RESEARCH COMMUNICATIONS

Note: The Journal of Asian and African Studies invites communications in the form of short articles and reports about ongoing research, not exceeding 5,000 words, both in the empirical and theoretical fields.

EDITOR

1. The Sande and some of the Forces that inspired its Creation or Adoption with some References to the Poro

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In the Mende community, religious activities such as initiation rites, ancestor worship and social counselling require group interaction and involvement. These activities are capable of stimulating the growth of group organisations, fraternities, cultural institutions and as in this study, secret societies. These societies are characterised by an elaborate ritual, a social life and religious beliefs which are capable of binding members together and of reinforcing traditional social ties between individuals. In such societies, the link between the supernatural world and the members is sometimes strengthened by the art forms they generate. These art forms are used to maintain social and political equilibrium and to guarantee security for every member in the face of the hazards of life as well as to impart form and content to the social activities of these societies.

Among the Mende, almost the full range of motivations for the arts is controlled by the Bundu Society (Sande). This is a female initiation secret society in which the women wear a wooden helmet mask called sowei. This secret society is found in many areas of West Africa with slight organisational differences occasioned by the cultural awareness and religious attachments of its members who in many cases look up to the masked figure (sometimes called Sowei), as representative of their divine and mystical protector.

In the Sande, art with its corresponding stabilising, integrating and educational functions plays a vital role in sustaining group loyalty. When such a society supports art, change in the forms generated is acceptable only within narrow limits. Any art tradition devoted to the expression of spiritual values, for example the Byzantine or the Buddhist, sets a space limit on excessive self-expression and promotes instead what may be thought of as group expression. This is not a prohibitive or inhibitive limitation, but one that disavows egocentrism in the artist, and encourages a slow but steady refinement of the existing models.

1 The Mende with a high density of population and numerous secret societies for men and women occupy an area of roughly 12,000 square miles in the eastern and south-western parts of Sierra Leone Province, and a much smaller area in the adjoining corner of Liberia.
Before examining what factors motivate the creation or adoption of a secret society such as the *Sande* or the *Poro* which is the men's society, it is necessary to discuss some of the propositions that have become current in recent years. The exploratory study by M. Watkins in 1943 had very little to say about the social and religious factors involved in the creation or evolution of the *Sande* beyond a few general remarks on its role in Mendeland. In addition, the recent theoretical studies on the *Sande* by Augustus Caine (1959), Kenneth Little (1967), and Harry Sawyerr (1968) are confined to listing, describing and explaining the various roles of the *Sande*. Their studies as does that of Watkins, emphasize the importance of the *Sande* in coordinating the diverse and conflicting elements of Mende culture and transmitting them from one generation to another. This initiation Society they posit, provides a galaxy of counsellors to plan the type of education that guarantees a steady stream of technical competence in various crafts and skills vital to the Mende industrial complex. In so doing, the *Sande* provides rational guidance, inspiration and challenge as well as patterns for understanding the complexities and philosophical theories of Mende culture.

While one is impressed by the contributions of Watkins, Caine, Little and Sawyerr to the understanding of the diverse roles of the *Sande*, Little goes still further to list myths and oral traditions associated with the origin of the *Poro* Society. In his analysis he employs the often-cited account on the creation of the *Poro* Society among the Mende by Colonel H. G. Warren. Warren believes...

What is important in the light of the general argument of this study is the fact that the *Poro* was established by the Mende to ensure ethnic cohesion as Warren's account seems to indicate.

The Colonel was an Englishman employed as a District Officer in Sierra Leone. He was initiated into the *Poro* Society, but did not advance beyond the first grade. In the search for evidence on the beginnings of the *Poro* Society, his account has been consistently employed by other writers such as F. Migeod. From Migeod (1927: 232–233), we know that the Colonel was handicapped by an inadequate knowledge of the Mende language, and this obviously limited his participation in all the activities of the Society. Furthermore, whatever secrets he learnt while in the *Poro* died with him.

Today, the *Poro* Society is one of the most powerful secret societies of the Mende, whose nocturnal activities are designed to bring about forced seclusion of non-members. At present, women, children and non-members are strictly forbidden to approach its sacred groves. In fact, the operation of the Society is such that although some of the powerful members in the religious hierarchy...