LBR105687.FE

Liberia: The Sande secret society, its activities, organization, leaders and consequences of refusing the role of leader; Sande’s power, its treatment of those who speak out against or oppose its practices; state protection for individuals threatened by Sande (2012-November 2016)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Sande and Secret Societies in Liberia

In a December 2015 report on traditional practices in Liberia, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) describes secret societies as follows:

[UN English version]

The Sande and Poro societies are the trusted custodians of “cultural” in much of Liberia and have been present in the region for centuries. These societies are traditionally believed to inculcate values and teach skills conducive to communal harmony and to prepare children for the rigors of adulthood. They also have a spiritual dimension, though they are not considered to be religious institutions as such, and most Sande and Poro members are also adherents of Christianity or Islam. (UN Dec. 2015, para. 14)


Sande and Poro have a presence in the north and the west (IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7; UN Dec. 2015, para. 15) as well as in central Liberia (ibid.). However, they have very little or no presence in the southeast (ibid.; IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7). There are other secret societies in that region, but they differ from the others in that the girls are not necessarily subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) (IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7; UN Dec. 2015, para. 16). A charity organization named 28 Too Many, which works to put an end to FGM, reports that 85 percent of the Liberian population is composed of Sande-practising ethnic groups (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 9, 31). Sources indicate that Sande is mainly active in rural areas (AFP 30 March 2012; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10). In addition, the UNMIL report indicates that individuals from the poorest segments of the Liberian population are more likely to be members of Sande (UN Dec. 2015, para. 8). According to the Demographic and Health Survey 2013, prepared by the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS), 49.8 percent of Liberians between the ages of 15 and 49 are members of Sande (LISGIS et al. 2014, 276).

1.1 Definition, Role and Activities

Sande’s role is to prepare girls for womanhood (Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 3; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). According to the sources, the initiation teaches them the following:
• how to become wives and take care of their husbands (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7; VOA 13 Oct. 2016);
• how to manage their homes (ibid.; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012);
• how to become mothers (IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7);
• correct sexual behaviour (VOA 13 Oct. 2016);
• social etiquette (ibid.; IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7);
• how to hold societal positions (Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015).

During the initiation process, they learn "secret[s]" that are not to be shared (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 20). For information about those secrets and Sande in general, please refer to Response to Information Requests LBR27521 from August 1997 and LBR38472 from March 2002.


1.2 Organization, Hierarchy, Operation


The Sande is hierarchically organized (Lavenda et al. 16 Feb. 2007 in Australia 6 Apr. 2009, sect. 1; Bledsoe 1980 in Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 6). The hierarchy is based on secrecy: the higher a person’s status, the greater the secret knowledge that is revealed to them (ibid.; Lavenda, Robert et al. 16 Feb. 2007 in Australia 6 Apr. 2009, sect. 1). It is also tied to age:

Young initiates are lowest in status, but have more prestige than the few people in their tribal group who are not members of the secret society, for many people believe that non-initiates are ignorant of important cultural secrets. [...] In general, the older people are, the more status they have in secret society, even if they do not hold office. (Bledsoe 1980 in Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 6)

1.2.1 Selecting Zoës

In Sande, according to B.L. Bellman, author of The Language of Secrecy [1984], a zoë’s power is hereditary and is passed from mother to daughter (Australia 12 June 2007, sect. 5). It is typically passed on to the eldest daughter, but the selection for the replacement may also take into account the child’s interest in and skill at working with “medicines.” (ibid.). Corroborating information or any information about the consequences for an individual who refuses to take on the role of zoë could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. The Relationship Between the State and Secret Societies

2.1 The Power of Secret Societies

The Sande and Poro secret societies are seen as powerful institutions (Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 3; Thomson Reuters Foundation 4 Aug. 2016) and “influential” (Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015; UN Dec. 2015, para. 15). The UNMIL report states that they are held in high esteem by the public because of their role in passing on values and skills from one generation to the next (UN Dec. 2015, para. 7).

Secret societies hold power over the communities, resolving disputes (International Crisis Group 6 Apr. 2006, i; Australia 5 Aug. 2009, 1) and condemning members who have defied established social norms (ibid.). In addition, the village’s important political decisions are made by the secret societies (International Crisis Group 8 Dec. 2004, 26; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012).

Some sources describe membership in a secret society as a condition for exercising power in your community (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 20; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). Families who opt out of secret societies are considered “sinners” and are “treated as outcasts” (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012). Only individuals who are members of the Sande and Poro societies can take part in decisions concerning the village (Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012).

International Crisis Group also reported in 2004 that since the zoës have considerable power and influence in the communities, politicians are using them to win support and legitimacy in rural areas (International Crisis Group 30 Jan. 2004, 21). They are also trying to become members of the secret societies
and control them (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to UNMIL, the chief Poro zoe is the head of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders (NCCE), the representative body of traditional authorities in Liberia (UN Dec. 2015, para. 20). The council is [UN English version] “highly influential” and is consulted by state authorities on all matters related to society; it plays an advisory role on internal affairs in the country and it is mandated to help the government maintain peace (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.2 The State’s Power over Secret Societies

UNMIL explains that in Liberia, two departments oversee secret societies: the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), which supervises the activities of secret societies and the NCCE, but the minister of which is second in authority (to the chief Poro zoe) with respect to cultural affairs; and the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism (MICAT), which promotes and preserves culture but does not oversee traditional practices or cultural societies (UN Dec. 2015, para. 21-22). Corroborating information or additional information about the state’s power over secret societies could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Sande’s Treatment of Individuals who Speak out Against or Oppose its Activities

During their initiation, Sande members take an oath not to reveal anything about what has taken place in the bush (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014; UN Dec. 2015, para. 18). They are forbidden from disclosing the practices of the secret society, at the risk of facing supernatural or physical sanctions (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 20). Those sanctions can even include death (Pulitzer Center 30 March 2012; UN Dec. 2015, para. 13 and 18). Non-members are also prohibited from discussing the secret society’s activities or attending them, under threat of various sanctions (ibid., 13). According to 28 Too Many, those sanctions can include forced initiation (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 21; AFP 30 Mar. 2012), while other sources mention FGM (AFP 30 March 2012; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015).

Sources indicate that activists and journalists who speak out against FGM or secret societies are putting themselves in danger (Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10). For example, Phyllis Kimba [head of the National Association on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (NATPAH) (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10)], had her house burnt down after she made a speech criticizing FGM before the UN (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10; PRI 19 Nov. 2012) in March 2012 (ibid.). Liberian journalist Mae Azango, who published a report on the Sande ritual of FGM in the Liberian daily titled Front Page Africa on 8 March 2012 (Front Page Africa 8 Mar. 2012), was threatened by Sande members (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; AFP 30 Mar. 2012; Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014). According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), she received anonymous telephone calls, was sought after at her home and at the newspaper, and her daughter was almost taken by force to be cut (AFP 30 Mar. 2012). According to sources, she received death threats (AI 13 Mar. 2012; PRI 19 Nov. 2012), and other sources report that she had to go into hiding (AFP 30 Mar. 2012; Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014; IFEECH 14 Oct. 2015).

UNMIL states the following:

During the reporting period, HRPS documented seven cases (involving 11 victims) of the Sande society forcibly initiating or attempting to forcibly initiate adult women. In at least five of these cases, FGM was used as a threat or as a punishment for perceived wrongs committed against Sande members. For example, in February 2012, in Tweh Town, Tappita District, Nimba County, five women were allegedly threatened with forcible initiation following an argument with two zoes. In January 2013, in Bacconee, District 5, Grand Bassa County, a woman and her three-month-old child were abducted, and the mother was allegedly subjected to FGM, allegedly in retaliation for insulting a Sande member. In July 2013, a 48-year-old nurse in Zuluyee Town, Nimba County, was threatened with forcible initiation and FGM for stating that traditional birth attendants should encourage pregnant women to use the local health facility in order to prevent maternal deaths. Her statement was reportedly considered an affront to Sande culture and tradition. (UN Dec. 2015, para. 63)

In January 2010, a village chief sentenced Liberian Ruth Berry Peal to undergo FGM and be forcibly initiated into Sande because she had an argument with some initiates (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 21 and 58; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). When she launched proceedings against the women who cut her against her will, her husband and children were threatened by Sande zoes because she had disclosed Sande secrets (ibid.).

4. State Protection
Liberia’s penal law criminalizes some activities that may be associated with traditional practices, including assault, kidnapping, felonious restraint, endangering the welfare of a child or negligent homicide (UN Dec. 2015, para. 41). Some of the secret societies’ practices are officially prohibited under Liberian law, including forcible initiation, sassywood and ritualistic killings (ibid., para. 39–41). Performing FGM on children or on adults without their consent is also prohibited by law (ibid.; UN 29 Oct. 2015).

However, sources indicate that secret societies, including Sande, act with impunity in Liberia (Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015; UN 18 Dec. 2015). According to UNMIL:

Despite the domestic legal framework prohibiting some of those practices, these and other harmful practices are largely left unaddressed by the formal justice system because they are widely considered as being part of the national culture and traditions. Hence these hinder the rule of law and the protection of victims. (UN Dec. 2015, para. 3)

In Liberia, according to some sources, there is a traditional system of customary law that operates beyond the official justice system with respect to issues involving culture and traditions (Australia 5 Aug. 2009; UN 29 Oct. 2015; UN Dec. 2015, para. 10). According to a Liberian lawyer, who cited the case of Mae Azango as an example, [translation] “there is nothing the law can do” when a customary law such as FGM has been violated (AFP 30 Mar. 2012).

UN agencies report that authorities hesitate to intervene in issues involving secret societies, for political (UN 29 Oct. 2015; UN in Australia 5 Aug. 2009) or financial reasons (ibid.). If they oppose them, they could lose votes (UN 29 Oct. 2015; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10). Others are simply scared (AFP 30 Mar. 2012; UN Dec. 2015, para. 18) or loyal, such as civil servants who are themselves sometimes members of these societies (ibid.).

Sources indicate that Liberian authorities have made efforts in recent years to try and provide a framework for secret society practices in order to curtail abuse, such as forcible initiation (UN 20 Mar. 2014, 13; UN Dec. 2015, para. 105). In 2012, the government announced a shutdown of Sande’s activities and stopped issuing permits that allow zoes to perform FGM (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 58; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012) in the wake of the uproar of the Mae Azango affair (ibid.). The NCCE recommended abolishing forcible initiation of children and non-practising adults (UN Dec. 2015, para. 106). These commitments were reiterated by the government in 2013 (UN 20 Mar. 2014, 13; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). However, in 2014, the United Nations Human Rights Council concluded that kidnappings, forcible initiation, FGM and bush schools were continuing, despite state protection (UN 23 Feb. 2015, para. 32–33). According to UNMIL, the guidelines issued by the government presumed that any prosecution would take place within the traditional justice system rather than the formal justice system since zoes may only be tried under customary law (UN Dec. 2015, para. 45). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to sources, in 2016, in order to have the new Liberian domestic violence bill brought before the House of Representatives, the ban on FGM had to be removed as it risked costing representatives votes during the 2017 elections (Front Page Africa 4 Oct. 2016; Thomson Reuters Foundation 4 Aug. 2016) and because it went against Sande interests (ibid.).

4.1 Examples

After her forced initiation and forced FGM, Ruth Berry Peal was able to take her attackers to court, thanks to national and international support, and they were convicted (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 21; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). However, they have never been arrested (ibid.). In 2015, the victim will still being threatened by Sande and, according to Equality Now, the state did not take any measures to protect her (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

With respect to the case of Mae Azango, which resonated internationally and resulted in a call from Amnesty International (AI 13 Mar. 2012), Liberia’s Minister of Information of Liberia ensured that all "necessary precautionary measures," including a police investigation, had been taken (The Daily Beast 23 Mar. 2012). He informed AFP that [translation] “the police were ordered to protect the journalist” (AFP 30 Mar. 2012).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References


Australia. 5 August 2009. Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT). *Liberia: Please provide information on state protection in Liberia. Would the police protect someone who refuses to be initiated into Poro (tattoos) by the family?* [Accessed 9 Nov. 2016]

Australia. 6 April 2009. Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT). *Liberia: 1. Please provide information on the Kpelle, including their traditional practices, and their location within Liberia. 2. Is conversion to Christianity and refusal to adhere to traditional practices a problem for Kpelle living in Liberia? 3. Please provide information on the NPFL and their use of child soldiers, including information on the peace agreement and their demobilisation. 4. Please provide information on passport procedures in December 2007 and whether it is possible to get a passport through connections or bribes. 5. Please advise if there is a special deal between Liberia and China re entry into and employment of persons. 6. Please provide brief information on the current political environment in Liberia.* [Accessed 9 Nov. 2016]

Australia. 12 June 2007. Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT). *Liberia: 1. What evidence is there of the existence of the Neegee Society? 2. Does the Society operate in particular provinces of Liberia and if so which ones? 3. Is there any information about the purposes or practices of the Society? 4. How are members of the Society recruited? 5. Is there any information on leadership of the Society? Is there a group of elders (Zoes) and if so how are elders selected? 6. Is there any documented evidence or research on recruitment and succession practices of any other secret societies in Liberia? 7. What is the attitude of state authorities towards secret societies such as the Neegee Society? Are people found to be members of such a society punished in any way? 8. How strong is the rule of law throughout Liberia currently? 9. Are state agencies able to protect people in rural areas? 10. Are refugees and others who fled Liberia or were internally displaced during the war able to return to their homes and reclaim property? 11. Would a person with no family be able to survive independently in Monrovia today?* [Accessed 9 Nov. 2016]


Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Action Aid Liberia; Equality Now; Forum for African Women Educationalists; Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices; Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation; Open Society Initiative for West Africa.

**Internet sites, including:** ecri.net; Fédération internationale des ligues de droits de l'homme; Freedom House; Human Rights Watch; IRIN; ReliefWeb; United Nations – Refworld.

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