggrandizement.

At mid-afternoon, the chairs had filled up, children and young men had been sent to stand in back, and the *sara* (Islamic prayer and sacrifice) began. The floor was given to Maya Kaikai, still dressed casually, who thanked the attendants and his "friend" President Koroma for starting work on the highway to Kailahun, before adding a few general words about friendship. An enthusiastic young man read out the names of the attending guests from the APC party executive and the government, including the APC General Secretary, the State Secretary (in sunglasses, a flashy wide-brimmed black hat, and a black shirt opened to reveal a few small gold chains), and about a dozen others. Chief Ndoleh then got up to introduce the assembled chiefs, who included

Paramount Chiefs from several Kailahun chiefdoms, and several town chiefs from around Luawa. The difference between the two sides of the triangle was striking, one sleekly dressed and heavysset and the other modest and elderly. Other speakers stood to discuss friendship, non-violence in the upcoming elections, and Maya Kaikai's accomplishments. Notably, almost nothing was said about the deceased, nor was any speech direct about the heavy APC presence, even though several attendees sported Koroma buttons. The prayers were short and the guests dispersed quickly afterward, with a sacrificial goat taken back behind the grave for a secluded death. As the cars prepared to drive away, some of the *gbini* began to arrive and hung over the hoods of the vehicles to keep them from leaving until their occupants contributed a donation. A 4x4 from the Luawa Resort drove up with a woman in the passenger side, who, as soon as she saw a devil passing by her side of the car, leapt into the driver's lap and cursed at him for driving so close.

Throughout the day, one-on-one interactions between the devils and members of the Kailahun Town population and their guests established or reiterated different kinds of connections between each sector. In the late afternoon, these relations were amalgamated in spectacular fashion.

Power displayed

As the program began, different populations arranged themselves around the space in front of the Kaikai compound in a lop-sided circle, accounting for the lay of the crossroads and an open drainage ditch. Some sat in plastic chairs, some crowded close, some stood at a distance. Many men and boys perched precariously on three rusted-out shells of the cocoa plantation pickup trucks in front of the building across from the house. As the performance continued, the



Figure 57. Sennessie “C.I.C.” Sannoh and the Warriors’ *goboï*. Bandakor, Kpanga-Kabonde Chiefdom, Pujehun District, 2012.

crowd grew and stretched to more distant structures and hillocks until it possibly counted one thousand individuals. In the courtyards of the houses nearby a number of women and children found open places to watch, but they were continuously chased off by *mbolesia*, the attendants of the *gbini*, as the devils passed throughout the program.

With a big uproar, long lines of *mbolesia* snaked swiftly through the streets, spinning and snapping rolled cloths, and three *gbini* and their entourages converged on the square. They forced their way into the playing space with a burst of tremendous drumming and then circulated around, visiting those luminaries seated in front of the Kaikai estate. Ndoleh leapt up and expertly stage-managed them, coercing the devils into one corner of the triangle. They took turns performing one after the other, charging out in the direction opposite to where they had entered when they were finished. Two more *gbini* filtered in later and did the same. The performances were short, no more than two minutes, and seemed to have wide room for improvisation. The central structure was the entrance and slow lumber of the devil into the center of the space to an ominous “dum dum dum” of a bass drum. The drummer would crack up the tempo and the devil shuffled quickly around the field and then spun upright, whipping its sleeves back and forth. One attendant slapped his cloth across the *gbini*’s front apron to get it into a frenzy.¹⁰⁷ Another followed behind the devil, holding a small rice sifter that may have held mystical items, as if he were collecting talismans dropping from the *gbini*’s tablet-covered back.¹⁰⁸ The devil was often provoked into rushing across the stage, rapping its tablets together as the devil hit the wall of men and the attendants struggled to stay between it and the crowd. At certain moments, the devil leaned over, its limbs disappearing beneath the raffia, its form appearing almost like a great bowl

¹⁰⁷ cf. Siegmann and Perani, “Men’s Masquerades of Sierra Leone and Liberia,” 43.

¹⁰⁸ Possibly related to the broom-holder (*kpangbahoumoi*) described by Little. Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone*, 246.

filled with talismans. From there it continued to contract its body inward and swirl in dangerous circles, its raffia exploding out towards the crowd. One *gbini* almost lost its head and Chief Ndoleh leapt up immediately and escorted it off the stage, hurrying back to wave his arm aggressively and angrily towards the audience. In another case, the devil struggled to hold its crown but seemed to have trouble putting it back in place, and Chief Ndoleh had all the lined up *mbolesia* surround it as it got itself together. Yet another swung around and picked up the sifting attendant under his apron, almost making him disappear before spinning dramatically through the circle. The crowd erupted in cheers.

After each of the *gbini* had performed in turn, several *ngafei* took over.¹⁰⁹ These lesser devils were overwhelmed by an increasingly rowdy crowd, and as one *ngafei* danced, the others aggressively engaged in crowd control, particularly on the end where the devils entered. As one devil charged the youths nearby with his sticks, the group fell on top of itself in a pile that splayed both inside and outside the circle, and the men who hopped up laughed and crowded around the devil with a mixture of defiance and salutation before returning to more civil formation. Another devil marked out a line with his sticks that he wanted the crowd to stay behind, then turned around and walked backwards along it, robotically swinging his sticks blindly and catching a lot of men off guard. He received the same reception. The devils also employed full-speed charges, some with ready, set, go, warning sprints. Many of these charges resulted in spectators tumbling into the gutter that lay at one edge of the field and another cleared all the boys off the pickup trucks in chaotic and painful fashion. The honored guests didn't help matters when they started throwing small plastic packets of cheap liquor into the crowd. Even little boys tried to get the drinks and the chaos was intense. Finally one guest threw the whole

¹⁰⁹ In some regions, *ngafei* is known as *gbetei*. Its "secular" counterpart is *nafali*.

bag of liquor in, and a local grabbed it in a moment of triumph before he was quickly lost beneath the pile of bodies.

Just as the crowd grew outside the circle, the circle itself shrank, until it was a deformed triangle. Some disgruntled elders on the far side periodically moved their chairs ahead of the surging crowd, but most had disappeared. As the circle collapsed in on itself and the sun dipped into the horizon's haze, Chief Ndoleh emerged with envelopes of to distribute to the drummers and the escorts of different devils. A few *gbini* clustered around him as he methodically double-checked the arrangements, then charged off as their handlers collected an envelope and a carton of canned beer each. Chief Ndoleh strode out towards his house with his arm over the shoulders of the last *gbini*. The crowd of men reoriented themselves around some musicians, and formed a massive mob that followed the chief and the devil at a distance, marching and chanting *hindo wovei wailo* ("the old man has come") and stopping every once in a while to jump up and down and cheer. I was told they would move off towards the Poro bush, where they would be met by old women singing to them not to leave.

Power discerned

The affective impact of this extraordinary spectacle emerged out of three intertwined aesthetic preoccupations: ferocious and unpredictable masculinity, prodigious populations of spectators, and the arrangement and discernment of hierarchies within those populations. From the balcony of the Kaikai residence, the mapped distribution of human categories was patently apparent. Even amidst all the seeming chaos, the arrangement of human bodies and the hierarchies implied were clear to even the most oblivious non-initiate.



Figure 58. Reveler, *ngafei* (or *gbetei*), attendant. Jormu Kafeibu, Nongowa Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2012.

At the base of the estate staircase on the southern side of the dance space, a short row of plastic chairs held the most important guests and dignitaries. The tall two-story edifice behind them, also representing the strength of the family lineage, stood as an immobile blockade that buttressed their position. While other spectators around the ring found themselves forced back and away from the spinning vortex of power that was *gbini*, those seated in front of the house moved only at their own volition. They sat next to a large cooler from which they could regularly take chilled beer, not the locally bottled Star brand, but Kaon, a much more expensive canned lager imported from Albania and popular among the elite. The central seat was taken by APC representative Victor Foh. Young Maya Kaikai, the ostensible honoree, and Chief Ndoleh, the ostensible host, took more peripheral seats beside Foh, from which they could more readily leap into the midst of the action or out of the circle in order to orchestrate the events. The musicians sat to the guests' right. From a practical viewpoint, this was close enough to take orders from the leadership, but more important to aesthetics and distributive power, their proximity meant the drummers' control over the *gbini* appeared to emanate from the position of the honored guests.

Other elders arrayed themselves in chairs around the circle. These gentlemen had the privilege of front-row seats, but had to deal with the inconvenience of the movements of a rowdy crowd and devils. In sacrificing comfort for proximity, they signified their position as Poro insiders. The wild mobs of young men that spread out from the circle of performance constituted yet another category of spectatorship as a zone of fevered competition. Those with enough will and physical force to push themselves into position won the right to view the spectacle. This was not only a site of visual interaction, but also encompassed all other sensory stimuli. The young initiates fought to join in song, to physically interact with the *gbini*, and to catch and drink the copious plastic sachets of cheap "packet liquor" the honored guests frequently threw into their

midst. This zone of fervent and unpredictable action was almost entirely focused on participation rather than observation.

Outside this ring and spreading as far as I could see from the balcony, a more dispersed crowd of women and other less engaged spectators tentatively occupied an uncertain space. Many young girls seemed to be testing how close they could get to the dance without risking an unexpected eruption of a *gbini* in their direction as the spirit either entered or escaped the circle. Most women and non-initiates posted themselves at points that were established as outside the zone of the *gbini*'s unbridled force, such as the comparatively protected canopies in front of nearby shops. From such vantage points, the spectacle was doubly or triply obscured behind tiers of other spectators, yet it remained a source of fascination. In their role as viewers of the viewers, the spectators in this marginal zone constituted the spectacle as much as the performances that took place at the center.

Multiple and varied vantage points each hosted constituencies with different rights and powers. At the center were those with the right and power to see, to know, to participate every aspect of the event. On the fringes were those whose rights were curtailed in very specific ways. In between were tiers that hosted combinations of differing rights and powers.

My own ability to view and discern all of these spaces came from my elevated perspective from the Kaikai estate balcony, but this position had not been pre-determined. The APC event came early in my relationship with Kailahun Town, so I had limited contacts. I knew the lead drummer well, but in spite of his central position in the ceremony, he never risked his status by sponsoring my presence in formal occasions.¹¹⁰ I was acquainted with Chief Ndoleh, but to be his guest was too much of an imposition. In the end, I arrived at the event alone. The

¹¹⁰ This was a personal preference as far as I could tell, and I never found out the reason for it. Drummers in Kenema often invited me to Poro ceremonies in that region and used their influence to authorize my presence. I assume the Kailahun drummer felt less secure in his own personal situation.

plastic chairs were just being set up and few were at the site when I strolled by, but one local offered that I take a seat near the drummers in the central zone of the honored guests. I sat and waited for the program to begin for several minutes, until after more discussion I was directed to take my chair away from the drummers on the opposite side of the playing circle. Again, I sat for about fifteen minutes as crowds began to gather, until I was questioned again about my role and directed to leave the circle. I was taken up to the Kaikai estate balcony, directly overlooking the performance space, where I joined two dozen women, children, and non-initiates, mostly family members and APC guests. William Rea discusses similar jockeying by local society members in his attempts to participate in the Ìkòlé masquerade festival in Southeast Nigeria. The disputes around his presence revealed the “power struggles and rivalries” involved in its organization.¹¹¹ The kind of live negotiation demonstrated by the minor debates about my placement and how I was meant to articulate with the other spectators—whether as an honored guest, a peripheral spectator, or a non-initiate with some rights to view the program—indicated not only my ambiguity as an outside observer, but also hinted at other, more important negotiations that were reshaping the distribution of spectators and power throughout the entire event.

The performance of power was instantiated through the *gbini*, and the devils were the visual center of the performance. As spectacle, the *gbini* attracted a crowd with extraordinary visuals, and they united the audience through a shared point of reference. More importantly, the *gbini* structured the space of the performance and classed the spectators according to numerous hierarchies, aligned generally insider-to-outsider and specifically by gender, age, and lineage. The classification was *visible*. Through the medium of the *gbini*, each spectator could envision a power structure that operated for the most part in invisible, obscure, or covert planes. Moreover,

¹¹¹ Rea, “Rationalising Culture,” 100.

the classification was *palpable*. Each spectator had an embodied, lived experience of their relation to that normally intangible power structure, manifested in the geography of the performance as it constantly rearranged itself around the figures of the *gbini*. The structure was at its most static, even if the activity was at its most chaotically ecstatic, in the circle in front of the Kaikai residence. As the *gbini* moved throughout the town, the power structure became increasingly mutable and contested. The long line of *mbolesia* attendants heralded these dramatic spatial shifts, placing spectators on alert for the coming *gbini*; in spite of or because of the warning, the tempestuousness of the devil made each contact unpredictable and intense. Every time the *gbini* arrived, the crowd reformulated around it, women dashing away, initiated men dashing forward, shelters jammed with bodies, paths cleared of them. Spectators' physical proximity to the *gbini* was constantly renegotiated, but always grounded in the spectators' social proximity to the spirit and Poro more generally. Small children fled. Women hopped back into the shelter of shops. Powerful but uninitiated men stood at a respectful distance, feigning disinterest. An ethnographer and others of uncertain confidence were cloistered on the balcony, the one site from which they could see but not interact with the performance. Young men charged behind as the *gbini*'s entourage. Elders and dignitaries proudly stood before and folded themselves within the devil's dusty embrace. All of us onlookers lived out our relationships to arcane power through the exercise of our right, or lack thereof, of access to the *gbini*.¹¹²

It is in this sense that *hale*—again, at once “medicine,” “devil,” and “secret society”—can be best understood as a “ritual separator.”¹¹³ The *hale* of the *gbini* spectacle does not separate the social order symbolically or psychologically, so much as it *constitutes* the social order. The

¹¹² cf. Bellman's observation that Zo ranking is physicalized through their position in the ritual, and these position change in relation to the ritual context. Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 25–26.

¹¹³ Jędrej, “Medicine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture,” 247.

“ritual separators” are best considered synecdochic, in that the *gbini* and its entourage are a single, visible, and tangible component of larger, less fathomable social formations. The ritual does not reproduce the ideal structure of society in a Durkheimian sense by enacting a prefigured model.¹¹⁴ All social categories are made manifest, but expressly in order that they may be set in relation to each other physically as well as abstractly.

The intensive display of social relations is primed to accommodate attempts at exhibiting, influencing, and renegotiating power. As Sandra Barnes has noted for chiefly rites in postcolonial Nigeria, while chiefs may have lost formal legislative control, their ceremonies in and of themselves are sites of extensive “informal political uses.” Most such operations are concerned with “creating and maintaining the political and economic conditions that enable successful people to *emerge* as big men and women.”¹¹⁵ The emergence of “big men and women” requires the creation of a visual field upon which political actors can be recognized and wealth redistributed, here facilitated by the funds of the APC campaign coffers. The ostentatious display of authority, combined with the dispensation of largesse, manifests a radiation of power from a central core to a periphery, neither of which remains entirely stable. The radiance of influence is experienced both through visual and other sensory stimulus, which grow more intense the closer one is to the core, and through monetary and commodity handouts, which filter out from the core with diminishing quantity and quality, primarily in the form of various levels of alcoholic treats. Needless to say, occupying the core is prime performance real estate.

The fact that APC agents—and to a lesser extent the RUFPP earlier in the week—took the center stage was a key revelation. As recently as the last presidential election in 2007, APC

¹¹⁴ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*; De Jong, *Masquerades of Modernity*, 44.

¹¹⁵ Barnes, “Political Ritual and the Public Sphere in Contemporary West Africa,” 32 emphasis added.

campaigns had been violently driven from Kailahun Town by riots and rock-throwing. An oft-repeated story told of a former ambassador who descended to the street before the oncoming motorcade of then APC presidential aspirant Ernest Bai Koroma and fired a pistol into the air (all private firearms are illegal in Sierra Leone) until the APC was forced to turn and retreat. The party's presence in the center of the SLPP stronghold as honored guests of Poro was a stunning reversal. The Poro membership would argue that their activities were apolitical, that they perform out of duty for the deceased irrespective of their party affiliation. However, it is precisely such disavowals that allow "culture" to be politicized. The ambiguity of the relationship between the Poro and political parties allows for more fluid maneuvering than is possible in open debate. As William Murphy notes, "the logic of secrecy in political strategizing arises, in part, from the structural need to gain support from people who are required by kinship norms to support their own relatives in political contests."¹¹⁶ Kinship relations are just one of many complications of contemporary neoliberal democracy in rural Sierra Leone, exacerbated in regions like Kailahun where local SLPP loyalties make it extremely difficult to gain access to national resources held by the opposing party. Poro's opaque networks combine with its transparent public spectacles to allow participants to negotiate these obstacles.

The "visual regime" of Poro opposes much Western history linking visibility to power, such as the "panopticum" of Michel Foucault's disciplinary State.¹¹⁷ Nicholas Mirzoeff reveals that "visibility," a favorite term of postmodern scholars of aesthetics, was coined in 1837 by conservative historian Thomas Carlyle as "a technique for the individual dominance of the ruler and the institution of sovereignty, derived from the ability of the modern general to visualize the

¹¹⁶ Murphy, "The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics," 569.

¹¹⁷ Mark Poster, "Visual Studies as Media Studies," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 1 (2002): 68; Tony Schirato and Jen Webb, *Reading the Visual* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 69; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 195–210.

entire battlefield that extends beyond any person's biological sight."¹¹⁸ The geography of prominence places the most mighty at the highest spaces, bestowing a view upon the widest possible terrain and often simultaneously making the mighty visible to the widest possible public. In the case of the Kailahun Poro procession, this site would have been the balcony on which I sat amongst a variety of other uncategorized participants. However, we were most certainly not the most powerful actors in this event. For the Poro, higher ground was a place to put people out of the way, a space of quarantine in which we could do as little damage as possible. In spite of being able to see all, we could do nothing.

Visuality in Poro is organized in the opposite direction. Power was at the center of the performance, and at that center, one's visual field became increasingly compromised. From the perspective of the balcony or the bystanders who observed from well outside the circle of performance, one could see the entire crowd and its disposition, though perhaps only fleeting glimpses of the featured performers. From inside the circle itself, one could only see the wall of bodies that constituted the dance space, one's fellow dignitaries, and the devil. As one is allowed closer and closer to the *gbini*, the more that devil fills up one's field of view and the more one is surrounded by its particular manifestation of social power. Rather than panoptic, we might imagine this as a "myopic" visual regime, one in which power comes into greater focus with greater proximity. The more restricted and focused one's view becomes, the closer one comes to the source of power, while the wider one's perspective, the more diffuse and distant the source of power becomes. The absolute apogee of this continuum is the moment when a dignitary receives the privilege of becoming engulfed by the *gbini*. At that instant, his visual field is presumably

¹¹⁸ Nicholas Mirzoeff, "War Is Culture : Global Counterinsurgency, Visuality, and the Petraeus Doctrine," *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (2009): 8.

completely obstructed, but one cannot imagine that it is eliminated. Rather, it is enveloped. By what, I cannot say for sure, but call it the secret. Or call it power.

Reality reframed

Poro oversees social transitions and thus engages the powers of liminality, as Victor Turner's work long ago established.¹¹⁹ Ostensibly, Poro emerges in public only during periods of radical yet structured change to that public. On the one hand, initiations mark individual transitions that significantly change the public by adding new actors. On the other, the funerals and installations of chiefs mark communal transitions that significantly change the public by replacing administrators. Both of these events are, in a sense, out of human control, driven by the passage of time through the forces of growth and death. Control over these processes is not exactly agentless, yet the agents are invisible. Poro ties its agentive power to the invisible forces of the bush and the spirit world of ancestors. Limiting Poro public performance to periods of radical change that are not fully in human control ostensibly keeps them from being manipulated by individual human actors, while also framing Poro as the manager of and guide through social chaos. By being in some way outside of total human control, Poro displays remain "liminal" rather than "liminoid."¹²⁰

Many observers have suggested that the *heisia* of Poro, especially *gbini*, are emissaries of both the bush and the spirit world.¹²¹ During my research, I was never granted the privilege of learning many specific interpretations of the Poro devils, but their emergence from the Poro bush and their animalistic ferocity certainly do suggest such ties. Bringing a bush spirit into the village

¹¹⁹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1966).

¹²⁰ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, 53–55.

¹²¹ Siegmund and Perani, "Men's Masquerades of Sierra Leone and Liberia," 43.



Figure 59. Daru town *gboi* performing for an SLPP rally. Daru, Jawie Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

emphasizes the many inversions inherent to the liminal moments of initiation and administrative transition. The spirit is paradoxically “a non-human forest being who exhibits human aspects,” as Monni Adams suggests in Ivorian contexts.¹²² In these moments, Poro may be seen as controlling normally uncontrollable spirit and bush realms. Public spectacles around the *gbini* emphasize such inversions.

Many inversions purposefully induce chaos and violence. Any breach of Poro regulations by non-members, whether by men or women, is said to met with forced initiation, a punishment due to its cost and the presumed violence of the bush.¹²³ Most commentators note the practice of presenting a broken pot, in lieu of a body, to families of the initiates have died in the course of initiation.¹²⁴ Ritual danger and inversion is not limited to Poro, as Jędrej notes ritual devastation of the village in Sande initiation, though “in fact only a token amount of prearranged damage is done.”¹²⁵ However, the violent rowdiness of the male initiates during Poro is not always so contained. The Poro events for the funeral of a significant chief in the city of Kenema were canceled abruptly when fears arose over the youths use of the pandemonium to engage in looting and other lawlessness. One might consider the violence of Poro performances as simply an extension of all the reversals at play; if Mende society is usually marked by excessive civility and peace, in the inverted world where Poro comes to light, society descends into lawlessness, although that lawlessness may have its own laws. One might also consider the violence, contained at least temporally to the time of the rite, as a kind of release valve, allowing hidden and simmering tensions a moment to burst into view and be reckoned with. Alternatively, one

¹²² Monni Adams, “Agency and Control in Masked Festivals among the Bo People, Southwestern Côte d’Ivoire,” *Zeitschrift Für Ethnologie* 130, no. 2 (2005): 206.

¹²³ cf. Fanthorpe, *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*, 14–15.

¹²⁴ Little, “The Political Function of the Poro. Part I,” 357; Harley, “Notes on the Poro in Liberia,” 18.

¹²⁵ Jędrej, “Medicine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture,” 252.

could consider the violence constructed in order to be contained. If Poro, as McGovern claims, is “a major ritual preoccupation [...] to control flows—of potentially dangerous energy [...], potentially dangerous persons, or powerful knowledge,”¹²⁶ as it most certainly is, Poro must create a real sense of that danger in its performances before it can demonstrate its control over it.

Bellman argues that the revelation of secrets, and specifically that of human power behind Poro masks, takes the performances from “rituals of illusion,” in which a spirit is mimicked, to “rituals of allusion,” which open out on an array of symbolic reinterpretations and metaphoric deployments.¹²⁷ Yet rather than thinking of these rituals as analogies or metaphor, I believe they are best understood synecdochically as a part of a greater whole, a concentrated instantiation of a broader, more amorphous system. These rites are not a reference to an alternate reality. Thinking back to Bellman’s discussion of *meni* or our deployment of *hinda*, we can consider them reframed or nested realities, “a second world alongside our manifest world” in Simmel’s words.

At the moment of unmasking, the “true” character of Poro is revealed. This moment may or may not happen in the initiation bush, but certainly happens in many other more individuated contexts like rumor. Poro does not simply *control* the spirits or the bush exterior to their human collective; it *is* the spirit and the bush. Yet at the same time, it remains a force of human agency. Thus, the spirit world and human agency collapse upon each other, and human agency is revealed to be embedded within the ultimate, unpredictable, dangerous source of all social power. At the moment of unmasking or revelation, the masker is revealed simultaneously as spirit, as metaphor for spirit and bush, and as not-at-all-metaphor but synecdoche for human agency and social action.

¹²⁶ McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*, 60.

¹²⁷ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 83–84.

4.3 AUTONOMY

Privacy/publicity

Poro's fundamentally "public" functions heighten the stakes of my friend's claim to "privacy" in reference to the national government's jurisdiction over initiations. At first his insistence might appear to contradict Poro's public agency. Declaring Poro "private" might remove it from public scrutiny and control while also severing its influence over Mende public life. Yet to claim that the two categories are mutually exclusive, that "the private is what the public is not," is to grossly overstate their opposition.¹²⁸ While "public" and "private" are complementary, they are transient categories that are highly contingent and constantly renegotiated.

Feminist and queer scholars have noted that the delimitation of activities as "public" or "private" corresponds to efforts at seizing or maintaining power over different spheres of social action, exposing how "how privacy is publicly constructed."¹²⁹ Nancy Fraser points out that "the labeling of some issues and interests as 'private' limits the range of problems, and of approaches to problems, that can be widely contested in contemporary societies."¹³⁰ Topics that are made private, such as patriarchal domination of the family unit, are framed outside the possibility of communal debate and transformation. Seyla Benhabib argues that all struggles against oppression begin by redefining the private as public, a process most famously proclaimed in the slogan "the personal is the political."¹³¹ However, if consignment to the "private" sphere is

¹²⁸ Joe Bailey, "From Public to Private: The Development of the Concept of the 'Private,'" *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2002): 28.

¹²⁹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 23.

¹³⁰ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 77.

¹³¹ Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 100.

conceived as being denied autonomy by feminist and queer theorists, most Poro members see the issue quite differently.

Following the critique of the constructed nature of public/private divisions, Jean and John Comaroff observe that civil society is inherently “protean,” existing “only to the extent that it is named, objectified, and sought after.”¹³² In other words, civil society is not a preexisting condition that individuals and activities enter into, but rather a construct created by the demand individuals make for it. Yet as Mariane Ferme argues in the Sierra Leonean case, the openness imagined by Habermasian public sphere theory is not available to all political actors. Publics are thus conceived as hidden in order to maintain as much flexibility as possible:

For if a defining feature of the public sphere is its accessibility to the broadest possible spectrum of citizens, then its existence in the Sierra Leone case is beyond doubt—except that the conditions under which so many can participate in creating “a public opinion” are that the debates be as much secret as they are public, and that outcomes remain ambiguous. A central tenet to the continued existence of a public sphere in Sierra Leone is that its deliberations remain partly secret, especially when those deliberation concern the ballot, given the modern history of electoral abuses in the country.¹³³

This covert public, in a way a “secret public” that corresponds to the “public secret,” mirrors Mende practices that contrast public unity with private debate.¹³⁴ A “secret public” is something of a shielded context in which conflicts over the common good can play themselves out with minimal impact on already tenuous lives in Sierra Leonean villages—lives always dependent on wide social networks and a certain degree of cooperative action.

¹³² John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, eds., *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 6. The distinction between “civil society” and “public” varies across the literature. I am inspired by many of the issues discussed under the rubric of “civil society,” but agree with Craig Calhoun that civil society refers to institutions, while public sphere refers to discourse. “Public” and “public sphere” are thus conceptually more flexible and broadly pervasive than “civil society,” which can be limited to certain organizations and their membership. Craig Calhoun, “Civil Society and the Public Sphere,” *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 278.

¹³³ Ferme, “Staging Politics: The Dialogics of Publicity and Secrecy in Sierra Leone,” 161.

¹³⁴ Murphy, “Creating the Appearance of Consensus in Mende Political Discourse.”

However united a front they might maintain, publics remain sites for contestation and change, often expressed through the movement of practices between public to private engagement as feminist theory has insisted. Responding to a national debate over a village HIV/AIDS treatment rooted in traditional medical practice, Peter Probst observes that when healing practices move from private to public discourse, they spur contests over knowledge, meaning, and social memory.¹³⁵ These shifts between public and private spheres, more than the spheres themselves, set the terms of common debate and social action. The public and the private are not so much opposing categories as two forms of the same process of negotiating power.

Privacy declared

The “public” and the “private” are best understood as declarative speech acts or performative utterances.¹³⁶ They are not “descriptive” or “indicative.” They perform that which they state, moving the subject in and out of different power configurations. They have the perlocutionary effect of inviting or blocking action. To declare something private is to restrict access, while to declare the same thing public is to open it to interaction. Put simply, privacy is a claim to autonomy, publicity is a call to participation.

At even the widest claims to publicity, participation is curtailed both explicitly and implicitly. Involvement is limited by distinctions between participatory roles, including rights to action, observation, and discussion. The relations between different roles are not necessarily linear or static. Permission to perform or enact does not inevitably grant permission to observe or to discuss. The role of women in Poro is one instance in which these permissions are distributed complexly; they are invited to perform as singers and crowds, but they are limited in their ability

¹³⁵ Probst, “‘Mchape’ ’95, Or, the Sudden Fame of Billy Goodson Chisupe.”

¹³⁶ cf. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

to observe, and they are absolutely prohibited from any kind of discussion. Standing on the balcony above the APC performance, I was permitted to observe, but not to perform, and my ability to discuss Poro was a constant act of careful negotiation.

While the limits of participation are made explicit in the roles in which individuals can intervene, they are implicit in a number of other forms. For example, one needs to be able to hear the call to participate. In Poro, literacy takes the form of a variety of social codes and signals, including sign language and the deployment of symbolic items. Another implicit limit is location, as one must be present in a certain place to participate. Yet another is the ability of the listeners to recognize themselves as subjects of address. Non-initiates may hear a Poro call, but selectively tune it out as not addressed to themselves or “none of their business.” These different limitations suggest ways in which privacy begins to dialectically push back on publicity.

Though calls to publicity are depicted as extending limitlessly outward, they are actually directed internally, *within* a community.¹³⁷ Explicit and implicit limits of participation define the limits of the community of those permitted to participate. Conversely, calls for privacy are directed externally, outside a community or extra-communally. While privacy appears to be withdrawal from the outside world, the call for privacy is directed at a more infinitely extensive realm than the call of the public. Two extremes of public/private dichotomy demonstrate the limit points of these declarations. Historically for example, the nation-state has had little need to make claims for its own autonomy and so rarely makes claims for privacy (though this is dramatically changing as nation-states’ sovereignty is threatened by global intervention and hence they *are* beginning to demand privacy). Meanwhile family units rarely require claims for participation, since the involvement of family members in their specific roles as parent or child

¹³⁷ e.g. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

or relative is never questioned; therefore, they never need to invoke the language of publicity. Communities on the continuum between these two extremes, including businesses and corporations, NGOs, villages, provinces, and Poro, are constantly renegotiating calls to publicity and privacy, participation and autonomy.¹³⁸

Non-initiates, like myself, are not privy to Poro's calls for participation, nor would these calls be articulated in the language of neoliberal democracy. Thus, we are unlikely to hear a claim of "publicity" from Poro. Even so, the lack of this claim does not mean that Poro does not engage with a public that we all share. As Poro finds its claims to control over the commons challenged by outside forces, much more likely in the current postwar environment of governmental and international NGO oversight, its members are more and more likely to appeal to the language of "privacy" in order to find a way to maintain their autonomy in relation to foreign power.

Privacy/secrecy

Today, as throughout recorded history, Poro is more often described by both adherents and outsiders as "secret" rather than "private."¹³⁹ What, then, is at stake when my friend shifts Poro's frame of reference from "secrecy" to "privacy"? Certainly part of the impulse is to address a Western presumption that secrecy relates to evil, or at least "the concealment of something negatively valued."¹⁴⁰ Privacy is more often neutrally valued than secrecy in Euro-

¹³⁸ Feminist theory reminds us that the autonomy of privacy can come at the expense of individual autonomy, as is the case where men's control over the household subjects women. This is one example in which a call for publicity can be a gesture towards the protection of individual freedom.

¹³⁹ As with the term "secret," there is no clean translation of "private" into Mende. The closest approximation is perhaps *magele*, which suggests "aloneness" or "to be left alone."

¹⁴⁰ Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett, "Privacy and Secrecy: A Conceptual Comparison," *Journal of Social Issues* 33, no. 3 (1977): 44. cf. Nooter, *Secrecy*, 18–19.

American and internationalist discourse. At the same time, the call to privacy renegotiates the conditions of power and participation between Poro and its public.

Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett's distinctions between privacy and secrecy too easily fall into the trap of positive and negative value that Simmel cautioned against long ago.¹⁴¹ However, they do make a suggestive point: "One basis for the legitimacy of privacy is the belief that private behavior does not affect those to whom access is denied or restricted."¹⁴² Various private lives are depicted as essentially analogous to one another, and one's actions in the private sphere are imagined to have no effect on anyone else. Secrecy, on the other hand, suggests that knowledge of the secret would affect the knower. If privacy is none-of-your *bisnes* (or *hindei*), the presence of the secret suggests that in fact, the knowledge *is* your *bisnes*.

As Simmel observed, the "fascination of secrecy" leads to the "fascination of betrayal," a challenge to break through the barrier. Secrecy is temptation.¹⁴³ The call of the secret is central to Poro's recruitment. Secrecy suggests "truth," and the knowledge one is privy to inside Poro leads to insight and significant power.¹⁴⁴ Even so, one does not need to be initiated into Poro to understand the impact of its hidden knowledge. As Ferdinand De Jong observes, "formal initiation was not required to acquire a measure of cultural competence in the performance of secrecy. Indeed, secrecy is an intersubjective experience that draws the excluded in."¹⁴⁵ This principle of secrecy, that it effects, calls, and organizes even those who are not privy to it, make it a powerful tool of hierarchy. Murphy sees secrecy as "essentially a boundary mechanism [...]" the content of the secret is often insignificant compared to the rights, obligations, and privileges

¹⁴¹ Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 331.

¹⁴² Warren and Laslett, "Privacy and Secrecy: A Conceptual Comparison," 45.

¹⁴³ Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 332–4.

¹⁴⁴ Taussig, *Defacement*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ De Jong, *Masquerades of Modernity*, 191.

generated by the fact of secrecy.”¹⁴⁶ The maintenance of these boundaries is the stuff of power.

Allen Roberts states it succinctly:

Secrecy is the essence of politics, for it implies a hierarchy of privilege and dependency: some people know something, others do not. Secrecy is power, for those who know secrets may withhold or reveal their knowledge. [...] In particular, secrecy usually involves knowledge critical to effecting change, in both secular and sacred realms.¹⁴⁷

Secrecy is a core requirement of power and influence. Simon Turner calls it “the irreducible element of political ontology.” Yet secrecy requires the supplement of the spectacle to operate, and “sovereignty itself relies on the constant oscillation between the visible spectacle and the hidden machinations of conspiring power.”¹⁴⁸ Poro requires secrecy and its powerful ability to control publics through discretion and discernment in order for its spectacles to function.

Conversely, Poro requires its public spectacles in order for its secrecy to be maintained.

Secrecy and the change it facilitates can be risky. Bellman found that their multiple frames give secrets a “multivocality or polysemy which makes them highly volatile.”¹⁴⁹

Secrecy’s “mystery and attraction” are accompanied by “dangers,” Sissela Bok observes.¹⁵⁰ As Zoe Strother notes, “every culture has secrets that are capable, if released, of destroying the society itself.”¹⁵¹ Transmuting the public secrets of Poro into simple private matters may remove these threats to the community. Yet as we have seen, the violence of Poro is but one expression

¹⁴⁶ Murphy, “Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders versus Youth,” 193.

¹⁴⁷ Roberts, “Insight, or, not seeing is believing,” 65.

¹⁴⁸ Turner, “‘The Tutsi Are Afraid We Will Discover Their Secrets’—On Secrecy and Sovereign Power in Burundi,” 38.

¹⁴⁹ Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, 99–100. cf. Ferme, “Staging Politisi: The Dialogics of Publicity and Secrecy in Sierra Leone.”

¹⁵⁰ Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Vintage, 1982), xv.

¹⁵¹ Z.S. Strother, “Eastern Pende Constructions of Secrecy,” in *Secrecy: African Arts That Conceals and Reveals.*, ed. Mary H. Nooter (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993), 157.

of the violence and unpredictability of human social action. Any attempt to tame Poro is thus an attempt to blunt its capacity for action.

Exchanging “secrecy” for “privacy” may allow Poro to protect its autonomy and present itself as legitimately outside of foreign intervention. At the same time, it threatens to cut off its influence in the broader community and its constitutive relationship with Mende public life. Finding the balance between these two imperatives has been and will be a long, chaotic, and piecemeal endeavor, one in which we know Poro has been engaged for all of recorded history.

CODA

Initiation

In the midst of and yet far from the debates about Poro, young Mohammed sat serenely, contented with his new status. Did he know that he represented one instantiation of the many fraught challenges that Poro faced from and presented to the outside world? Was he aware that his garb was a public and private repudiation of the power of the central government? Or conversely, did he consider that his youthful passage through the initiation rite might suggest that the procedure was less grueling than advertised and might undercut one of the pillars of Poro’s claims to power? Was he old enough to internalize the education he received in the bush or to remember and understand the importance of the transition from being an outsider to being an insider? Who is served by a six-year-old initiate?

Mohamed’s father, Lamin, argued that he had his son initiated in order to ensure the boy had the opportunity to join before anything could happen to him. If any sickness or accident killed Lamin, Mohamed would likely never see the inside of the Poro bush. Perhaps in generations past, the responsibility of seeing that the boy was initiated might have been taken up

by relatives, but now, that was no longer certain. Even the boy might find reasons to rebel against the Poro system by the time he reached adulthood. Indeed, many young men in villages across Mendeland, both initiated and uninitiated, rejected Poro as a system that invested the elders with too much power. Though fervently pronounced eternal by its adherents, Poro's future remains unforeseeable.

As it so often has been, Poro was invoked to counter insecurity—this time Lamin's personal and realistic insecurities of his own death and the disenfranchisement of his kin. In postwar Sierra Leone, newly competing forces are being mobilized to battle insecurity. Hoping to thwart a recurrence of the RUF's exploitation of Kailahun's isolation, the central government and the international community are focusing heavily in connecting the region to the outside world. While this attention brings welcome infrastructure and economic investment, it has also brought intensive social change. Inevitably, the alternative modality of public espoused by Poro has clashed, clashes, and will continue to clash with outside ideals—colonial and postcolonial, national and international. The articulation of these publics is not likely to come out of calls for increased transparency in the name of good governance nor from the prohibition of circumcision practices in the name of human rights. However, the complex process of contestation and conciliation might begin with a call for privacy.

Final Item: "What's Done in the Darkness Must Come to Light"

Redressing Conflict

Jalloh's closing act usually begins with the following formula:

Let me tell you one history. One story about my very, very self.
August 6, 1997. August 6, 1997. August 6, 1997. August 6, 1997.

The reiteration of this date is the most specific moment in a story that quickly dissipates into a generic tale of capture by combined RUF and AFRC forces. The lack of specificity likely serves to connect Jalloh with his viewers, as the narrative is basic enough to resonate with many in the audience who suffered or feared similar imprisonment. The mystic arts begin as the details trail off, and Jalloh demonstrates rather than describes his escape.

After a lengthy preamble in which Jalloh ceremonially strips to shorts and steps into a bag bound by his men, a billowing sheet covers a box into which he is locked. Both local officials and a visiting American researcher have verified that the bonds are firm and the box empty, yet when the sheet drops, Jalloh is standing radiantly. Not only free of bag and box, he is now clad in the white robes of an Islamic scholar. The spectacle is one of mystic liberation and transformation, made all the more significant by Hassan Jalloh's personal history as one of the most infamous commanders of the Sierra Leone Civil War.



Figure 60: (above) Jusu “Mandela” Massaquoi and Hassan Jalloh. Gbeika, Njaluahun Chieftdom, Kailahun District, 2012. (below) Hassan Jalloh and the Warriors. Boesan, Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia, 2012.



Figure 61. Foday “Small” Sama and Hassan Jalloh. Tienii, Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia, 2012.



Figure 62. The Warriors cover Hassan Jalloh. Gbeika, Njaluahun Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2012.

Cloth and Culture

The box act is only one of Jalloh's many acts revolving around clothing, including those in which he enrobes his dancers in new uniforms or pulls clothing for spectators. The prevalence, popularity, and apparent power of clothing-related mystic acts raise a question: why do these acts convey so much mystic authority? The repertoire of mystic acts in countrywide circulation includes dramatic acts of violent injury and regeneration which one might expect to have more resonance given Sierra Leone's recent past. Yet although Jalloh has stopped performing these more gruesome displays, his popularity has not flagged. The cultural history of dress in the region illuminates the impact of Jalloh's clothing-related acts.

Many commentators have noted the socio-economic importance of cloth in Sierra Leone, particularly for Mende society. Arthur Abraham goes so far as to call Mende "Country Cloth Culture," in reference to the long-held importance of locally woven cotton fabric.¹ Joanna Edwards has enumerated the many uses of country cloth, from clothing to currency to gifts to ceremonial and religious items to bearers of spiritual medicines.² Mariane Ferme characterizes cloth as a principal Mende tool used to harness the potent and dialectically related principles of containment and expansion, and thus crucial means of power manipulation, exemplified by the starched, copious robes of "big persons" that at once expand their bodily frame and conceal powerful medicines.³ Sierra Leoneans continued to develop the role of dress in channeling power in wartime. Paul Richards describes the appropriation of *ronko* mystic shirts, noting that the *ronko* acts not as body armor, but as a technology that "links social and material forces,"

¹ Arthur Abraham, *Topics in Sierra Leone History: A Counter-Colonial Interpretation* (Freetown: Leone Publishers, 1976), 42–49.

² Joanna P Edwards, "The Sociological Significance and Uses of Mende Country Cloth.," in *History, Design, and Craft in West African Strip-Woven Cloth* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 133–68.

³ Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 166–171.

binding the wearer physically to the warrior skill set he has learned socially.⁴ Mary Moran explains why many combatants dressed in women's clothing by arguing that, by transgressing gendered dress codes, these fighters tapped into unstable but extremely powerful liminal forces regulating transformation and mortality.⁵

While Hassan Jalloh never dresses in women's clothing, Lansana Lebbie, one of his former CDF colleagues and now a competitor on the cultural troupe tour circuit, regularly appears out of the box in a miniskirt, tube top, and wig to dance with the bemused men who earlier verified his bonds. The discursive frame around his act, encouraged both by Lebbie and the audience, is not that the performer has dressed in women's clothing, but that a "woman" has mystically appeared. While this transformation is manifestly "play" rather than "real," the fact that audiences describe the act as a transformation of self rather than one of attire reflects a recognition of the power of shifting outfits to transform the person inside.

Attire and Identities

Hassan Jalloh never transforms into an identity he cannot already claim to some degree. The outfits he mystically dons and the roles that he mystically assumes are reduplications of positions he has taken up over the course of his own life history. In this way, his own capacity to transform as a social actor is as much on display as his capacity to escape locked boxes and conjure new clothes.

In many instances, particularly in places where he was stationed as a CDF commander, Jalloh appears in fatigues and army boots. While this uniform clearly references his own paramilitary past, it also addresses broader concerns about the army. During the conflict, the lack

⁴ Richards, "Dressed to Kill: Clothing as Technology of the Body in the Civil War in Sierra Leone," 505.

⁵ Moran, "Warriors or Soldiers?: Masculinity and Ritual Transvestism in the Liberian Civil War."

of uniforms among combatants led to confusion and terror. The infamous crisis of the “sobel,” the soldier-by-day who transformed into the rebel-by-night, led civilians to believe that they could no longer trust soldiers based on their exterior appearances. Armed young men could thus be soldiers, rebels, or kamajors, no matter what they wore. This uniform uncertainty, whether by circumstance or by design, was a key contribution to the chaos of the war. Jalloh’s unambiguous appearance as a military officer attempts to resuscitate a clear image of the Sierra Leone Armed Forces. By simply embracing and exposing a military identity, Jalloh gestures towards a restoration of faith in the State and its ostensible protectors.

Several times during the 2012 election season, Jalloh appeared in bright red overalls and a red cap, signifying support for the ruling All People’s Congress (APC) party. Jalloh’s support is provisional. He asserts that his own party is AGIP, “Any Government In Power.” By putting on the political colors of the ruling party, Jalloh refers to the mutability of political allegiance. In 2007, Jalloh was an active campaigner for the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP), an expected development given his CDF past, as the SLPP regime had been the main sponsors of the CDF movement. Jalloh’s appearance in the red colors of the APC is thus a dramatic shift of political loyalty. Of course, the colors one wears are not necessarily indicative of how one votes. Jalloh inserts that sentiment into speeches on political tolerance, arguing that one cannot tell a man’s opinions from his appearances and referencing the 2007 elections, when many ostensible SLPP supporters clad in green wound up voting APC red, in what became known as “watermelon politics.”⁶ Jalloh’s political displays demonstrate that transformations of loyalty are possible, frequent, and conditional—with one exception. Jalloh likes to stress that “God comes first. After God, Government. After Government, Guns,” clarifying the ranking of his loyalties: spiritual,

⁶ Christensen and Utas, “Mercenaries of Democracy.”

then political, and only then militaristic. When Jalloh appears in APC red, he frequently reenacts this valuation by going back under the tarp and reappearing in his most common outfit, that of the Islamic devotee.

In almost three-quarters of the performances of the box act that I have seen, Jalloh has emerged in the copious robes of the Islamic faithful. He has described this outfit variously as that of an Imam, a *kaamɔkɔi* (Islamic teacher), or an *alhaji*, anyone who has taken the pilgrimage to Mecca. Jalloh's preference for this outfit is wrapped in many rationales. First, his audiences are primarily Muslim, and Jalloh infuses his whole performance with Islamic prayers and teachings. Though he himself has not performed the Hajj, his facility with Arabic language and Koranic scripture validates his role as an Islamic tutor. Moreover, even the most cursory investigation of West African mystic arts reveals its deep imbrication with Islam and Islamic scholarship, and Koranic script has long been used among the Mende to harness mystic power, from the production of protective talismans to the preparation of *nesi*, a medicine derived from the ink washed from koranic writing tablets.⁷ Beyond these explicit forms of spiritual power, Jalloh's robes also tap into subtler forms of social influence. If the copious flowing robes of the wealthy conceal the human form and reflect their owners' ability to disguise their resources, by transforming his wardrobe, Jalloh demonstrates control of his own access to power.⁸ Stripped to nothing, he places himself on the humblest rung of the social ladder, only to emerge in the abundant robes of the Islamic scholar, inflating both his silhouette and his social standing. Finally, the *kaamɔkɔ* robes don Jalloh with considerable spiritual and intellectual authority he exploits in the message-laden speeches that close the performance.

⁷ Bledsoe and Robey, "Arabic Literacy and Secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone."

⁸ Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 166–171.



Figure 63. Hassan Jalloh and spectators. (above) Tienii, Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia, 2012. (below) Foobu, Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, 2011.

Through his mystic redressing, Hassan Jalloh assumes forms of military, political, and religious power. His personal history buttresses these mystic demonstrations, and cumulatively they demonstrate his own ability to move among these different spheres. Both explicitly and implicitly, Jalloh's performances assert that he gained this agency through the chaos of war, rewriting the history of the conflict not only as a era of catastrophic loss but also as a period of potential self-redefinition. His message is to look to the past not for its pain but for its possibilities, and by all indications this is a message his audiences are eager to hear.

Disappear, appeared, loss, change

Jalloh often integrated my presence into this portion of the program by declaring that I had once placed all sorts of cameras inside the box in order to uncover how it worked. Allegedly, the machines had failed to see anything. Despite Jalloh's claims, I never tried to figure out how the box worked, as I was not particularly concerned with uncovering the mechanics of the act. I suspect most of the other spectators felt the same way; that is to say, they were not interested in what happened inside the box so much as they were in what came out of it. M.C. Jędrej notes that Sewa Mende initiates go through five different grades, each of which requires a return to the village so the individual can be seen to have transformed into the new status. The stages are all "publicly marked" while the transformations themselves are "esoteric and secret."⁹ While the secret shift is necessary, the change must also be made public in order for it to be fully realized. What happens within the box barely matters; what counts is what emerges. The presentation *is* the transformation. As Jalloh ceaselessly reiterates, *what's done in the darkness must come to light.*

⁹ Jędrej, "Medicine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture," 251.

Transformations are effected through discursive reframing, changing the business, switching one's uniform. Metadiscursive speech, such as that Jalloh uses to frame his acts as blessings from God rather than relations with *ginesia* spirits, may be one form of reframing, but not the only one. Rebel militias transformed the sanctioned, systematic violence of initiation into the unauthorized, chaotic violence of abduction by mobilizing the frame of war. SLITHU transforms individualized witch-hunting exercises into a unified response to national spiritual insecurity by mobilizing the frame of wartime memories. Political parties transform the public secret of *gbini* into secret publics of opposition by mobilizing the frame of Poro. In this way, a single act can be transmogrified from wonder to horror, reality to imagination, play to politics, or back again. These transitions are exemplified by Jalloh's catalog of mystic powers: "disappear, appeared, loss, change,"

Despite the hazards ascribed to secret acts and invisible realms, the public aspects of social transformation are perhaps what make the process so dangerous. Transformations may take place covertly, but when they are exposed, they must reckon with their unknowable reception. Jalloh can guess, but he cannot fully know how his audience will react, whether they will accept his gifts, or be shocked by his "blood magic," or cheer his transformations. Michael Warner notes poetically what can be observed here quite literally.

The magic by which discourse conjures a public into being, [...] remains imperfect because of how much it must presuppose. And because many of the defining elements in the self-understanding of publics are to some extent always contradicted by practice, the sorcerer must continually cast spells against the darkness. A public seems to be self-organized by discourse but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation.¹⁰

As practiced as his presentations are, Jalloh is not replaying a script, but rather continuously initiating actions, offering projects, and proposing futures. The final realization of his potential

¹⁰ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 106.

lies in the hands of his spectators and with the Almighty. He reiterates again and again that he does not know what act he will perform until he has reached the stage and conferred with Allah. As Hannah Arendt observes for processes of nascent quality of social action, “the unpredictability of outcome is closely related to the revelatory character of action and speech, in which one discloses one’s self without ever either knowing himself or being able to calculate beforehand whom he reveals.”¹¹

The kamajors’ infamous slogan in wartime was “*baa wote*,” a phrase with which many former CDF members still greet Jalloh as he tours today. *Wote* and its root *pote* have many related meanings in Mende, including turning, pouring, translation and transformation.¹² *Baa wote* is an order not to turn, and in the CDF context, the command simultaneously meant “don’t turn back” (i.e. a prohibition on retreat or surrender) and “don’t turn against civilians” (i.e. a prohibition on betrayal). As Mariane Ferme and Danny Hoffman argue, the phrase “suggest[s] a moral foundation at the heart of *kamajor* identity”¹³ and was central to the legitimization of kamajor engagement in war. Yet in the contemporary postwar context, Jalloh’s motto appears to have become, “*Wa, mu wote*,” or “come, let’s change.” This sentiment is expressed in performance when Jalloh prepares to enter the box, and Momoh Lukulay, the troupe’s singer, leads the assembled women’s chorus in a refrain.

Wote wote. Aa nya gande fɔ.
Change change. Let this change not disadvantage/deceive me.

This prayer speaks to Jalloh’s desire for transformation, but it also reflects the profound difficulty and unfathomable risks associated with transformation. One of the cruelest lessons of

¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192.

¹² Innes, *A Mende-English Dictionary*, 125–26.

¹³ Ferme and Hoffman, “Hunter Militias and the International Human Rights Discourse in Sierra Leone and Beyond,” 80.

the Sierra Leone Civil War was that change can be devastating. Jalloh's successful transformations aim to restore some hope in the potential for Sierra Leoneans to upend their status quo without upending their lives.

In a country where two-thirds of the population remains below the country's poverty line, the number of Sierra Leoneans who can actually effect Jalloh's dramatic personal transformations for themselves is sadly negligible.¹⁴ Yet perhaps this is one of the fundamental roles of the celebrity: to live lives that are out of reach, and so expand imaginations and the universe of possible futures.

¹⁴ Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, *Country Briefing: Sierra Leone*.



Figure 64: Hassan Jalloh, Woyama, Langrama Chiefdom, Kenema District, 2012.

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