

**DISCIPLINING THE BODY:: THE SOWO MASK AND THE CONSTRUCTION
OF THE FEMALE BODY IN SIERRA LEONE**

Part I: THE BODY IN CONTEXT: SOCIALIZATION AND GENDER

The female body has long been implicated in a binary dialectic of "nature" and "culture"; homologized to the raw potentiality of chaos, women's bodies have borne the brunt of a "civilizing mission" to order and discipline, control and define; a mission whose cruder tools range from the iron padlocked chastity belt to the wonderbra. The body, especially the female body, is a primary locus for the examination of the confluence of social structure and religious ideology, for the social body is predicated upon the physical body as culture is predicated upon nature.¹ The implicit hierarchical dimension in this construction, and one overlooked by its structural creators, drives a dynamic of power and resistance that ultimately contributes to the maintenance of extant power structures.

The body functions as a site for the confirmation of a social reality; it is a material/physical concomitant to social processes and as such must bear witness to these abstractions for them to be recognized and known, for them to be cast into the material world as "real." Social structure, therefore, must be evidenced by the remaking of the body, a disciplining, inscribing, or adorning of the body that defines it in terms of kinship or marriage, age grade, status, gender or other salient structural elements of the society in question. Embodied, these social indices form an interrelated network that contributes to the construction of identity at various levels of specificity: personal, collective, national, cultural. They carry as well prescribed rights, responsibilities, privileges and duties that further situate the individual body in a social matrix.

¹ Jean Comaroff provides a selective overview of the dialectic of nature and culture in modern Western scholarship from Marx and Durkheim to Turner, Mauss and Bourdieu in Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1985, 7-8.

In many societies, the socially constructed state of adulthood with its concomitant rights, responsibilities and privileges, is only rendered manifest through a change or series of changes in the material/physical state of being; these changes are symbolized and effected through rites of passage. One salient physical act/sign that functions to mark the transformation from child to adult and neutral to gendered within a larger ritual context is that of circumcision. Circumcision functions as a "mediating sign"² conjoining the material and non-material, the body in its physical, individual aspect and in its non-physical, collective aspect. The social being is marked preeminently by the disciplined/made/inscribed body, a phenomenon that may take a variety of forms but which functions to situate the individual body within a larger social body. This process results in the creation of a *socialized* body³.

Initiatory rites can be seen as practices modelling the process of socialization. One integral component of this is the production of the gendered body. The gendering of the body involves assigning socially determined status, qualities or traits purported to be based on biological, sexual characteristics. The ideology connected to gendering is one putatively based on "nature", on biological sexual differences between men and women; however, gendering functions as a system that "divides power." It is a "metaphor and conduit for the expression of power."⁴ The "making" of a socialized body therefore involves the correlative creation of a *gendered* body. The social system of power connected to gender is one that produces a body whose contours are socially determined, whose rights, privileges and responsibilities are prescribed, and whose productions and processes are strictly controlled through a variety of practices and belief structures (such as customs and taboos) that relate the individual body to the collectivities of the family, the ethnic group, the society and ultimately to a cosmology. These larger collectivities are predicated upon a hierarchical system in which certain groups are privileged in relation to others; privileged in terms of prescribed social roles and correlative duties and their implications for status, access and mobility. The creation of the gendered body functions as one site for the imposition of this hierarchy in both physical and ideological terms.

² Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 200.

³ The creation of what I have termed the "socialized body" has been theorized by Catherine Bell as occurring through what she terms "rituals of power" that work to forge a specific political "technology" of the body. See Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, 97. The most salient "ritual of power" is the initiatory rite of passage into adulthood and gender specificity.

⁴ Catherine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, 109.

The work of Michel Foucault has contributed much towards understanding this link between the individual body and larger social processes, indicating that it is the body itself that functions as the primary medium for the play of power within society. For Foucault, the body is the site where local social practices are linked to larger organizations of power.⁵ The "deployments of power" are directly connected to bodies: their functions, physiological processes and sensations.⁶ "*Power relations have an immediate hold upon {the body}; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.*"⁷ The social production of gendered bodies is thus directly connected to power and its relations; relations which are determined by a multiplicity of forces and their strategies that both appropriate and constitute the body, thus establishing a "microphysics" of power.⁸

The articulation of power is strategically indirect, involving a network of relations that are mutually constitutive and mutually negating. The body is simultaneously a product of this shifting network of relations and intrinsic to its articulation, thus it participates not only in the articulation of power, but in that of resistance as well. Bridging body and strategy, ritual is intrinsic to this constitution and negotiation of power and resistance. To examine the social construction of gender is therefore to render explicit the connections between the female body and the dynamic of power and resistance undergirding patriarchal hegemony.

The elaborate female rites of initiation among the rural Mende of Sierra Leone provide a provocative illustration of this dynamic. Although specific details surrounding the more esoteric aspects of the initiation are lacking, the structure of the process as a whole is well documented, as are correlative social practices. Structural aspects of Mende society have been detailed in some depth by anthropologists, art historians and ethnographers such as M. Charles Jedrej, Warren d'Azevedo, Ruth Phillips and Sylvia Ardyn Boone. In addition, female rites of initiation are performed to this day, albeit in shortened form, a fact that attests to their continued social relevance.⁹

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Random House. 1978.

⁶ Ibid, 151-152.

⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.

⁸ Catherine Bell, 203.

⁹ The temporal duration of initiation rites has been altered from many months to several weeks, primarily to accord with a Western-style educational calendar which does not accommodate the lengthy period of seclusion traditionally prescribed for initiates.

The Mende are agriculturalists inhabiting the coastal flood plain of southern and eastern Sierra Leone. Jedrej states that they traditionally live in small villages comprised of two or three patrilineal kin groups and subsist on the cultivation of rice and cassava in the adjacent forest.¹⁰ Many Mende have migrated to the urban capital Freetown, a once resplendent coastal city that has decayed into the anarchic blend of capitalist consumerism and African patriarchalism characteristic of many former colonial capitals. However, the interior of Sierra Leone has not suffered destabilizing forces with the same intensity and rural populations have assimilated the changes of nationalism, rapid modernization and industrialization more gradually.

Among the rural Mende of the interior, social bodies are constructed by the institutions of male and female "secret" societies, as has been the case for generations. Here, the most striking structural dichotomy is the division of society into those who have been initiated and those who have not. Among other things, humanistic and esoteric knowledge is transmitted through the secret societies, and one who has not been initiated is likened to a simpleton, a child.¹¹ It is therefore difficult for a person who has not been initiated to marry, for they have not achieved the status of socialized adult, and thus cannot participate in the social institutions of marriage and the family, with their concomitant social rights and responsibilities. The production of children for men by women within the institution of the family is one of the most socially valued occupations for women.¹² The extant literature on the Sande secret society and its male counterpart Poro appropriately describes their function as the mediation of "social relations and cultural values."¹³

As the knowledge imparted by Sande and Poro depends intrinsically upon the structure of symbol and practice in which it is embedded, this "knowledge" cannot be known outside of that context;

¹⁰ M.C. Jedrej, "Medicine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture," *Africa* 46, 3 (1976), 248.

¹¹ Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance From the Waters*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1986, xi.

¹² In West Africa, barren women are social outcasts. Related to this, the notion of male sterility functionally does not exist.

¹³ Warren d'Azevedo, "Gola Poro and Sande: Primal Tasks in Social Custodianship," *Ethnologisch Zeitschrift Zuerich* I (1980), 14. J.V.O. Richards suggests that secret societies have a historico-political function related to national or ethnic identity. In his view, Sande is an "integrative force that strengthens kinship and cultural ties between ethnic groups segmented by colonial boundaries." The implication is that Sande and Poro functioned to reinforce group identity in the face of colonial fragmentation. Richards does not back up this claim with any historical documentation however, nor does he describe secret societies in the pre-colonial context in any detail. See J.V.O Richards, "The Sande," *Baessler-Archiv*, Neue Folge, Band XXII (1974), 265-281.

hence it is "secret."¹⁴ Therefore these associations prohibit any discussion of their processes with the uninitiated. As a result, it has been extremely difficult for Western scholars to study these institutions, given both the strictures of secrecy and the difference across sex lines. This fact has resulted in a paucity of ethnographic details documenting rituals that take place in seclusion, of which those connected to Sande have been particularly hard to investigate, considering the fact that most research has been conducted by white males.¹⁵ Moreover, this phenomenon is intrinsically related to the larger heritage of European intervention in Africa, a continuum that ranges from early trading exploration and missionary activity, to colonialism, the Atlantic slave trade and Western style scholarship. The totalizing scheme uniting these various histories is one of political domination, economic exploitation and cultural hegemony. Important to remember is that the very scheme that denied "primitive" peoples a history, is one that denies women a history by refusing to see the gendering of women as the construction of a subordinate "system." The issues that this then raises for contemporary research in Africa are ones that require conscious reflection. In this respect, the works of scholars such as Jean Comaroff, Andrew Apter, Marianna Torgovnik and others question this totalizing scheme by calling attention to the conceptualization of "Africa" in the West, as well as by highlighting the mutually transformative process of articulation between systems constructed as dominant and subordinate. The interplay of social order and human action provides a field for these scholars to investigate what Comaroff terms a "dialectic of power and resistance"¹⁶ manifested in symbol and practice. Unraveling this dialectic of power and resistance involves a preliminary project of explicitly acknowledging one's own heritage and agenda, as well as being aware of the ideological tenets of

¹⁴ This has led at least one scholar to claim that these institutions are not secret at all. In this view, the term "secret society" is a misunderstanding propagated by Western scholars who did not have access to the structural matrix of symbol and practice surrounding these institutions. This view, in my opinion, disregards the fact that Mende men and women in Sierra Leone are unwilling to discuss Sande except in the most general terms. The fact that strict sanctions exist for any who trespass when Sande is in session also attests to the fact that there are claims being made for its secrecy.

¹⁵ d'Azevedo sketches briefly some aspects of the cultural bias and political agenda underlying European male ethnography of the West Atlantic coast region, suggesting that these early researchers were attracted to Sande and Poro because they resembled stable cultural institutions similar to the European monarchic nation-state. This was seen as promising for the commercial and later political agenda of Europe. D'Azevedo states further that Poro came to be regarded by these Europeans as "the tantalizingly mysterious counterpart of the Church of Rome, a network of ecclesiastic powers behind secular rulers, the all-pervading secret arm of government." The veil of secrecy shielding Poro from European cooptation eventually resulted in its vilification as a "terrorist" society bent on resisting European civilizing missions. See d'Azevedo, "Gola Poro and Sande," 13-14. Overlooked by d'Azevedo are other implications of European male research in Africa such as the lack of concern or attention to women's lives. This is a topic that has direct bearing on this paper, but can only be noted at a superficial level at present, although it is one that demands further investigation.

¹⁶ Jean Comaroff, *passim*.

scholarship as a whole. With this in mind, I take a moment here to reflect consciously upon my goals and aims in writing this paper.

Living in Sierra Leone from 1989-90, I was struck by the importance of the Sande society in the lives of women, as well as by the mystery surrounding it. Claims of the necessity of Sande as the defining criterion of womanhood aroused my suspicion. As the only masquerade in West Africa danced by women, the Sande masquerade presents a picture of female empowerment in what is an extremely male-oriented society that places profound strictures on the mobility, bodily integrity, abilities and ambitions of women. The questions I bring to this project are then the following: Is one of Sande's implicit functions that of a "steam-valve" for women whose lives are otherwise profoundly restricted? Why is Sande the defining criterion of womanhood and what are the processes involved in this? How are women persuaded that Sande is crucial to being a woman? Related to this is my general interest in the relations between the female body and a social order in which males are overtly privileged. Although I believe that the social construction of gender specifies male as well as female, and constricts the behaviors and roles of both men and women, the scope of this paper is limited to looking at the relations between the female body and the construction of gender in a specific social context. Where the construction of the male gender is relevant to establishing this it will be noted.

The concerns and focus of this paper are sufficiently complex as to warrant a brief map, a reader's guide of sorts, that lays out the format in schematic form. The paper is divided into six main parts, each part building on its neighbors in a spiraling¹⁷ fashion that serves to bring me closer to the main thesis while simultaneously allowing slightly different vistas. Within these broader parts are sections that deal with more specific topics. Part I, including the following section, is an introductory excursus that contextualizes the issues in a broad as well as a narrow way. The theoretical assumptions determining the production of the body in a general way are laid out and the cultural context that the paper will be situated in is introduced. Part II "The Discipline of Ritual/The Ritual of Discipline" spirals in on the initiation ritual that actually produces the body in this context. The spiraling of Part III "Ritual and the Gendered Body" then takes us away from specific detail to draw out the political implications of this ritual in regards to a

¹⁷ I use the term *spiraling* deliberately, in the hopes of evoking a Dalian sense of breaking out of the linear time constraints and "logical" paradigm of patriarchal scholarship. See Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

system of gendering, and its consequences for women's bodies among the Mende people. Part IV "Deconstruction and Construction: Pain and Imagining" takes as its focus clitoridectomy, and situates this act in reference to the social production of bodies. It is not until Part V "The Sowo Mask and the Female Body", that I can approach my thesis directly: that the mask associated with female initiation is an icon of the social production of the female body that situates it in a socially subordinate position, and not, as has been traditionally claimed, an empowering image for women that allows them a creative and authoritative role in society. Part VI "Empowerment, Negotiation and Creative Reappropriation" spirals in on the grounds for this traditional claim and analyzes how these types of claims function in reference to the larger, patriarchal society. At this point, the reader should now retrace her/his steps backwards with the aid of this map, proceeding carefully past patriarchal society, past the Sowo mask, inching by clitoridectomy and the initiation ritual, to finally return to the point of departure: an introduction to the Sande society.

The Sande Society

The Sowo mask (*Sowei*) is the emblem of Sande, the women's secret society charged preeminently with conducting female rites of initiation. It is "secret" in terms of its organization, membership and control, and in terms of its esoteric knowledge and rites, which are restricted solely to initiated women. Its function is thereby said to be the protection, empowerment and socialization of women;¹⁸ in this capacity, the principal ritual function of Sande is to transform children into women.¹⁹ Thus children are given to Sande by their parents, who pay the initiation fees, and marriageable women are

¹⁸ This definition is found either explicitly or implicitly in all of the literature dealing with the structure and function of Sande in the lives of women of the West Atlantic coast region. See Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance From the Waters*; Caroline Bledsoe, "Stratification and Sande Politics," *Ethnologisch Zeitschrift Zuerich* I (1980), 143-149; Warren d'Azevedo, "Gola Poro and Sande: Primal Tasks in Social Custodianship"; Frederick Lamp, "Cosmos, Cosmetics and the Spirit of Bondo," *African Arts* 18 (May 1985), 28-43; Ruth B. Phillips, "The Iconography of the Mende Sowei Mask," *Ethnologisch Zeitschrift Zuerich* I (1980), 113-132 and "Masking in Mende Sande Society Initiation Rituals," *Africa* 48, 3 (1978), 265-76. All of these sources accept uncritically the assessment of Sande society as overtly empowering for women. It is my contention however, that this empowerment is ultimately illusory at a deeper level that itself constitutes the topography of power relations in society.

¹⁹ Sande also presides at other important events in the life passage of its members, although its primary ritual function is the production of socialized women in rites of initiation.

taken from Sande by their betrothed, who pay the exit fees. Sande chapters are found all over Mendeland, as well as in other areas of the West Atlantic coast region. In *Radiance From the Waters*, Sylvia Ardyn Boone, describes Sande as international and multi-ethnic, including women of various ethnic groups in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. She estimates its present membership at over a million people, characterizing Sande in Mendeland as ubiquitous: "*where there are Mende women there is Sande.*"²⁰

The society is organized hierarchically around one or more women called *Sande Jowei*. They are the spiritual and temporal heads of Sande: experts in Sande lore, keepers of the esoteric knowledge and ritual leaders, who are charged with the custodial care of the Sowo mask as well as the physical *hale*²¹ believed to be the source of Sande's power and ritual efficacy. Facilitating the emergence of an adult female from the undifferentiated state of childhood through a series of ritual separations, Sande's charge is to affect the ontological transformation from asocial to social. This process culminates in the production of an adult woman capable of fulfilling her cultural duties, whose body has been remade in accordance with social demands and whose identity is fully aligned with these demands.

An image of idealized feminine beauty, a symbol of liminality, an icon of transformation, the Sowo mask is the visual representation of female initiation. In this context, the mask represents the creation of "woman". As such, it is emblematic of the construction of the female gender, and the correlative ideological framework necessitating and maintaining this social construction with reference to a larger patriarchal hegemony. As an emblem of "woman", the mask has been interpreted as an empowering image in the lives of Mende women, representing spiritual purity and sublime beauty while simultaneously

²⁰ Boone, 15.

²¹ Hale is a unified conceptual system linking three categories of phenomenon:

1. a hale is a medicine, whether acquired from a government clinic or prepared from indigenous herbs, used in the treatment of various ailments.

2. a hale also refers to a concoction used in the ritual swearing of litigants in a formal dispute. Such *haliesia* are also used to apprehend thieves and other malefactors such as witches. In this context they have often been referred to as fetishes.

3. "secret" societies such as the Poro society for men and the Sande society for women are known as hale. (Jedrej, "Medecine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture," 248.)

All forms of hale involve a material representation of the spiritual power that is believed to render it efficacious, as well as various esoteric and exoteric rites of preparation. The result of the action of hale yields a potent residue composed of the spent hale and the object upon which it has acted. Thus, the three types of hale are united conceptually through participation in specific Mende notions of power, knowledge and efficacy, expressed by their common function of "ritual separation." A ritual separator is "that factor in rites of separation which, after preparation, affects the separation of another factor from an undifferentiated state, which we style profane, into an elemental state, conventionally styled sacred, at the same time precipitating a third factor, a residue." (Jedrej, "Structural Aspects of a West African Secret Society," *Ethnologisch Zeitschrift Zuerich* I (1980), 133) In terms of the hale used to catch thieves, the residue contains the thief him or herself, and will be fatal unless countered by the appropriate rituals which dilute the potency of the residue.

alluding to an esoteric realm constituted of, by and for women. This realm may indeed have real world consequences in the form of enhanced social status and political power;²² however, this notion of empowerment must be reexamined as a negotiating strategy mediating pleasure and pain, subordination and dominance in a larger schema whose aim is the determination and discipline of the female body. This disciplining of the female body carries implicit political connotations that situate women as dependent and inferior in relation to men.

Thus, although the Sowe mask is described as a source of status and power for Mende women, when examined closely it reveals an underlying ideology that severely circumscribes this status and power. In this capacity, it signifies salient elements in the construction of a female-gendered identity. This gendered identity occupies a subordinate position in the larger, hierarchical social structure of the Mende. The mask in the context of female rites of passage is a concrete manifestation and symbolic instantiation of the social construction of a gendered identity that "remakes" the female body in accordance with patriarchal hegemony.²³ Ultimately, the mask reinforces this hegemony through its participation in a dynamic of power and resistance that authenticates existing hierarchical relations.

Part II: THE RITUAL of DISCIPLINE / the discipline of ritual

The girls who were selected to go to the Bundu [Sowo] wood...were carried by their brothers or the men to whom they were promised to on their shoulders in a procession proceeded by a diabolical Bundu dancer...At a distance from the entrance...the boys...put the girls on the ground...who then proceeded on their own...The goals of the Bundu organization were explained: these were first of all to assure them fertility...to acquaint them with all their conjugal duties...All the girls knew that

²² Madam Yoko is the most famous example of the real world ramifications of Sande and the Sowu mask in terms of status and political control. Madam Yoko reigned as paramount chief of the Kpa Mende through her position as Sande Jowe, using the institutional structure of the Sande society to establish patronage networks. She accomplished this by manipulating her initiates sexual potential to arrange alliances with men that forwarded her political aims. Madam Yoko was eventually involved in the larger political manoeuvrings of British colonial overrule. For a biography of Madam Yoko see: Carol Hoffer, "Madam Yoko: Ruler of the Kpa Mende Confederacy," in Woman, Culture and Society, ed. M. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1974, 173-187.

²³ By patriarchal hegemony I refer to a social system comprised of a hierarchical structure that privileges the male gender in terms of status, access to land, goods, services (domestic and otherwise) and knowledge; that endows the male gender with what is culturally valued, and that posits the male as the cultural standard by which all are measured.

unless they passed through the Bundu initiation they would be unable to get married and a woman in Africa who does not get married practically does not exist."²⁴

*"Sande training, which includes the performance of many chores for the older women, is designed to inculcate values of modesty, diligence and respect for one's seniors."*²⁵

The categories of child and adult in Mende society are mutually exclusive ones that involve the oppositions of asocial to social and gender-neutral to gendered. Within the Sande rites of initiation there are thus three levels of transformation: that of child to adult, and correlatively that of asocial to social and gender neutral to female. The movement from asocial to social being is one that implicitly depends upon the gendering of the initiate's body. For the purposes of analysis, this process of transformation can be understood as comprising five stages. In schematic form, they are as follows:

²⁴ P. Gervis. "An Initiation Ceremony in the Bundu Bush," Chapter XII in *C'est Arrive Dans la Sierra Leone*. Albin Michel, Paris, 1957, 266-75. Excerpted in Fran Hosken, *The Hoskin Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, "Case Histories: Sierra Leone." Lexington, Massachusetts: Women's International Network News. The term *Bundu* is a Sherbro one commonly used in Sierra Leone to refer to the Sande masker.

²⁵ Ruth Phillips, "Masking in Mende Sande Society Initiation Rituals," 267.

Table 1 - Stages of Transformation

Stage	Term	Ontological Status	Ritual Act or Symbol
1.	<i>Ndopoi</i> (child)	"normal state" neutral child	removal to boundary (lodge)
2.	<i>Kpowie</i> (simpleton)	"ritual state" neutral child	action of hale (cliteridectomy)
3.	<i>Gbongbini</i> (virgin)	"ritual state" female child	ritual washing
4.	<i>Hanjoe</i> (bride)	"ritual state" female adult	return to village
5.	<i>Nyaha</i> (wife)	"normal state" female adult	

The initiation rite begins with the removal of the initiates to the seclusion of the *kpanguima* (initiation lodge), located on the margin between village and forest.²⁶ This is the first separation, which divests the child of her familial context, and marks the entrance of a liminal space in which her childhood name and clothing are shed. Each initiate is given a new name, one by which she will be addressed for the rest of her life. As a group they are known as *kpowei* (novice, singleton) and, according to Jedrej, each wears a mixture of male and female clothing and a red headcloth when they appear again in the village.²⁷ At some point after the first period of seclusion, the Sande Jowe leads the village women in a ritual destruction of the village, producing a small amount of pre-arranged damage. Jedrej proposes that this ritual destruction serves to homologize the village to an ambivalent realm, midway between cultural order and the natural chaos of the forest, a realm construed as necessary for the preparation of hale.²⁸ This is succeeded by a gathering of leaves by the women. These leaves are then combined in an unknown manner with the physical representation of the hale, a process that is said to activate its powers. Following is an esoteric rite that Jedrej presumes involves the invocation of ancestral spirits. He states that this is believed to make the

²⁶ The spatial location of the initiation lodge at the boundary between forest village is extremely significant. The most striking structural opposition in West Africa is the dichotomy of forest and village, indexing the opposition of "cultural" order and "natural" chaos. This dichotomy is further translated into homologous dichotomies mediated by a series of socio-spatial categories that in practice, serve as a realm of ambivalence. Ambivalence is achieved by the introduction of a third category or series of categories that are anomalous or abnormal in terms of the opposed categories; a vital process that establishes a dialectic. The third category appears to resolve the basic oppositions by creating the potential for change/interchange; however, it also ensures that the opposed categories can simultaneously retain their individual purity and therefore remain intact. Thus, the boundary indexes ambivalence which is necessary for the movement of child to woman operant in the initiation rite.

²⁷ Jedrej, "Medecine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture," 250. Jedrej believes that the red headcloth is symbolic of the unexcised clitoris.

²⁸ See Jedrej, "Medecine, Fetish and Secret Society" and "Structural Aspects of a West African Secret Society."

to make the hale "hot", or efficacious. The hale is then transported from the *sowowe* (house of the *Sande Joweï*) to the *kpanguima*. Jedrej states that it is carried on the head of a woman, in a white bowl covered by a white cloth, and is accompanied by the music and singing of the village women.²⁹

The prepared hale is used in the next stage of the ritual, the point at which the genderless initiate is transformed into female. Although the details of the ritual at this stage are not clear, it is known that clitoridectomy is performed in conjunction with the presence of the now efficacious hale. The potent residue, composed of excised clitorises and the spent hale is then ritually presented to the village as evidence of the initiate's new status. This residue is felt to be extremely dangerous and it must be disposed of with the utmost caution, although the exact nature of the disposal is not known. The change that has taken place is referred to as *pili kamei hu*, a term which suggests marked separation.³⁰ The red head covering is replaced by a white head tie and loincloth and the body of the initiate is covered in white clay. When they appear in the village at this stage, the initiates are subjected to "lewd speculation and bawdy remarks on the part of the men,"³¹ a direct recognition of the sexual potential of the initiates. This new status is further signified by the name of the novices at this stage: *gbogbini* (virgin, maiden). Here, *gbo* means "to plant" or "to dig" and *bini* means "ready" or "prepared." Thus, the initiates are "ready to be planted." As agricultural production is predicated upon a cultural ordering of the unruly fecundity of nature, the initiates' own fecundity has been ordered and channeled for social purposes, i.e., reproduction within the patriarchal family.

The ensuing stage is announced by a ritual washing of the initiates in the river. The initiates then emerge for the final time from the seclusion of the lodge. Transformed, they are elaborately dressed and become the objects of admiration on the part of the women and gifts on the part of the men of the village. They are seated on raised chairs in a special open sided building (*hanjoe jemee*) in the village. Jedrej states that after seven days their feet are washed and they "come down" out of the *hanjoe jemee*.³²

²⁹ Jedrej, "Structural Aspects," 137.

³⁰ *Pili* means to throw something, or to fire a gun or sling shot. *Kama* means marvel, wonder or mystery and *hu* indicates in. See Jedrej, "Medecine, Fetish and Secret Society," 250.

³¹ Jedrej, "Medecine, Fetish and Secret Society," 250.

³² Jedrej, "Structural Aspects," 136.

This final stage signifies the initiate's return to and reincorporation into the village as potential wives (*nyahanga*). Their exit fees from Sande are then paid for by their prospective husbands.

Interpretation of the Rites of Initiation

While each stage of the ritual is in some way publically marked, the actual category change itself is esoteric and secret. Seclusion of the initiates is the first public step of the transformation and marks the beginning of a liminal period for the initiates, a time in which their former identities and relationships are symbolically destroyed in preparation for rebirth into a new identity. After an initial period of seclusion, the initiates appear in the village clothed androgynously. Here, they are berated for their inabilities and publically instructed in comportment and dance, much to the amusement of the village members. This stage can be seen as the first step in the reconstruction of the initiate in terms of the dominant meanings and interests of the social collectivity; in this process the liminal experiences of pain, fear and ignorance are revalorized in association with these dominant meanings and interests. This contributes to the creation of the social body from preexisting physical form. Thus, a new name is given to each initiate in recognition of her new state.

The ritual destruction of the village and the preparation of medicinal hale through various exoteric and esoteric rites dramatizes the coalescence of sociostructural dichotomies in an ambivalent third state that in itself helps to render the hale efficacious. This represents the acquisition of a material source of controllable power capable of transforming the initiates' ontological state. The material to which this ritual separator is applied is the child herself, perceived as unformed matter. The child is neither male nor female at this stage, but something in between, as indexed by androgynous garb. It is the action of the hale that is believed to transform by imposing gender. Clitoridectomy is then the physical complement to this abstraction, an act which signifies in physical terms that the initiate is now wholly female, for the clitoris is believed to be a male organ.³³ Hence, becoming female involves ontological transformation affected by the hale, and the correlative rite of clitoridectomy which makes visible this transformation. Clitoridectomy is

³³ The male rite of circumcision is likewise believed to remove the female organ of men, the foreskin, and thus to make the initaites wholly male.

the defining act, one that literally cuts off the initiates from their former physical existence. As Comaroff states of circumcision rites: "*The severance, a message of bodily violation, blood and suffering, [is] carved upon the organ bearing the major symbolic load of emerging adult identity. But while it distinguishes the present from the past by invoking separation, pain and death, the operation also introduce[s] the terms of an alternate theme--that of rebirth.*"³⁴ According to Comaroff, the operation of circumcision involves the condensation of two images: sacrificial victim and neonate. Through circumcision, bodies function as "media for the symbolic reordering of social categories."³⁵ The sequence of events within the liminal stage proceeds "from an act of deconstruction of the novices through their gradual reformation. In the process the poetic structure of the rite builds a cumulative image of social being, shaping the person in terms of an increasingly inclusive order of categories and relations which transcend[s] individual subjectivism and subsocial existence."³⁶

With rebirth into a new state comes a new identity with new rights, relations, responsibilities and privileges. This simultaneous death and rebirth is announced to the village by the appearance of the *kendue*, a "bier-like structure" which is paraded before the villagers by the Sande women. Jedrej states that his informants likened the *kendue* to a corpse in a white shroud. He interprets its function as that of "carrying the 'corpse' of the male elements (a collection of excised clitorises...) which the Sande hale has fallen upon, thereby separating out the pure female (*gbogbini*)."³⁷

The esoteric rite of washing in the river marks the initiates' passage from "virgin" to "bride." Few details are known about this stage, but water and water symbolism are used here to reference a spiritual realm believed to be the source of Sande's power and ritual efficacy.³⁸ This stage may complete the transformation from neutral to gendered, child to adult, remembering the mystical allusions of water to spiritual purity and beauty. This stage may represent the exposure of the initiate to esoteric knowledge

³⁴ Comaroff, 96.

³⁵ Ibid, 97.

³⁶ Ibid, 109.

³⁷ Jedrej, "Medicine, Fetish and Secret Society," 252.

³⁸ The deep waters of rivers and ponds signify the realm of the spirit for the Mende. Women speak of "finding Sande" in a river (Boone, 17) and the initiation lodge when in session is said to be "under water." (Boone, 50) Water is believed to be the mystical source of life before life. In myth, water is the abode of female spirits known as *tingoisia*. *Tingoi* is said to radiate an ethereal, absolute beauty that humans can neither attain, nor resist. She is also the bestower of good fortune to those she has chosen through the medium of dreams. She is said to be the mythical prototype to which the Sowo mask alludes, an instance of the spiritual source of beauty beyond the reach of mere women, but towards which they incessantly strive.

believed to be of a transformative nature. However, given the paucity of information about this stage it is difficult to speculate further.

In the final stage, the initiates appear as *hanjoeisia* in the village. Here their status as adult women is recognized with gifts and admiration. They are displayed before the village as sexual objects and betrothal arrangements are negotiated between their parents and interested men of the village. Sexual relations prior to initiation bear heavy social sanctions; thus Sande is said to ensure the virginity of females until marriage. After seven days as *hanjoeisia*, the initiates "come out" and are reincorporated into the village with a completely new status. Now they are potential wives and must soon bear the wifely duties of producing children, preparing food, carrying water and firewood and performing domestic service in a new family where they have very little authority, respect or status. Often they will be a second or third wife in an extended family that may include several generations. As the person of lowest status in such a family, the brief period of leisure and admiration as *hanjoeisia* comes to a shockingly abrupt end.

Part III: RITUAL and The GENDERED Body

The initiatory rites of Sande function to reinterpret individual, physical bodies in terms of a larger social structure. At this juncture of material body and the larger social collectivity are what Catherine Bell terms "rituals of power" that work to create a political "technology" of the body.³⁹ These rituals function to model the process of socialization; they structure the body through an "internalization" of the dominant social meanings and schemas, simultaneously constituting both the individual body and the larger social world. Individual and social bodies are thus created by and in relation to each other. I have termed this process the creation of the *socialized body*. The socialized body is the individual body in its mutually constitutive relations to the social context; it is therefore made up of more than biological matter or physiological processes but contains as well the values, contours and definitions that a culture attributes to the body. This socialized body is by definition a *gendered* body. I contend that something similar to this

³⁹ Catherine Bell, 97.

notion of a gendered body is implied in Bell's reference to the "political technology" of the body, for gender is primarily a political construct.

For Bell, the "natural logic" of ritual is a logic embedded in the physical movements of the body and therefore beyond consciousness and articulation.⁴⁰ It is therefore acts that restructure bodies; ritual can be thought of as an *embodying* of the structures of the social world that is beyond consciousness and articulation. One implication of this is that ritualization invests these structures with the quality of *naturalness*. They are embedded in the individual's body itself, for they are constitutive of the body. Because ritual operates as "practical mastery," it is a means of aligning the socialized body within a system of power relations in society. In the words of Catherine Bell, *ritualization aligns one within a series of relations linked with the ultimate sources of power*.⁴¹

The construction of gender within the Sande initiation rituals therefore functions to align the initiate herself within the patriarchal order. I have chosen here to focus on the gendering of the body in three ways: as a *disciplining* of the body, a *making* of the body and an *inscription* of the body. "Disciplining" refers to the physical, bodily postures, attitudes or behaviors that materially manifest gender on the field of the body. "Making" refers to the social rights and responsibilities, privileges and duties associated with a gendered body. "Inscription" is a process that radically and permanently modifies the body in its physical aspect to accord with social notions. As a whole, the discipline/making/inscription of the body accomplished by Sande serves to define the female in terms of a patriarchal order and ensures that women cannot functionally subvert this order without subverting society itself. Through its participation in both a physical/material reality and a social/ideological⁴² reality, the gendered body through the operation of Sande is disciplined in its physical aspect; made in its social aspect; and finally inscribed through the act of clitoridectomy, a mediating sign that signifies both concrete and abstract notions of femaleness within the patriarchal system. This type of "sexual politics" is a crucial element in women's rites of initiation.

The Gendered Body as the Disciplined Body

⁴⁰ Bell, 99.

⁴¹ Bell, 41.

⁴² I use the term *ideological* in an Althusserian way: as a means of describing the imaginary relationships of individuals to the real relations in which they live.

Through strict standards of beauty, dress and hygiene, the bodies of Mende women are disciplined. Although these prescriptions are taught to girls by their mothers at a young age, they are revalorized through Sande rites. Elaborate styles of hair braiding, codes of dress, as well as techniques of personal hygiene are part of the pedagogical emphasis of Sande initiation. Here, I will only analyze hair braiding and hygiene, although each of these disciplining prescriptions contributes something towards revealing the complex strategies used for the social control of female bodies.

To understand hair braiding, one must first look at Mende ideas connected to hair. The Mende speak of both hair and natural flora as *kpotongo*: abundant, plentiful, a repository of the life force.⁴³ Men's hair is worn cropped close to the head and facial hair is usually removed. Thus the Mende say that "men don't have hair."⁴⁴ Women's hair must always be plaited or alternatively, covered in a head tie, as is the hair of the Sande initiates. The social emphasis on plaited hair suggests an act "ordering" nature, a symbol of cultivation that bespeaks social control. The word for plaiting found throughout Sierra Leone is "planting:" to plant in ordered rows is to impose order on an otherwise chaotic life force; it is an act of separation, the defining act of culture. This is underscored by the fact that disheveled, loose hair signifies insanity, wildness; in short, asocial behavior. The relation of "planting" or plaiting to the term *gbogbini* indicates a correspondence between women's hair and women's sexuality, both of which are seen as threatening and in need of social control.⁴⁵

In Radiance From the Waters, Sylvia Ardyn Boone describes Mende ideals of beauty, ideals that are restricted solely to women. "The overwhelmingly obvious point about beauty in Mende life," she writes, "is that *discussion is solely about women*." (emphasis in original) "Men may evaluate beauty, desire beauty, pay for beauty, obtain beauty, exchange beauty--but they have placed themselves outside of the arena: they are consumers of beauty."⁴⁶ Standards of female beauty include shape of breasts and buttocks, bodily proportions, shape of mouth and teeth, scent, gracefulness, patience, modesty, honesty, goodness; in

⁴³ Boone, 186.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 96.

⁴⁵ Men's sexuality is subject to social definition as well; however, the expression of their sexuality is linked to culturally valued processes such as virile power and forcefulness. The fact that men may have sexual access to many women within a polygamous household is further evidence of the relative lack of stringent controls placed upon their sexuality.

⁴⁶ Boone, 89.

short, notions involving character, looks and comportment. In terms of my focus on the disciplined body, standards of hygiene and cleanliness reflect the social values placed upon women's bodies and the efforts needed to remake one's body in accordance.

Boone states that Mende women keep themselves meticulously clean, bathing usually three times a day. The genital area is the focus of scrupulous attention and must be absolutely free of pubic hair and odors. *"If a woman should go to a man without shaving, she is indicating indifference and that she has no regard for his opinion of her...A cleanly shaven vulva is a treat for a man; it shows that the girl is for him 'heart, mind and body'..."* Further, Boone claims that a woman's genitals are the focus of the community's attention, subject to constant speculation and discussion with the result that intimate information about them becomes public discourse:

"It is hard to know, say the elders, where one will find the best vagina. A man can see by looking at his bride that she has nice breasts and nice hips, and a nice vulva; but he has no sign about the state of the vagina....Mende men see the puzzle about the vagina as a problem in the community and a topic they return to often. They agree that the girls who are less attractive often have vaginas that are the 'best ever,'⁴⁷ almost as a compensation for what they lack in looks. And a man is very lucky to find both internal and external desirability combined in one woman. The general community can be harsh and vocal in its judgements of a factor so intimate and supposedly secret. If a young woman is not sought after, it will be because word has gotten around that her vagina is not good."⁴⁸

As this brief passage detailing the male search for the best vagina indicates, Mende notions of beauty involve women in a structure of expectation and a quest for fulfillment that centers on their bodies. Here gender differences between men and women, putatively based on biological, sexual differences, are converted into gender hierarchies. The female body as produced, is then involved in a system of consumption in which it is the desired commodity. This relation of commodity to consumer is descriptive of the relation of female to male. Further, this structure of expectations involves women in a time-consuming and complicated process of attempting to fulfill male desires; it is a blatant instrument of

⁴⁷ As the vagina is "made for sexual intercourse," this praise is reserved for vaginas that are small and tight, with an "independent rhythmic motion during coitus." See Boone 114-118.

⁴⁸ Boone, 116-117.

control that results in women's perception of themselves and their lives solely in terms of a male-defined existence that is institutionalized and socially sanctioned.

Catherine MacKinnon defines gender socialization in terms of a privileged male (hetero)sexuality that institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission:

"The overall objective of female conditioning is to make women perceive themselves and their lives through male eyes and so to secure their unquestioning acceptance of a male-defined and male-derived existence. The overall objective of male conditioning is to make men perceive themselves and their lives through their own eyes and so to prepare them for an existence in and on their own terms."⁴⁹ ... "Gender socialization is the process through which women come to identify themselves as such sexual beings, as beings that exist for men, specifically for male sexual use."⁵⁰

Women's bodies in this context are valued only in relation to male desires; further, their sexuality, unless channeled in the "proper", i.e. male oriented, direction is disruptive and threatening to the social order. But for social control to be effective, more than just the outward appearance of women's bodies must be dictated. The standards determining the outward appearance of women's bodies are paralleled by beauty ideals that involve the correct performance of duties constructed as essential to the feminine gender. I have described these duties in terms of the female body as a made body

The Gendered Body as The Made Body

The gendered body as the made body is construed in terms of wifely, familial and social responsibilities. As a wife, a woman's primary responsibilities involve the totality of domestic life: the production and care of children, the preparation of meals, cleaning and laundering clothing, carrying water and firewood to the village, tending garden, weaving and dyeing cloth, and helping her husband in the fields. Part of Sande's pedagogical emphasis is instruction in the performance of these duties and the

⁴⁹ MacKinnon, 111.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 110.

inculcation of values of subservience related to them, for these are duties which carry very little in terms of social recognition and very much in terms of onerous responsibility.

Further, a wife's body is never her own; it is given over to the tasks of suckling, conceiving or carrying children and is sexually available to her husband upon demand. The only socially sanctioned times for a woman to refrain from sexual intercourse after initiation are during pregnancy and for a defined period of time afterwards,⁵¹ and during menstruation. The female body as a made body is thus constructed solely in terms of the needs of the family and the society: her breasts are given over to suckling, her uterus to childbirth, her vagina to her husband's sexual pleasure, her hands to labor, her head to tote water and firewood. These duties are at the core of familial and social responsibilities, for it is women's work that both maintains society and allows it to function smoothly and to prosper.

Mende women are involved in a gender specific world of practical activities and duties that is separate from yet interdependent upon the gender-specific world of male practical activities and duties: those of the social, public world. As the family is the fundamental social unit in Mende society, the men represent its public "face", while the women are confined to its domestic foundation. Male activities of agricultural production, governing, public decision making and the "safeguarding" of tradition as elders, are high status, public activities as opposed to the low-status but necessary female activities. This hierarchy of high and low status obscures the fact that female activities are absolutely crucial to the maintenance of society, and allows the perpetuation of a system of dominant and subordinate classes that falls along a gender dichotomy. Here, gender ideologies associated with men and women can be seen as related in a hierarchal system of both overt and covert privileges and restrictions that defines the acceptable uses of bodies. This type of gender ideology is most dramatically apparent in processes that physically inscribe the body in terms of prescribed social uses.

The Gendered Body as the Inscribed Body

⁵¹ From one to two years, according to Boone, 94.

Through the operation of clitoridectomy the female body is inscribed; it is physically remade in conjunction with its social value and function. The exact nature of this procedure as it is practiced in Sande initiation is not well documented. Some reports indicate that the clitoris is excised, others that the clitoris as well as the labia majora and possibly parts of the labia minora are removed as well. An early ethnography by a Western female doctor who supposedly witnessed an initiation ceremony states that the woman who performed this operation "cut out the entire clitoris and the soft parts of the vagina until her knife met firm tissue." A piece of wool or a twig soaked in oil was then "inserted into the lower incision so that when the wound healed an enlargement of the vagina would result which is supposed to make childbirth easier...It is from that cut that most of the disasters in childbirth occur because the hardened scars do not allow stretching of the orifice."⁵² In "Stratification and Sande Politics," Caroline Bledsoe asserts that "girls may be clitoridectomized and labiadectomized," although her "impression is that these practices for girls are dying out."⁵³ Other sources refer to the excision of the clitoris alone.⁵⁴ My own experience in Sierra Leone in talking to both women and men is that clitoral excision is the norm, however this information remains suspect due my status as an outsider living in the country for a relatively short period of time.

At minimum, and not to deny the gravity of this, what can be established is that the clitoris of initiates is removed in an operation that constitutes the central event of the Sande rites. It is the epicenter: without it Sande is not in session. *"Sande initiation ceremonies and procedures of all sorts may be modified, truncated, even eliminated, but the excision operation must be performed; it is an absolute requirement; it is the strait gate by which a girl enters into Sande fellowship."*⁵⁵ The act of clitoridectomy signals a social transformation: the transformation of a non-gender specific body into a gender-specific body. It is this that constitutes the definitive moment in the socialization process. Correlatively, the pedagogical component of Sande ensures that the initiates are inculcated into the social values, norms and duties attached to their now gendered bodies.⁵⁶

⁵² P. Gervis, *C'est Arrive Dans la Sierra Leone*, Chapter XII "An Initiation Ceremony in the Bundu Bush," excerpted in Fran Hosken, *The Hoskin Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, "Case Histories: Sierra Leone," 5.

⁵³ Bledsoe, 145. She neglects to state upon what grounds she bases her impressions however.

⁵⁴ See Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance From the Waters*, 65; Ruth Phillips, "Masking in Mende Sande Initiation Rituals," M.C. Jedrej "Medecine, Fetish and Secret Society in a West African Culture," and "Structural Aspects of a West African Secret Society."

⁵⁵ Boone, 65.

⁵⁶ Caroline Bledsoe believes that the "ideologues of education" invoked when describing the ritual function of Sande serve only to obscure patterns of stratification that relate the Sande and Poro societies to political and economic power relations in the society at large. She states

Moreover, clitoridectomy as a physical act inscribing gender upon the body is paralleled by the abstract ontological gendering believed to be affected through the action of hale. This is attested to by the procession of the *kendue* through the village. The *kendue*, containing the residue of the ritual separator (hale) combined with the excised clitorises that it has "separated", announces publically that the initiates have passed into a new state that is simultaneously a material state and a more abstract state. The language of liminality permeates this stage with its polysemic and multivalent references attesting to simultaneous notions of control and chaos, birth and death, material and social, that are resonant in the passage from child to woman. Clitoridectomy functions within this larger structure as a mediating sign conjoining material and non-material: by inscribing the physical body through the forced removal of the clitoris, it is remade into a socialized body. In this system, the clitoris must be removed for it is an anomalous organ: useless for the male prerogative of sexual pleasure, useless for childbirth or childrearing, useless for labor. Further, the most sensitive area on a woman's body is removed as a permanent sign of a social reality: as a material marker that testifies to women's subjugation. One cannot forget that one is a slave when an iron ball is chained to the leg, one cannot forget that one is a Jew when branded on the arm; these testify to one's status, and if properly indoctrinated, the woman, the slave and the Jew come to believe what they have been constructed to be. In this sense clitoridectomy signals the conditions for becoming a woman and serves as the threshold to social acceptance through marriage and childbirth, the only options for social participation available to women.

The process of clitoridectomy is also an esoteric act, performed by a female ritual specialist under conditions that involve only initiated women and those undergoing initiation. Men are strictly prohibited from any contact with the initiates before this process and are excluded from its performance under threat of death. In fact, Mende women attest to the necessity of the initiation process, and thus its defining criterion of clitoridectomy, as intrinsic to female solidarity and constitutive of female political power. Membership in Sande provides the only avenue to political power for women. This is not surprising, for as Sande elders are believed to control fertility, they therefore control the sexual capacities

that in reality the initiates learn little more than what they already knew before they entered, or that they would learn at that stage of their lives if they did not become secret society members. I would not argue with this except to point out that the social values and duties associated with one's gendered body may perhaps be rendered more explicit. See Bledsoe, "Stratification and Sande Politics," 145.

of the initiates themselves. It is to these elders that young girls are given to and then taken from after initiation, occasions that each involve fees. As custodians of the most basic resource in society, marriageable women, Sande elders are able to forge alliances that frequently translate into wealth, allegiance and political power. In 1971, for example, of the 81 chiefdoms in the Mende/Sherbro area, ten were headed by women.⁵⁷ Bledsoe analyzes this phenomenon in the following way:

*"Women who become powerful secular or secret society leaders thus achieve their status mainly by playing the 'male' game of trading rights in the women they control for political support. Given this perspective, it is little wonder that older ...women use other women for their own purposes, just as men do. In this system their own status rests on their ability to do so."*⁵⁸

Membership in Sande, and thus clitoridectomy itself, constitutes the terms of female fellowship and political power for women in a society that privileges men; as such, it also presents a medium for the articulation of male power and female resistance, a forum for the constitution and negotiation of patriarchal hegemony in terms of the creation of the female body itself. However, the terms of this dialectic of power and resistance I judge to be extremely costly in terms of women's bodily integrity and mobility. To understand further what these costs are, we must delve deeper into the notion of clitoridectomy as a mediating sign, connecting it with the role of the Sowo mask in Sande initiation.

Part IV: DECONSTRUCTION AND CONSTRUCTION: Pain and Imagining

Aside from the purported political connotations associated with clitoridectomy and the Sande society as a whole, the act of clitoridectomy in and of itself indexes a certain relation between the body and an imagined object of belief: a social structure or social reality. In each, the experientiable "reality" of the body is read not as an attribute of the body but as an attribute of its larger social referent.⁵⁹ This type of

⁵⁷ Carol Hoffer, "Mende and Sherbro Women in High Office," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, VI, ii, 1972, 151-64.

⁵⁸ Bledsoe, 147.

⁵⁹ Elaine Scarry, 184.

correspondence is facilitated by a liminal state involving the conflation of symbolic experiences of birth and death. I would like to refer to this conflation as the experience of pain and imagining, or deconstruction and construction, with the pain of wounding as necessary for the production of the socialized body.

Taking some of Elaine Scarry's insights and building upon them in relation to clitoridectomy, I define pain as an "intentional state without an intentional object." Imagining is "an intentional object without an experiencable intentional state."⁶⁰ What this means is that pain is a bodily experience that intensely focuses awareness upon the body, upon subjectivity itself. When one is in pain, one is aware only of a pain that is beyond the language of description, one that defies objectification. As a result, pain is destructive to the self. Its use in rites of initiation capitalizes on this deconstructive aspect. By contrast, imagining is a state of intense focus upon an object external to oneself. When one is truly imagining, the experience of the object in mind is one that can impede awareness of other bodily experiences.⁶¹ This process of imagining may best be understood as that which is operant in martial arts and other techniques of concentration where the goal is transcendence of bodily awareness.

Pain becomes an intentional state when it is brought into relation with the objectifying power of the imagination; through that relation, pain will be transformed from a "wholly passive and helpless occurrence" into one that modifies the self."⁶² In other words, pain, as an "objectless state of consciousness" is related to a socially relevant, socially determined object (an imagined object) through the process of circumcision and its ritual concomitants, a process that functions to remake the self. The imagined object, what Scarry terms an "artifact," or a "fragment of world alteration,"⁶³ is presented in conjunction with the experience of pain in a process that culminates in the production of a socialized body. The "imagined object" par excellence, and one that symbolizes in an extremely complex and multivalent way the socially relevant ideas of womanhood operant here, is the Sowu mask.

The act of circumcision then, for both males and females, relates the objectifying power of the imagination to an experience of pain that transforms the mere physical body into the social body. It is an

⁶⁰ Ibid, 164.

⁶¹ Scarry posits this as the "topography of act and object in sensation and perception;"(166) a continuum of pain and imagining where pain is the acute awareness of the self as the experiencing subject and imagining is self-transforming objectification, the acute awareness of the object of sensation itself and not that of the experiencing subject.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, 171.

elementary sign that memorializes the confluence of pain/wounding and imagining for which it is a substitute.⁶⁴ The wounding of circumcision is a deconstruction of the material body followed by a reconstruction of it in social terms. The "making" of the adult female body therefore involves a process of deconstruction achieved through the pain of wounding and the reconstruction of a social body through pain's confluence with imagining a socially relevant object; i.e. the "proper" female body, symbolized by the Sowo mask.

Part V: THE SOWO MASK AND THE FEMALE BODY

The Sowo mask (*Sowei*) appears publically in the village three times during the course of initiation to announce the succesful completion of key stages to the village. According to Ruth Phillips, the first of these appearances "*occurs two or three days after the girls have been taken to the bush and circumcised...This is a time of danger for the initiates are still recovering from circumcision and the families of the girls have not previously had news of them.*" Phillips states that *Sowei* does not dance at this solemn occasion, but her presence reminds the village of the powerful Sande hale which legitimates the "lawless" behavior of women, who "*rush about the town waving leaves and taking food and things they need which don't belong to them.*"⁶⁵ The second appearance of *Sowei*, about two weeks later, announces that the initiates will be brought into the village for the first time. On this occasion, the *Sowei* dances through the night. The next day the initates are brought into the village dressed in white and covered in white clay. From this time on, they spend their days in the village and return to the *kpanguima* to sleep at night. The third appearance of *Sowei* in the village announces the release of the newly initiated women from Sande.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Phillips, "Masking in Mende Sande," 269.

In addition to these public appearances, Soweï's presence among the initiates during clitoral excision is crucial. It is the conjunction of the experience of pain with the ideal female body represented by the mask that transforms the physical body into the socialized body. Intrinsic to this production are the ideals, values and expectations communicated through the multivalent visual language of the mask.

Criteria of the Sowo Mask

Firstly, the Sowo mask is both the head of a woman, and a representation of the head of a woman. For the Mende people, the mask *is* beauty: it incarnates beauty and engenders beauty. In Sierra Leone, beauty is "contingent upon one's manipulation of nature to pleasing effect."⁶⁶ The mask, in order to be considered beautiful, must conform to five essential criteria that determine its recognition as a Sowo mask. These criteria can be seen as manipulations of nature in that the image is itself a piece of wood that has been laboriously carved. It is also implicit in the fact that each criterion represents a point of dialectical interchange between culture and nature, realms constructed as opposites. The relation between them takes the form of a manipulation, the refiguration of a natural "given" to accord with cultural or social demands. Thus the criteria of Soweï's beauty are themselves instances of the remaking of a material "given."

Beauty is expressed through Soweï's intricate coiffure, symbol of social status and wealth, elegance and cultivation. The top of every Sowo mask must be carved to represent elaborately braided hair. These patterns are left to the discretion of the carver, who, in an interesting parallel to the creation of women, is always male. The patterns may reflect current styles or more traditional ones now out of favor. Like village women, Soweï's hair must always be plaited.

Her beauty is also expressed by her neck, encircled by incised rings of flesh (*cut-neck*). Throughout Sierra Leone, a beautiful neck is defined as possessing creases or rings, compared favorably with the refinement and delicate lines of the finest sculpture. A person lucky enough to be blessed by this sign of God's beneficence is endowed with a mark of beauty connoting refinement, high status, grace. One researcher suggests that a Western parallel to neck rings is the golden halo crowning angels, mark of what

⁶⁶ Frederick Lamp, "Cosmos, Cosmetics and the Spirit of Bondo," 43.

is human in form but divine in essence.⁶⁷ They also index fat rings, connected with a life of plenty and thus wealth. Neck rings may further be a reference to water, suggesting Soweï's origin in the watery depths, believed to be the spiritual source of life.

A Sowo mask must, in addition to an elaborate coiffure and neck rings, display heavy-lidded, downcast eyes--the opening served by the merest slit. Her eyes cannot be gazed upon, cannot be read. She is beyond the vicissitudes of human life, her eyes do not communicate as the eyes of humans, but reference something beyond. In addition to characteristic eyes, her features must be small, delicate and composed. In all respects, her face evinces an inner force, a subtle power beyond human ability. Her features signify impenetrability: downcast eyes, closed mouth and ears, small, non-functional nose. They are balanced, composed, referring only on the surface to human conventions but pointing to a refinement beyond mere physicality.

Soweï displays a broad, smooth forehead, whose sheer size is striking. Mende people believe that the forehead is the seat of the person, the actual point on the body that receives good fortune, success, prosperity, commenting when these seem imminent "It is there now on her forehead."⁶⁸

Finally, Soweï must be black, a radiant black. "Shiny blackness is the image's name, description, identity."⁶⁹ Referring to human skin, the Mende say the blacker the more beautiful. In this respect, blackness identifies Soweï with the color of human beings, with the realm of the physical. To be black is to acquire color rather than to possess no color. Black skin is seen as the product of a process of refinement, as in the dyeing of cloth.⁷⁰ Thus, the deeper the black, the more beautiful, for the more refined. The word "black" in the Mende language also refers to "coolness", "moistness." Deep water is said to be black.⁷¹ Notions of water and the spiritual realm, refinement and social cultivation, are thus resonant in the blackness of Soweï.

The beauty of Soweï is a conceptual focal point upon which many ideals and categories converge. Soweï as the embodiment of beauty unites and gives concrete form to the otherwise disparate

⁶⁷ Boone, 170.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 181.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 158.

⁷⁰ Lamp, 30.

⁷¹ Boone, 237-8.

realms of spirituality and physicality, cultural order and natural power. Implicit is the opposition of men and women as an ontological category, since beauty is the exclusive providence of the feminine. At another level, Soweï's beauty, as defined by the five characteristics, represents an instance of interchange between these categories: an "ordering" of nature, as seen in Soweï's coiffure, or a transcending of nature, as evidenced by her neck rings and water symbolism. The terms of this dialectic, however, are those of manipulation: the discipline, remaking, or defining of nature/material form to accord with a social ideal. This social ideal is one that is imposed upon the material of actual bodies in the Sande rite of initiation; one that manipulates them in ways that have real world consequences. These consequences range from subservient status, low levels of social and physical mobility, lack of authority, lack of self-worth and rigidly prescribed codes of appearance.

The imposition of this type of hegemonic structure on bodies reworks them; reorienting them in hierarchical strata of relationships directly connected to the play of power. As Foucault has shown, power only exists in the interplay of hierarchical relationships and their institution at both the microlevel and macrolevel; i.e., at the level of bodies and social hegemonies. Hence, the social production of gendered bodies is directly connected to power and its diffuse networks of strategies and relations. However, this hegemonic ordering simultaneously generates a network of resistance, for power and resistance are mutually constitutive. Ritual is one mediating strategy for this negotiation and renegotiation of systems "constructed as dominant and subordinate." I now turn to an examination of the language of resistance and the negotiation of hegemonic ordering provided by the Sande ritual of initiation.

Part VI: EMPOWERMENT, NEGOTIATION AND CREATIVE REAPPROPRIATION

In Sande, Mende women discover the terms and limits of female solidarity. The occasion for this, it will be remembered, is the excision of the clitoris, the main site of female sexual pleasure and a source of sexual self-sufficiency for women. Clitoridectomy results, on the one hand, in the social

cooptation of female sexual pleasure.⁷² However, the ritual space of Sande is also a woman-only space, and one in which creative reappropriation of the dominant meanings and valuations of patriarchal society may take place. Initiation rituals may facilitate an experience of empowerment by allowing women to negotiate pain and pleasure through creative play, provocative song and dance, and ritual enactment of grievances. The fact that Sande is a space for women to escape from mundane drudgery and vent their frustrations without the presence of men is one that should not be overlooked. It also contributes to the formation of a sisterhood of women who will aid and support each other for the rest of their lives.

The pain experienced by an initiate is one that is offset to some extent by the pleasure she receives through her participation in Sande. This empowerment may occur in the form of defiant dances and songs, through the development of life-long bonds of solidarity and friendship with her fellow initiates, or through the joy of receiving admiration and praise. Sande as a secret and esoteric community allows women a measure of freedom to create themselves, a brief respite from the rigid definitions they must otherwise conform to. Hence, the ritual space of Sande is one in which female "lawlessness" is sanctioned and women may mock social norms, jeer at men and revel in their time of power. However, this time of power is a ritual one, and thus exists only within a defined framework. The opportunity to renegotiate, to resist hegemonic ordering exists in a carefully defined time and space, one that may threaten to overflow its boundaries, but one that ultimately reinforces these boundaries through its articulation with them. Precisely this dynamic of power and resistance reveals that the illusory exercise of power is plausible in the context of resistance, while limited in the context of power.

Concluding Remarks

⁷² In "National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts: The Sexual Politics of Colonial Policy Making," *Journal of Modern History* 63 (December 1991), 647-682, Susan Pedersen contends that it was the lack of vocabulary to discuss female pleasure as well as the ignorance surrounding the function of the clitoris that contributed to the inability of Britain to combat female genital mutilation among the Kikuyu, despite the efforts of committed feminists in the British Parliament as well as colonial missions in Kenya. It is interesting to speculate that the present inability to discuss these issues publically in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa, as well as the confused furor this issue has raised in the United States may be due to some of these same issues.

The Sande ritual of initiation is a complex and fascinating subject that, at the very least, demonstrates the necessity of looking at the construction and manipulation of gender by religious systems. As African societies are forced into systems of global exchange and hastened into "modernity," "traditional" religious practices such as Sande initiation take on new meanings and symbolizations. In the example of the Kikuyu of Kenya, British colonial policies deeply threatened traditional Kikuyu social structures and stability with the result that female excisory practices were extolled as an act of nationalistic faith and Kikuyu solidarity.⁷³ In these situations, it is not unusual for women to be forced to bear the burden of nationalism through redoubled efforts at reviving "traditional" ways of the past, ways that are usually associated with religion. The reemergence of the *chador* in Iran after the overthrow of the Shah is another case in point. It remains for a thorough study to be made of the relations between religion and nationalism in the context of the Sande in Sierra Leone and its contemporary relevance, especially given recent political events.⁷⁴ It is my hope to one day be a part of such an undertaking.

⁷³ See Ibid.

⁷⁴ The ongoing Liberian civil war has sent thousands of refugees streaming into Sierra Leone, severely taxing an already overburdened economy and infrastructure and exhausting food, petrol and water supplies. This fact probably catalyzed the coup d'etat of April 1992 which overthrew President J.S. Momoh and put 36 year old army captain Valentine Strasser in charge of the country. One of Strasser's first presidential campaigns was one to promote Sierra Leonean nationalism and patriotism. As part of this, Freetown was covered in murals commemorating great Sierra Leonean heroes. Things soon turned sour, however, and recent events in Sierra Leone have included the massacre of 500 civilians at a refugee camp run by American nuns, and the unreported murders of hundred of Lebanese merchants and miners. As young bands of army thugs now roam the countryside, looting and killing, the world press ignores the silent war that is destroying Sierra Leone.

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