On Liberian secret societies and conflict resolution

Ilmari Käihkö
Department of Security, Strategy and Leadership, Swedish Defence University
ilmari.kaihko@fhs.se

ABSTRACT

Recent times have witnessed a rising interest in micro-level conflict resolution mechanisms in the form of religious and traditional leaders due to their perceived legitimacy central to peace. Based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this article updates the decades old literature on Liberian secret societies to post-conflict realities, focusing especially on these leaders' peacebuilding potential. While states remain the main instrument for upholding domestic order, the weak Liberian state continues to rely on societies for legitimacy in conflict resolution and governance alike. The article offers a contemporary look at the Liberian societies, and especially their uneasy relationship with the state: the two are so entwined that it is difficult to separate the two. Yet this also poses problems for the societies, as the proximity threatens their ultimately local legitimacy. While peacemakers and statebuilders alike are tempted to co-opt societies to gain legitimacy, the article questions whether this is always desirable or possible.

Keywords: conflict resolution, legitimacy, Liberia, secret societies, state-building.
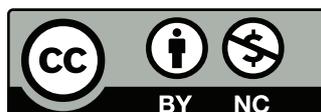
AUTHOR BIO

Ilmari Käihkö is an assistant professor at the Department of Security, Strategy and Leadership at the Swedish Defence University, and at the time of writing a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology, Uppsala University, and a visiting fellow at the Department of Anthropology, Yale University, supported by the Ryoichi Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund (SYLFF). He has worked for two and a half years in East, Central and West Africa with development cooperation, military and research. He is currently investigating fundamental concepts of war and violence, as well as how force is constituted, controlled and employed. He has previously published several book chapters on contemporary military strategy and African politics, as well as articles on Liberia and other conflicts in journals such as *Africa Spectrum* and *Conflict, Security & Development*.

DISCLAIMER

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the relationship between the state and "traditional" "secret" societies in Liberia. These societies are institutions that, because of their availability and legitimacy, exercise a central role in micro-level conflict resolution and governance. The contribution of this article comes in the form of updating the existing literature on the Liberian societies, the bulk of which is decades old. As a result, this literature does not account for the single most important factor affecting these actors: the near-collapse of the state during the civil wars (1989-1996, 1999-2003), and its subsequent rise after.

The societies offer a glimpse of several dynamics that concern legitimacy and relationship with the state, not least the attempts to instrumentalize their legitimacy by co-opting local institutions with local legitimacy (Käihkö 2012). The Liberian state depends on the legitimacy of societies, whereas these actors are often paid, and hence sustained, by the state. It is these dynamics which also require adding the citation marks around *traditional* and *secret*. The societies are not altogether secret, although some of their practices are. Even further, while the societies' status is largely built on "traditional" premises, this article also argues that the relationship between the Liberian state and traditional societies is much closer and more complex than often thought.

This intimate but ambiguous entanglement between institutions built on different and to some extent competing sources of legitimacy questions notions of these institutions as traditional, or as constituting a part of civil society often reified as a mediator between private life and state policies. Even further, the relationship between the state and the societies complicates the deeply held idea that weakness of the formal state automatically equals to stronger informal institutions of local governance. As a central part of governance, the conflict resolution potential of societies deserves special attention, as identi-

fied in recent discussions which have sought to involve religious and traditional leaders in micro-level peacebuilding (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013). For instance, a United Nations (UN) General Secretary's recent report identified their mediation as a "useful mechanism" because of their knowledge regarding community grievances and ways to solve them, access to key decision makers, and as a way to legitimize peace processes. The "active involvement" of religious and traditional leaders was also identified as nothing less than "a central element of a successful peace agreement" (United Nations General Assembly 2012: 53-55). More specifically in Liberia, the UN Peacebuilding Commission saw "that traditional leaders are key agents of change, who could be instrumental in establishing systems that are in accordance with international standards" (United Nations Peacebuilding Commission 2011: 9). Even here the practitioners' and intervening actors' attempts to bypass the weak state in conflict resolution and governance nevertheless need to consider the more complex relationship between the state and the societies.

This article continues with a conceptual and methodological discussion that clarifies the terminology used in this article, situates the investigation in existing literature and discusses how the sensitive topic has been investigated. The third section focuses on secret societies, which arguably form a society complex that to some extent reflects broader social values and hierarchies of the overall Liberian society. These societies uphold order through both sacred and secular means, as well as traditional legitimacy and coercion. The fourth section investigates this kind of social control in practice. The outbreak of the civil war interrupted society practices, which suggests that they were unable to prevent it. The societies' inability to address root causes of local conflicts furthermore suggests clear limits to their conflict resolution capacity, especially in conflicts which concern non-members. These are illustrated in the fifth section, which discusses

the role societies played in the mining community of Bartel Jam in Grand Gedeh County. The sixth section focuses on issues of legitimacy, and the relationship between the Liberian state and societies. Concrete examples are again offered in the seventh section. As many traditional elders are on the state payroll, the relationship is close. The societies nevertheless often offer the only way for local communities to protect themselves from abusive state policies, especially in the cases the state cooperates with outside interests, such as commercial companies. While too close cooperation with the state may lead to losing local legitimacy the societies ultimately depend on, societies also have the power to cause and not only resolve conflicts. The concluding section offers a reflection of the theoretical and policy relevance of these actors, and suggests venues of future research.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to clarify the terminology used in this article, as well as to make three remarks on the source material used. Beginning with terminology, it is crucial to define "state", "society" and "societies". The first two are defined in classic sociological manner. State is usually described as a widespread survival unit, which according to Weber can only be defined through the same physical force innate to all political organizations. His famous definition of sovereignty exercised by states in turn was based on the legitimate use of this physical force in a certain geographical territory (Waters and Waters 2015: 135-136). Society in turn is defined as the large community connected by interaction that exists within the bounded territory, in this case within the Liberian borders. While this notion of society can thus be criticized as state-centric, even in Liberia perceptions of everyday social realities increasingly resonate with a concept of collective nationhood. Si-

multaneously, despite its overall weakness the Liberian state has in recent times had some success in separating citizens on its territory from those abroad, especially through primary education in Liberian English and more robust border control measures.

Previous anthropological studies have shown how it is difficult to separate state and society from each other (Aretxaga 2003; Das and Poole 2004). "Societies" fall into the intersection between state and society, and offer an excellent opportunity to investigate the close links between the two. This is not least when it comes to legitimacy. In keeping with Weber, forms of power can either be coercive, or be based on legitimate authority. Legitimacy essentially equals to a belief of a certain order because it has been there for a long time (tradition), because of personal dedication to a ruler (charisma) or because it is deemed legal. Without legitimacy there is no authority, nor need to obey commands (Weber 1978). Yet as in many other contexts, even the state in Liberia struggles to find legitimacy that can uphold its authority. It is hence ultimately the weakness of the modern state with national ambitions that has necessitated its entanglement with "traditional" and local-based "secret" societies. Yet as illustrated later through concrete examples, despite their close relationship with each other the state and the societies stand in some important respects in opposition with each other. While this relationship influences both the state and the societies, the effects will likely be more profound for the latter.

Somewhat confusingly, colloquial Liberian English uses the term "society" in a manner reminiscent of even the older English use that refers to the association between certain social strata, for instance. Referred to by their name (Poro, Sande), by the prefix "secret" or in plural to distinguish them from the broader Liberian society, the societies are smaller, exclusive and secretive communities within the Liberian society. In Liberian English, society is even used in other contexts, such as when describing membership in rebel movements or

about somebody who uses drugs or engages in homosexual relationships. In these connotations, it typically has negative undertones.

When it comes to the source material, it is necessary to offer some remarks on the temporal and the spatial dimensions, as well as the overall availability of information. First, whereas some newer literature has investigated societies in the neighboring Côte d'Ivoire (Reed 2003), Guinea (Højbjerg 2007) and Sierra Leone (King 2016; Ménard 2017), there is preciously little written about their Liberian counterparts in the aftermath of the civil wars, which resulted in massive displacement and abrupt urbanization. Neither does this literature account for the strengthening presence of the Liberian state. While there is a consensus that societies continue to be important, exactly how important and in what ways remains disputed. While some observers in Liberia claim that little about Liberia can be understood without considering societies, others see especially the urban variants such as Freemasons as nothing more than instruments for networking. The perceived importance of societies is no doubt inflated by their inherent secrecy. When it comes to conflict resolution, many of the success stories of engaging with societies remain anecdotal. Even further, these stories often come from partisan sources, as the organizations involved understandably want to give as positive image of themselves as possible.

Secondly, the fact that most of the existing literature concerns only the largest all-male Poro and the female Sande (also known as Bundu) societies makes it difficult to generalize to other cases, both within and especially outside Liberia. To balance this bias my material on the societies comes predominantly from more than five months of fieldwork in Southeastern Grand Gedeh County, where Poro does not exist. This fieldwork, as well as additional twelve months in local communities in other parts of Liberia, was conducted during four trips between 2012-2017.

Some believe that it is simply impossible for outsiders to gain information concerning secret societies.[1] A more moderate view follows Bellman's (1984) position, which sees the secrets and the societies differently: considering that in some areas virtually all men (and possibly women) are society members, neither the existence of societies nor their membership is really a secret. It is rather practices which remain hidden. But even with them the main point is rather that secrets are not *supposed to be known*, whereas they in reality may be. As Bellman (1984: 17, emphasis in the original) notes, "the *contents* of the secrets are not as significant as are the *doing* of secrecy". As illustrated by Simmel (1906), limiting access to knowledge has very concrete consequences in social and political relations in a society as it leads to solidarity between bearers of secrets, as well as stratification between them and others. This also helps to explain why protecting secrets from outsiders is paramount and revealing society secrets punishable: these secrets form an important foundation of wider socio-political structures of these contexts. This said, while the specifics of "secret" societies – the secrets – cannot be revealed, society practices are often observable. Secrecy is thus usually more about a process than about a concrete corpus of knowledge.

Studying anything sensitive poses significant methodological difficulties. Oft-discussed examples include marginal and criminal activities (Bourgois 2003; Contreras 2012) and more recently politics and war (Wood 2006; Käihkö 2018: 4-6). Yet even in the study of societies the same principle holds: deeper relationships with those we study with result in richer material, not all of which our informants want us to disclose (Reed 2003: 3-4, 71). This is also the case in this study, which builds on evidence collected during my long-term participant-observation in local communities for my PhD dissertation (2016a) that focused on former combatants and the war. Especially

---

[1] One Liberian reader of an earlier version of this paper declined politely to comment it, describing discussing society secrets uncomfortable.

the time spent in the rural areas of the three districts of Grand Gedeh inevitably led to encounters with societies, which spurred interest towards these institutions.

The contemporary material this article builds on concerns especially the observation of society activities in Grand Gedeh during significant community events including conflict resolution. These activities would however have made little sense without contextualization provided by society members. In this regard I have been lucky, as two of my close informants are society members skeptical of some of their practices. Both are based in Zwedru, the county capital, but repeatedly invited me to visit their home communities. It is likely that this distance (and the strong Christian beliefs of one) contributed to the willingness to discuss matters related to societies. Other informants, such as those living in the rural communities and with whom I lived with, refrained from directly discussing society practices, but nevertheless explained their historical and contemporary influence. It may have been difficult for them to abstain from doing so in the aftermath of significant events where the societies were involved, such as the Bartel Jam conflict detailed below. When living in Bartel Jam with a family from the area I also engaged with newcomers, who saw the societies primarily as means of social control by the local Gbagbor Krahn. Through both accident and serendipity, I also learnt the identities of two mask holders in one rural community, which led to important insights regarding their broader communal roles.

Because of the need to protect and to respect the anonymity of those who participated in this research, their names are not cited. Admittedly the material the article is based on is nevertheless far from complete, but rather founded on glimpses, explained and interpreted first by Liberian informants and then by the author. Some of these cases are employed below to illustrate the workings of the societies, as well as their relationship with the Liberian state.

MASKS, "BUSH DEVILS" AND "SECRET" SOCIETIES

The presence of the state is a relatively new phenomenon in most parts of Liberia. It was only about a century ago – after the neighboring British and French colonies began to acquisitively eye the Liberian hinterland – when the coastal Americo-Liberian elite began to establish its authority in the interior. This also brought the Liberian state-building project into direct competition with indigenous systems of governance, which were partly secular, partly sacred (Fulton 1972). These systems are often called secret societies.

Secret societies have thus been a central part of West African social and political life for centuries. The largest such societies found across the Mano river region are the male society Poro and its female counterpart Sande. Both exist in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone. In turn, the Southeastern tradition continues across the border to Western Côte d'Ivoire, where the Ivoirian Krahn are called Guéré. Even at the time of writing, one of the most powerful society elders in one Grand Gedeh chiefdom comes from the Ivorian side of the border.

In Liberia secret societies are often associated with masks, or the so-called "bush devils" or simply "devils", where the connotation to evil is especially promoted by Christian missionaries and even some Christian Liberians. This demonization was also a part of the state-building efforts by the Americo-Liberian elite. Whereas the Liberian state was perceived civilized and Christian, the indigenous beliefs were portrayed as uncivilized, not to mention unwanted competition (Brown 1982; Ellis 2010: 190-191).[2]

Perceiving the secret societies as rivals, the Liberian state outlawed many of them in

[2] Unlike Brown, Ellis misses a number of relevant "civilized" societies such as United Brothers of Friendship and Freemasons, very important in the development of the Liberian state. These more urban societies are not discussed in this paper due to its limited focus.

1912. Others, such as Poro and Sande, were not banned outright, but were still viewed with suspicion. In the 1920's the government realized that controlling the interior would require indirect rule, and divided this territory into paramount chiefdoms. The creation of this new kind of institution did not necessarily build on "traditional" or even previously existing structures. Because their legitimacy on local level was connected to societies, the government had to rethink its ban. Controlling the interior became a more focused effort during President Tubman (1944-71), although his efforts were slowed down by logistics: it was only in 1968 when the last county became accessible by road (Gnielinski 1972: 100). As a part of establishing control over the interior, Tubman approved Poro and Sande as "tribal secret societies", placed Poro under his Department of the Interior and even joined it himself as its head. Most, if not all, subsequent heads of states have also belonged to Poro. Another visible connection between the state and societies is the practice of state officials and politicians to pay a masked dancer to come and perform at events. The symbolism of such a performance might well be interpreted to borrow (sacred) legitimacy from the traditional authority.

This sacred dimension of traditional legitimacy also explains why some churches, especially Pentecostal ones, openly advocate against societies. This said, many who describe themselves as "traditional" society members do go to church. It must be emphasized that while belief in the power of "devils" is widespread, God is still understood to be a superior power. Most of my respondents experience no great contradiction between the two systems of belief and practice, which, as Simmel suggests, helps to constitute who their adherents are.

While the masks are often associated with the customarily hereditary elderly *zoe* class in Poro perceived as highly skilled practitioners and medicine men, previous research disagrees on how intimate their relation is with societies. Little (1965: 359) claims that the Poro inner circle among the Mano "wore masks and were regarded and treated as spirits", whereas Bellman (1984: 30-31) writes that a Poro hierarchy can have a direct control of the main devil. Others argue that masks do not "function as an integral part of the Poro" but are autonomous and belong to households "only loosely affiliated" with other households (Siegmann & Perani 1976: 42). While widespread and retaining its integrity, "significant structural differences exist between Poro societies even within the same language group or tribe" (Bellman 1984: 19). This of course raises the question about how much can be generalized concerning the societies in the first place. Bellman's investigation of two neighboring communities in Northwest Liberia discovered significant differences between them. While informants also point out comparable differences between the different Krahn societies in different sections of Grand Gedeh County, there is arguably a red thread that illustrates more general dynamics of even other societies and their practices in the wider region, and possibly beyond.

This red thread can be described as a society complex, which encompasses not only specific society practices but also some social values and hierarchies clearly present in Liberian society. This complex should be seen as existing as an important part of the wider social and cultural fabric in Liberia, aspects of which it also helps to reproduce. For instance, the importance of initiation rites should not be underestimated, as they have customarily transformed adolescents into adults with full rights and responsibilities. These responsibilities include obedience to elders, which even the state appears to have an interest to promote. As the Internal Affairs Minister Henrique F. Topka assured, he sought "the restoration of dignity and authority of traditional people throughout Liberia" (Liberian Ministry of Information 2016). The societies thus reproduce a social hierarchy that plays a central role in the societies' conflict resolution activities: the

decrees of society leaders are considered final by many of my respondents. No wonder then that the state continues to rely on the societies' potential to resolve local disputes and stop conflicts from escalating. When faced with the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping force, Topka called on traditional leaders to take responsibility for buttressing government efforts to maintain peace (Liberian Ministry of Information 2016).

The societies uphold order and cohesion in communities through a mix of sacred and secular means, which combine legitimacy and coercion. The societies' potential in peace processes is arguably found in these practices. As noted by Ellis, "although the Bush Devil is certainly redoubtable, and even dangerous, it is not evil. Rather, the spirit of the forest is simply powerful, and its power can be used to inflict punishments which are believed to be in the ultimate interest of the community of believers. It is the guarantor of order" (Ellis 2007: 220).[3] There is however little recent research about their exact contemporary roles in Liberia, where this social fabric was shaken by the civil wars to the extent that it is only now becoming possible to begin to see what the new constellation looks like. The next section investigates the societies' role in guaranteeing order through social control, and the influence of the war. Ultimately, there is little concrete evidence about the societies' role as peacemakers on anywhere but the local level.

SOCIETIES AND SOCIAL CONTROL

As argued by Ellis, Liberian societies uphold both political and cosmological order in communities, where authority has usually been attributed to age, but is ultimately located in the

spiritual world (Ellis 2010: 190). It is this duty of protecting community interests and guaranteeing order that makes societies important for local governance, including conflict resolution. While much of the literature focuses on male societies, often described as omnipotent, it is also necessary to recognize the importance of women's societies for safeguarding female rights (Hoffer 1975). These society duties derive from the time when communities lacked other institutions. This explains why societies continue to perform similar functions as police and judiciary: they both enforce cultural norms, as well as judge and punish those that break them. In executing of these duties, masks become the main coercive agents of societies, and hence communities. The notion of "bush schools" in turn illustrates their educational role before state-led education programs.

The importance of societies in conflict resolution becomes especially pronounced in areas where the formal state structures remain weak. The societies' authority was however diminished by war in two important ways. The first was migration, which interrupted relationships between communities and land, to which tradition and hence society laws are intimately connected. The migration contributed to rapid urbanization into multi-ethnic towns and cities, where societies lost out to the strengthening state that possesses considerable amount of coercive power, as well as legal legitimacy. In this sense an important difference between Sierra Leonean and Liberian societies emerges. Whereas Sierra Leonean societies exist even in urban areas including the Freetown peninsula (Ménard 2017), the Liberian societies appear a predominantly rural phenomenon.

The second effect of the civil war was violence, which the societies were unable to stop; as the coercive means the societies possessed were based on local legitimacy, they did not work on outside belligerents. There is thus little concrete evidence about the societies constituting "a social force with the potential to make peace, and most likely also war" (Jörgel & Utas 2007: 61) in the modern

[3] Although Ellis' book is no doubt the best source of information concerning the first civil war, its second part that concentrates on religion suffers from his extensive use of older source material that often comes from missionaries. For one blatantly racist example, see Schwab (1947).

era. Unlike in Sierra Leone where Hoffman (2011: 83) witnessed the mirroring of mobilization and society practices, in Liberia rituals connected to mobilization were conducted by individuals, often by parents, and not by societies (Käihkö 2016b). Another example is the reconciliation ritual conducted between chiefs of Grand Gedeh and Nimba counties in the late 1980s, mentioned by several elders in Grand Gedeh. This ritual failed to mend the polarization between these counties, which significantly exacerbated the war that broke out shortly after.

This failure illustrates the difficulties of society practices between ethnic groups, as well as in heterogenous communities where community members do not belong to the same society. Such communities have for a long time existed in Lofa County, where the vast majority of the Mandingo ethnic group does not belong to Poro. Other interesting cases can be witnessed in urban areas, and especially in places where inhabitants can be not only multiethnic, but also multinational. As argued by Amos Sawyer (2005), the societies possess capacity to resolve interethnic disputes. There is however little evidence that this was the case during the war, at least when these groups did not belong to the same society. Lofa County serves as an example of this, as Mandingo rebels specifically targeted Poro society elders and markers of power in order to show that their enemies were unable to defend themselves. More generally and as discussed by Ellis (2007) the civil war saw many acts of violence committed to topple the traditional social order.

It would nevertheless be an exaggeration to claim that the societies played no role whatsoever during the war. According to Little, "the common bonds of the society unite men with men, and women with women, as fellow members over a very wide area, and to an extent which transcends all barriers of family, clan, tribe and religion" (Little 1949: 202). This suggests that shared norms and perceived common bonds offer potential for conflict res-

olution across other divides, and that societies could still play a mediating role between their members. As Sawyer notes, both the state and non-state armed actors presented themselves as serving the people during the war. This necessitated establishing relationships with societies, with the consequence that they influenced the armed actors' governance practices. This influencing however went both ways, as the armed actors too influenced societies (Sawyer 2005: 59-61). Evidence thus suggests that the peacemaking role of the societies is largely limited to local issues and to situations with limited violence.

Despite the effects of war described above – migration and violence – the change might actually not be that radical when one considers that in 2008 rural Liberians took only four percent of criminal cases and three percent of civil cases to formal courts (Flomoku & Reeves 2012: 44). Widespread view of state judiciary as corrupt, expensive and inefficient contributes to preferring other mechanisms, such as mediation by prominent citizens, including those from the traditional side. As argued by Flomoku and Reeves (2012: 46), "community justice can be a locally legitimate and cost effective means of providing marginalized citizens with ownership of and access to justice. It is more effective to work with home-grown dispute resolution mechanisms accepted by communities than to create new ones." Nevertheless, this also means that when formal and more expensive systems are lacking (or perceived to lack legitimacy), outlawed practices such as sassywood (trial by ordeal which receives its name from the bark of *Erythrophleum guineense* ingested or put into eyes. Effects of the intake of this toxin are then interpreted by elders to judge innocence. Less dangerous methods are increasingly common) are still preferred, even if they can favor elders at the cost of youth and women, as well as outsiders.

The strengthening of the state has also influenced society practices, as it is increasingly possible to "forum shop" for justice

through choosing a conflict resolution mechanism according to the context and situation. Some cases that involve the tradition cannot be brought to a formal court, while others are not suitable for their customary equivalents. Witchcraft accusations are a good example of the former, while rape cases have been "talked through" without punishment in the latter (Flomoku & Reeves 2012: 44). One case of domestic violence I witnessed in Grand Gedeh was taken to the customary court only after the wife grabbed a cutlass to protect herself. During the proceedings the wife was judged to be the violator of customary law and fined. While these verdicts are awkward from a Western legal perspective, they make sense from a community point of view where mediation is in practice the only way to continue coexistence in a close-knit community. According to my informants, more violent cases such as murders are always taken to the police in Grand Gedeh, rather than to customary courts.

The possibility for elders to judge cases may understandably lead to unfair verdicts. This is of course one of the problems of a gerontocratic order, where landowning elders historically used "all-powerful men's and women's secret societies… [to] gain power over all the women and children in their territory" (Bledsoe 1980: 53). This contributed to the outbreak of the civil war in Sierra Leone (Peters 2011). As cautioned by Fuest (2010), it might not be wise to return to the past order, as many in Liberia oppose some of the society practices. One reason for this is the impunity widely attributed to societies: not only is it perceived that no society member goes against another, but even police and courts are perceived to be so afraid of them that they can act with immunity in regards to law (as in the Salala case discussed below). Cases against self-proclaimed society members may not be brought to the attention of authorities for the fear of retribution. As even family members may be society members and for instance resort to using poison, acting against societies is perceived to risk personal safety. It is hence

hardly surprising that historical sources claim that Poro members could evade responsibility for debt and insulting uninitiated without repercussions (Little 1965: 358). Similar accounts have been voiced by many of my respondents, not least in Bartel Jam, a gold mining community in Gbazohn District of Grand Gedeh County.

BARTEL JAM: AUTOCHTHONY UNMASKED

Occasionally called "a city in the bush", Bartel Jam is a crammed settlement located some kilometers from the unpaved highway that connects Grand Gedeh to the capital. While gold had been mined in the area for at least four decades, by 2017 Bartel Jam had seen its best days. When the gold prices were high in 2012, Bartel Jam attracted miners from as far as Nigeria. By 2015 the mining in Grand Gedeh was turning more industrial. Whereas miners had before relied on water pump machines to dig deeper, Bartel Jam now received its first machines for washing gold. Yet when the more remote gold camps in Konobo district received "yellow machines" – excavators – none were immediately available in Bartel Jam. One reason for this was that the gold fields had been depleted. Yet another reason concerned the social conflicts in the gold mining community, where the foreign miners often complained that any conflict with Gbagbor Krahn originating from the area would be brought to the local traditional court, established and recognized by President Doe during a cultural event in the 1980s. Considering that the masks only speak the local Krahn dialect, those not from the area felt discriminated. In fact, it was difficult for them to present their case in the first place. As a result, the mere threat of bringing a case to the court was enough to settle disputes – likely in a manner favorable to the Gbagbor.

Bartel Jam offers a good example of how the societies and their masks not only judge cases, but even dictate laws. The Gbagbor

chiefdom was until recently largely an isolated and culturally homogenous area. This changed with the rise of the international gold prices, which led to migration of miners to the gold camps. As gold mining constitutes the main activity within Grand Gedeh's cash economy and as these strangers threatened to turn the Gbagbor (and other Krahn) into one of the many minority groups with the subsequent loss of power and standing, tradition became a way for the Gbagbor to maintain status quo and themselves as *primus inter pares*.

The Krahn identity thus became connected to a broader autochthony discourse (Geschiere 2009), which also drew inspiration from its more toxic variant across the border in Côte d'Ivoire: Because it was Krahn land it would also be the Krahn tradition and the Krahn laws that would be followed. Unlike in Sierra Leone where joining societies became a means for social integration (King 2016; Ménard 2017), this appears to have been impossible in Grand Gedeh. As a result, in Bartel Jam other groups were destined to remain second-class citizens after an Ivorian mask dictated a set of strict laws that forbade the non-Krahn from using the land for anything else than gold mining. This powerful intervention from the traditional side countered the rattling of the socio-economic order. The Krahn simply forbade the newcomers from exploiting the land, and thus monopolized economic activities such as farming, fishing, hunting, and tapping palm wine.

Years later, conflicts between local Krahn and outsiders continue to be taken to the traditional side, which understandably favors society members. Perceived coercive by strangers, this society intervention has done little to address the root causes of the conflicts. Ignited by violence committed by foreigners perceived to threaten the Gbagbor-led order, the society-led Gbagbor Krahn have repeatedly rioted, with escalation leading to more violence and even deaths. The deaths in turn finally resulted in police intervention, which forced a number of Gbagbor Krahn to escape

to other gold mining camps. This contributed to the widespread notions of the decline of Bartel Jam.

The Bartel Jam conflict and the presence of the autochthony discourse questions whether issues of identity and politics can be disconnected from each other when it comes to societies, as Ménard suggests has happened in Sierra Leone. After all, even she notes that the Poro practices were reactivated after the war as a way to establish political authority of a Sherbro political identity partially based on these practices (Ménard 2017: 43). At least in Liberia, societies are thus still connected to the kind of solidarity between society members, and stratification between them and others, identified by Simmel.

THE STATE CO-OPTATION OF THE SOCIETIES

Societies' role in local governance and especially conflict resolution is closely connected with the concept of legitimacy. When it comes to the societies, they exist because they are needed. This need arises on the one hand from the weak legitimacy of state conflict resolution mechanisms, and on the other hand from the weak state capacity, especially in many rural areas. Especially when it comes to conflict resolution, many Liberians remain between a weak rock in the form of the state and a traditional place. Yet the state is increasingly expected to take responsibility for certain tasks, such as education, health services and infrastructural projects, including electrification and road network. As already noted, even when it comes to conflict resolution, murder cases are always taken to state authorities, rather than customary courts. The state also intervened repeatedly in Bartel Jam, with police battling society members after the rioting by the Gbagbor Krahn.

Some informants have made an important distinction between the traditional law of the societies and the official government law,

which theoretically corresponds to the difference between Weber's traditional and legal authority. While in everyday life the two are experienced just as real in the sense that both the societies and the government can pass laws, it is clear that the societies are often more able to enforce them. This kind of efficiency alone supports the notion of legitimacy, which the tradition ultimately draws from the spiritual world. While not necessarily altogether competing, the tradition clearly enjoys more legitimacy (and with the exception of the military often coercive power) than the state. Despite the views that tradition has been used for personal gain and to suppress other people and especially strangers, my informants still perceive it to enjoy some checks and balances that contribute to a perception of its fairness, at least within their own communities.

While this kind of local legitimacy is certainly sought out by the state, it struggles to achieve it. For instance, the Gbagbor in Bartel Jam despised the local police commander, who was not only a newcomer, but more importantly one from Nimba County. Historically this local legitimacy also explains why the Poro authority derives from the society's control of land (Fahey 1971: 5), which continues to hold crucial importance in rural settings. In Grand Gedeh lineage elders who possess masks have also derived their prominence from their role as "guardians of lineage property", especially land (Brown 1979: 114-115). These kind of dual roles are common and central to the understanding of societies: "Leaders of secret societies often have important secular roles in society… locally, secret societies could be seen as the shadow structure of the chieftaincy but with political and security connections that go far beyond the geographical chiefdom. Herein lies the potential for peacemaking" (Jörgel & Utas 2007: 59). In other words, the societies effectively tie together authority, hierarchy, kinship and legitimacy in a manner the state struggles to match. This is the source of their legitimacy even in conflict resolution, which compares favorably against the state. It

is no wonder that the state has sought to co-opt and build on the societies' legitimacy.

ENTER THE STATE

The Liberian state has historically sought legitimacy through both supporting and co-opting societies in a way that makes it difficult to portray them as belonging to civil society. The close links between the two were for instance visible in April 2017, when President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf announced that she would arrive to Grand Gedeh as a part of the farewell tour that marked her last year in power. As she was posed to visit Konobo district, the superintendents of the county and the district both felt the need to clean the road there by "brushing" its overgrown sides. To implement the work the county superintendent announced that no government employee in the district would be paid before the road was cleared. As Liberian town, clan and paramount chiefs are on government payroll, they proceeded by mobilizing the grand devil. It soon announced three days during which the men in the various roadside towns would brush the road, or else be tied and fined. The government could only have achieved the same result through significant financial investment. Unable to contribute financially, the local government allowed the local communities the right of taxation – otherwise strictly a state privilege – of non-members during these three days. I too had to pay several drunken villagers on one checkpoint, allegedly set up to protect me and other uninitiated from the devil, whose howling I heard over our disagreement.

The Konobo example illustrates the seemingly seamless cooperation between systems of customary and modern governance. Yet attempts to co-opt local societies raises a dilemma left unexplored in literature on co-optation: how does a state instrumentalize institutions without destroying their local legitimacy, especially when these institutions must to some extent be viewed as criticism of this

very state? For instance, the fines imposed by societies are more often than not (in this regard the checkpoint mentioned above was beyond community affairs) measured in chicken, ducks, goats and cows rather than in money. This likely goes back to the Liberian state's imposition of hut tax in Grand Gedeh, which necessitated transition into money economy (Holsoe 2003: 51). Aside from criticism, the preference of livestock can also be explained by the way this livestock is often eaten together, which constitutes a reconciliatory act that builds and sustains group solidarity, again emphasized by Simmel.

It is clear that the Liberian state has sought to benefit from local legitimacy through its support to traditional leaders. One pertinent example is the way the chairman of the National Traditional Council (now the government-sponsored National Council of Chiefs and Elders of the Republic of Liberia, NTCL) noted in a resolution supported by the Carter Center (and hence Sweden and the United States) that "Traditional Leaders emphasized that they serve an important role as a conduit to transmit Government's policies to the local rural people" (Carter Center 2008). A law passed on 31 May 2012 gave NTCL autonomous and legal status, which it finally assumed six months later. Its functions include preserving, protecting and fostering positive Liberian traditions, cultural heritage and traditional institutions and assisting the government in peacebuilding, reconciliation and reunification at all levels. Every county in Liberia should have a representative in the council, and every county should also have its own subordinate council. In Grand Gedeh, the county superintendent has asked its traditional council to mediate in cases which involve local societies and the national police.

NTCL is thus a de facto instrument of the state, both on national and county level. Its pro-government stance became obvious in the conflict between the Salala Rubber Corporation and the local community in Margibi County where the company operates in. The

conflict started when the company's expansion of the plantation was met by resistance by the local community. Soon both firearms and at least one "country devil" (a mask) became involved. Despite the reports that hundreds of people participated in the protests led by traditional leaders and the devil, NTCL tried to ban the owner of the mask from performing and called the state authorities to criminally prosecute him as the perceived leader of the protests. All Poro and Sande activities were suspended, presumably in order to limit the economic damage where commercial companies operate. Interestingly the NTCL chairman was hired as a consultant by the company (Johnny 2012). This not only raises questions about his loyalties (and hence legitimacy), but also shows that the company believes that the he can help to resolve the conflict. While the owner of the mask was arrested, he was soon released by local authorities and disappeared from view.[4] This can be interpreted as proof of his local legitimacy, and the local authorities' fear of the consequences of his incarceration.

Another case where the government engaged a society came in 2012, when the female Sande society leaders in Liberia claimed that they had, at the Government's orders, stopped their activities – including the female genital mutilation (FGM). Interestingly the Sande society representative claims that they have given their land to Poro society so that men can use the land for the Poro activities (Allen 2012). This ban is a good example of an order that the Liberian government cannot enforce. In October 2013 I witnessed a Sande devil led to settle a disagreement between two women in Bomi County. As Julia Duncan Cassell, the Minister of Gender and Development, argued when explaining why the government couldn't simply ban FGM, "You can't just stop something that years and years ago your ancestors started. You have to be able to work along with [traditional leaders]" (quoted in Allen 2012). According to an international NGO

---

[4] Interview of an UNMIL officer, November 2013.

worker, President Johnson-Sirleaf herself has been open about her dependency on the legitimacy brought by traditional actors.[5] It is also possible that she was wary of interfering in "native" matters as an Americo-Liberian. Nevertheless, her governments did not attempt to enforce any bans on FGM (Fuest 2010: 24).

Considering that the state is often perceived to be only interested in extracting resources from the rural areas to the center, societies have also become a mean local communities can use to winkle out concessions from outside actors. Tradition can thus be employed to empower communities against outside interests to the benefit of the community. Valid grievances over unmet expectations and perceived government corruption that overrides local communities can thus be voiced through the sacred, which in the Salala case ended with the threat to unleash a country devil against the company. At least part of the public anger in this incident came from the accusations that the company had destroyed sacred bushes. As a result, upset country devils were roaming about the county. Resolving this problem would have required the sacrifice of three cows. But perhaps more importantly, the local community saw little benefit coming from the years of company presence (Sayon 2012).

From this perspective, it was the elders, a society and possibly one country devil that represented the interests of the community. It is regrettable that it was only through changing the rules of the game from the bureaucratic to the sacred that allowed the local communities to have any bargaining position against the government-backed foreign companies. Even more regrettable is that even in these cases the local communities' methods remain coercive. This is however an example of what can be described as politics of threat, where pressure through coercive action remains local communities' sole means of leverage.

The Salala case also raises the question whether too close involvement with the government and especially commercial actors undermines the legitimacy of these representatives of traditional leaders. Institutions such as the NTCL may fall to the same category as paramount chiefs, whom Sawyer would abolish altogether as counterproductive for self-governance (Sawyer 2005: 163). In other words, the process of state co-optation of institutions that enjoy local legitimacy is difficult if association with the state leads to losing this very legitimacy. The dynamics of co-opting institutions that enjoy traditional legitimacy by a state that ultimately builds on legal legitimacy remains an ill-researched topic in sociology, even if all states have likely engaged in such processes. Tightly connected to land and local identity, the societies have no room to expand, whereas the state continuously seeks to do so. In Europe, the importance of local institutions gradually diminished when confronted by strengthening states (Elias 2000).

Sawyer, the current Chairman of the Governance Commission, has managed to put some of his ideas into practice in the form of the National Policy on Decentralization and Local Governance, launched in 2012. It is yet unclear how much responsibility and means this policy delegates to traditional leaders: so far, its most visible effect has been the allocation of some funds to county development funds. These funds are controlled by the officials on county level, led by superintendents directly selected by the president. These same funds have also repeatedly been in newspaper headlines due to embezzlement accusations. These accusations have done little to instill trust in either local politicians or the government. If decentralization continues, it may one day reach clan chiefs, which would empower even local elders, and thus societies. Decentralization would of course make engaging these actors much more important, but also give them much more responsibility for conflict resolution.

---

[5] Interview of an international NGO program manager, June 2017.

CONCLUSIONS

Recent times have witnessed a trend in micro-level peacebuilding that involves religious and traditional leaders who possess local legitimacy deemed central to these processes. This article has discussed one set of local institutions, Liberian "traditional" societies. Because the literature concerning Liberian societies is largely decades old, it has missed the influence of the civil wars and especially the subsequent strengthening of the state. The local governance in Liberia must be seen as a part of the state administration, which currently employs paramount, town and clan chiefs. Because these same people are involved in societies, it is difficult to say where the state ends and the societies begin. This intimate relationship complicates, if not altogether questions, the deeply held notion that informal institutions are strong when the formal state is weak. In fact, the state influence has been so strong even in the distant county of Grand Gedeh that they can, at best, only be called "traditional" within citation marks.

The Liberian societies play limited, if any, roles in contemporary urban settings. Even in the semi-urban Zwedru, the county capital of Grand Gedeh, masks are understood to belong to cultural groups detached from the inherent political roles the societies continue to hold in the rural areas. Judging from reports of their commercialization (Ménard 2017: 44), it is possible that a similar fate awaits Sierra Leonean societies in urban areas. This said, the Liberian societies continue to enjoy legitimacy in rural areas because most community members have a stake in them. Many rural inhabitants nevertheless feel they have ended up in an unpleasant situation between a weak state and weakening traditions, where neither of the two can meet their perceived needs. It is thus likely that societies will continue to play important roles for years to come, while their diminished urban role suggests that they might ultimately be co-opted or displaced by the state.

This pessimistic view about the future of the societies stems partly from their conservativeness: the societies are tightly connected to land and local identity, and as a result have hard time expanding. The state in turn is a project that needs to do so, and in the process confront these kinds of competitors through either co-optation or dismantlement. This power is only available to states and not societies. Success nevertheless requires that the post-war upward trend witnessed in the power and legal legitimacy of the Liberian state continues, and allows it to cultivate belief in its legal legitimacy. With the departure of the UN peacekeepers and a plummeting economy in 2018, this upward trend is far from certain. More theoretically, the way states transform traditional legitimacy into something else remains a gap in existing literature, and warrants future attention.

In conclusion, this article advices caution when it comes to practitioners and intervening actors who wish to cooperate with traditional elders and societies in conflict resolution and governance. It is necessary to pay attention to the inherent cultural conservatism of traditional elders and societies, as well as any adverse effects for efforts to strengthen the Liberian state. Here it is also useful to remember that these actors are local. On the one hand, while they can make local communities brush the sides of a road, they will never be able to pave it. Such capacity is beyond their reach, and only available to the state (and in the case of Liberia, even then dependent on external actors). In the same way, the societies are closely connected to stratification, and are used to uphold a certain socio-political order at the cost of not only women and youth, but as illustrated through examples from an increasingly multi-ethnic gold mining area, especially those who do not belong to these institutions. This risks muting conflicts

without solving their underlying causes. The question remains whether it is possible to cherry pick the positive without the negative, or to enjoy their capacity in conflict resolution without supporting a gerontocratic and undemocratic social order, or to reform these institutions without spoiling their local legitimacy.

LITERATURE

Allen, B. 2012.
"Female Circumcision Temporarily Stopped in Liberia." PRI. https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-03-29/female-circumcision-temporarily-stopped-liberia.

Aretxaga, B., 2003.
"Maddening States." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (1): 393–410.

Bellman, B. 1984.
The Language of Secrecy: Symbols and Metaphors in Poro Ritual. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

Bledsoe, C. 1980.
Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Bourgois, P., 2003.
In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio, 2nd edition. ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Brown, D. 1979.
Domination and Personal Legitimacy in a District of Eastern Liberia. Phd. diss.: University of Manchester.

Brown, D. 1982.
"On the Category 'Civilised' in Liberia and Elsewhere." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 20 (2): 287–303.

Carter Center. 2008. "Resolution Regarding Critical Issues Facing Liberia and Its Traditional People as We Strive to Achieve Lasting Peace and Prosperity." http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/liberia/NTC-Resolution2008.pdf.

Contreras, R., 2012.
The Stickup Kids: Race, drugs, violence, and the American Dream. University of California Press, Berkeley, Calif.

Das, V., Poole, D, editors. 2004.
Anthropology in the Margins of the State. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Elias, N. 2000.
The Civilizing Process. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Ellis, S. 2007.
The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War. 2nd edition. London: Hurst.

Ellis, S. 2010.
"The Mutual Assimilation of Elites: The Development of Secret Societies in Twentieth Century Liberian Politics." In *Powerful Presence of the Past: Integration and Conflict Along the Upper Guinea Coast*, edited by Jacqueline Knörr and Wilson Trajano, 185–204. Leiden: Brill.

Fahey, R. 1971.
"The Poro as a System of Judicial Administration in Northwestern Liberia – Its Intraclan and Interclan Functions." *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 3 (4): 1–25.

Fuest, V. 2010.
"Contested Inclusions: Pitfalls of NGO Peace-Building Activities in Liberia." *Africa Spectrum* 45 (2): 3–33.

Flomoku, P., Reeves, L. 2012.
"Formal and Informal Justice in Liberia." *ACCORD*, no. 23: 44–47.

Fulton, R. 1972.
"The Political Structures and Functions of Poro in Kpelle Society." *American Anthropologist* 74 (5): 1218–33.

Geschiere, P. 2009.
Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion in Africa & Europe. Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press.

Gnielinski, S. von, editor. 1972.
Liberia in Maps. New York: Africana Publishing Corp.

Hoffer, C. P. 1975.
"Bundu: Political Implications of Female Solidarity in a Secret Society." In *Being Female: Reproduction, Power, and Change*, edited by Dana Raphael, 155–163. The Hague: Mouton.

Hoffman, D. 2011.
The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press.

Holsoe, S. E. 2003.
"Time and Place in Upper Grand Gedeh, Eastern Liberia." *Liberian Studies Journal* XXVIII (2): 29–64.

Højbjerg, C.K., 2007.
Resisting state iconoclasm among the Loma of Guinea. Carolina Academic Press, Durham.

Johnny, T. M., 2012.
"Liberia: Chiefs Suspend Traditional Bush Schools." *The News*. http://allafrica.com/stories/201210080727.html.

Jörgel, M., Utas, M. 2007.
The Mano River Basin Area: Formal and Informal Security Providers in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Analysis, Swedish defence research agency (FOI).

Liberian Ministry of Information. 2016. "Minister Urges Traditional Leaders To Join Peace Efforts." http://www.micat.gov.lr/index.php/blog/item/5129-minister-urges-traditional-leaders-to-join-peace-efforts.html.

Little, K. 1949. "The Role of the Secret Society in Cultural Specialization." *American Anthropologist* 51 (2): 199–212.

Little, K. 1965. "The Political Function of the Poro. Part I." *Africa* 35 (4): 349–65.

King, N., 2016.
"Freetown's Yoruba-modelled secret societies as transnational and transethnic mechanisms for social integration." In *The Upper Guinea Coast in Global Perspective*, edited by Jacqueline Knörr and Christoph Kohl, 58-73. Berghahn Books, New York.

Käihkö, I. 2012.
"Big man bargaining in African conflicts." In *African conflicts and informal power: Big men and networks*, edited by Mats Utas, 181-204. Zed Books: London.

Käihkö, I. 2016a.
Bush Generals and Small Boy Battalions: Military cohesion in Liberia and beyond. Phd. diss.: Uppsala University.

Käihkö, I. 2016b.
"Mystical and modern transformations in the Liberian Civil War." In *Transforming Warriors: The ritual organization of military force*, edited by Peter Haldén and Peter Jackson, 138-155. Routledge: New York.

Käihkö, I. 2018.
"Conflict Chatnography: Instant messaging apps, social media and conflict ethnography in Ukraine." *Ethnography*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138118781640

Mac Ginty, R., Richmond, O. 2013.
"The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace." *Third World Quarterly* 34 (5): 763–83.

Ménard, A., 2017.
"Poro society, migration, and political incorporation on the Freetown Peninsula, Sierra Leone." In *Politics and Policies in Upper Guinea Coast Societies*, edited by Christian Højbjerg, Jacqueline Knörr and William Murphy, 29-51. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Peters, K. 2011.
War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reed, D., 2003.
Dan Ge Performance: Masks and Music in Contemporary Côte d'Ivoire. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind.

Sayon, M., 2017.
"Liberia: Margibi Citizens Threaten SRC, But..." *The Inquirer*. http://allafrica.com/stories/201210301457.html.

Sawyer, A. 2005.
Beyond Plunder: Toward Democratic Governance in Liberia. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Schwab, G., 1947.
Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland. Peabody Museum, Cambridge, Mass.

Siegmann, W., Perani, J. 1976.
"Men's Masquerades of Sierra Leone and Liberia." *African Arts* 9 (3): 42–92.

Simmel, G. 1906.
"The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies." *American Journal of Sociology* 11 (4): 441-498.

United Nations General Assembly. 2012. "Strengthening the Role of Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, Conflict Prevention and Resolution. Resolution A/RES/65/283."

United Nations Peacebuilding Commission. 2011. "Peacebuilding Commission – Liberia Configuration Report of the PBC Delegation's Visit to Liberia, 12 – 17 June 2011." http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/cscs/lib/pbc_visits/stmt_pbc_mission_report_6_2011_f.pdf.

Waters, T., Waters, D, editors. 2015.
Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society: New Translations on Politics, Bureaucracy, and Social Stratification. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Weber, M. 1978.
Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. Vol. 1. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

Wood, E., 2006.
"The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones." *Qualitative Sociology* 29 (3): 373–386.