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Cultural power, ritual symbolism and human rights violations in Sierra Leone

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Abstract: This paper explores the links between the socio-cultural power structures of the Poro and Bondo secret societies and their interactions with internationalist human rights discourse in postconflict Sierra Leone. It argues that these secret societies offer gendered and cultural spaces that serve as social and political mobilizing symbols. These societies further provide forums as well as a stage for counter-discourses about gender-based violence and human rights violations, particularly with regards to the campaign against female circumcision. The paper concludes that despite internal tensions and squabbles, the Bondo secret society has gained most of its present-day solidarity by broadly disseminating to both members and non-members the highly charged narrative that the society's exposure leads to its destruction. The Bondo society has been able to maintain cohesion and defend its interests by appropriating and invoking traditional knowledge and ritual codes.



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study examines how members of the male and female secret societies—the Poro and the Bondo that are significant in gendered personhood and socialization are increasingly misappropriating their culturally privileged positions and falsely victimizing and violating the human rights of non-members in the name of defending tradition whereas in reality they are defending and preserving their personal socio-economic and political interests within local power structures in Sierra Leone that are being threatened by the global anti-female circumcision discourse. To keep its shape in the face of criticisms that are partly associated with ritual female circumcision which is a quintessential badge of gendered personhood, Bondo members are forwarding the society as being under threat from outsiders including human rights groups. They have accordingly responded by invoking the force of tradition—traditional knowledge and ritual codes.

Subjects: Area Studies; Development Studies, Environment, Social Work, Urban Studies; Politics & International Relations; Social Sciences; Behavioral Sciences; Development Studies

Keywords: postconflict; secret society; female circumcision; tradition; modernity

1. Introduction

Scholars have pointed out that as the basis of socio-political life secret societies can play a preponderant role in reconstruction and development initiatives by acting as a mobilizing symbol in fragile post-conflict states (Archibald & Richards, 2002, Fanthorpe, 2006; Richards, 1993; 1996). Local level reality however suggests that the male dominated Poro and the women's Bondo secret societies which command a huge following among most Sierra Leoneans are being used to serve the personal interests of adherents leading to gross human rights violations and human insecurity because of weak state structures following the decade long civil strife (1991–2002) that embroiled the country and led to loss of individual and collective belonging. This misappropriation is a result of the patriarchal bargain based on mutual interdependence and collusion between these secret societies. Using the Soweil Council, the official voice of the Bondo secret society as a useful prism, this paper examines the use of cultural codes by members of the society to maintain cohesion in the face of the transnational condemnation of FGC by anti-FGC advocates and their local allies in Sierra Leone. The defense of culture (FGC) is a mask for perpetuating human rights violations by the Bondo secret society with the tacit backing of the Poro secret society.

In Sierra Leone, secret societies operate as an important site of political power, making decisions about how laws are carried out, as well as initiations. One of their primary functions is to promote solidarity within gender groups and age groups. Secret societies are a political institution and secrecy functions to keep the societies in tact (Shepter, 2004, p. 168). Inequality based on privileged knowledge is as old as human society. Secrecy serves as a device for communicating as well as a mechanism for creating hierarchy between the initiated and the uninitiated (Bellman, 1984; Ottenberg, 1989). Secrets are used to create social boundaries on the basis of sex and age, “with recognized and acceptable forms of behavior within them” (Ottenberg, 1989, p. 104). As William Murphy observes, “society is divided into two categories: “the one jealously hiding what it boasts of knowing, the other receiving with respect whatever is condescendingly revealed to it” (1980)(cf. Bellman 1984). The extensive work produced on secrecy by scholars of the Upper Guinea Coast (Bellman 1975, 1984; Berliner, 2005; Ferme, 2001; Murphy, 1980) attests to secrecy as a powerful resource linked to hierarchy, age, gender differentiation, to community creation and to the making of powerful spiritual entities and religious knowledge. Mende cosmology, Mariane Ferme eloquently states is characterized by “the primacy of the concealed in understanding the visible” (Ferme, 2001, p. 4).

Membership of secret societies is the prerequisite for gendered personhood and carries high purchase and social prestige in the local socio-political organization and in national politics in Sierra Leone. Secret knowledge and practice are quintessential elements for enhancing a big person's (a politician's) aura. Both secrecy and power are predicated on the relationship between the subject's concealed aims and their visible manifestations in the external world (Ferme, 2001, p. 162; Simmel, 1950, pp. 337–340). The social capital that is a corollary of secret society membership is however being used to settle personal scores with non-members and anti-genital cutting activists who are framed up as violating a particular secret society's code of conduct and therefore need to be punished. Although some aggrieved individuals constantly sue the Bondo for violating their rights, on many occasions, such cases have been frustrated or thrown out of judicial hearing. Most cases involving the secret societies have to go through a state counsel who decides whether or not the case can be heard in court. From the accounts of some of our respondents, it is clear that the state counsel has thwarted cases implicating members of the Bondo society either by endlessly deferring the cases in question or by having case files go missing. Some cases, moreover, are dismissed outright on the grounds that they might infringe state security. Public officials “shield” the Bondo from prosecution as a way of repaying the support Bondo gives to the government. Another example of how the state counsel frustrates cases became evident during a court hearing regarding a woman who

had been forcefully initiated by the Bondo members against her will. To make a strong statement, several activists from different organizations converged at the local court in Bo dressed in black and crowded out all others. Several different cases were heard that day but when it came to the Bondo case in question, the court prosecutor announced that the case could not proceed because the plaintiff's file was missing. This was despite the fact that lawyers for the complainant had been assured that the case would proceed since it had been adjourned several times before (Field notes 29/02/2009). During our fieldwork, a girl was raped in Bo on the pretext that she had said negative things about the Poro and therefore warranted punishment. During a meeting convened by the NGO that had "rescued" her aimed at mapping out strategies for effectively dealing with Bondo and Poro aggression, male officials (all of whom were Poro members) lamented the fact that the Poro society had been tarnished by the incident. These instances of shielding the Bondo and poro show that the state lacks "state hardness" (Forrest, 1988) to implement "tough" policy prescriptions such as upholding other women's human rights when such rights conflict with the operations of the Bondo society. The states' ambivalent position thus means that it is unlikely to enforce any anti-FGC law in a rigorous way. These human rights violations instead accentuated with the passing into law of the 2007 Sierra Leone Child Rights Act which bans female circumcision- the badge of Bondo membership-on a child less than 18 years of age. The rampant abuse of women's human rights we argue, have emerged because of greater public consciousness of human rights issues in postconflict Sierra Leone. Furthermore, the government is under huge pressure from foreign aid donors who have linked development aid to improvements in women and children's human rights. It might be stated that the human rights and human security concerns that have come to be associated with Poro and Bondo practices, are at least in part, also the result of social and attitudinal shifts within the broader society. Perceived from the perspective of changes in attitude, practices once tolerated or considered acceptable have become unacceptable. Novel discourses of human rights and human security propagated by foreign NGOs and their local allies have deligitimized once accepted practices. When perceived from this perspective, Poro and Bondo misappropriation can be framed as one dimension of a larger story of social transformation. But, how has the Bondo secret society been able to frame the terms of political debates around the 2007 Child rights Act, and to simultaneously maintain a united front from the powerful transnational anti-female circumcision alliance in the post war context in Sierra Leone?

This paper argues that the Bondo secret society has remained integrated despite tension by appropriating a combination of cultural codes and symbols, common knowledge (Chwe, 2003), interaction and interpenetration of discourses through networks (Ansell, 1997) as well as the use of both restrictive and elaborated linguistic codes (Atkinson, 1985). Although resistance to FGC is farmed in terms of the defense of culture, the real issue at stake is about the self-interested defense of social, economic and political interests. This defense of culture is of course a mechanism for masking grievous human rights violations.

We are deeply aware that FGC constitutes a human rights abuse. Nevertheless, both female circumcision and human rights are mutable invented traditions (Cowan, Dembour, & Wilson, 2001; Hernlund & Shell-Duncan, 2007; Hunt, 2007; Merry, 2001). According to Hunt (2007) modern human rights legislation originated from eighteenth century fiction. Extrapolating from novels, Hunt concedes that eighteenth century readers were reminded that all humans resembled them because they intrinsically possessed natural equal rights. To her, human rights are an "invention". New experiences, ideas and empathy, changing cultural practices as well as individuality and autonomy were created over time. The growth of new forms of empathy established the basis for the articulation of a whole set of human right demands. This new development is important, in relation to torture. Some critics of ritual FGC present it as a form of torture because initiates lack consent (Hunt, 2007, p. 161). Violations of human rights come into play when a certain practice is caused by, results in, or in and of itself constitutes, a human rights violation. The fact that the operation of FGC is typically carried out on children raises a series of questions under the rubric of international human rights doctrine, including whether these children are capable of giving informed consent. Other objections include the fact that FGC impacts on women's sexual response, and that participants lack the right

to make decisions about their health (Moore, Randolph, Toubia, & Kirberger, 1997, pp. 137–138; see also Merry, 2001). Respect for culture is misleading because the notion of a bounded culture is a fiction. Neither do universal rights exist, rights, “including so-called universal ones, and not natural and eternal but always emergent and historically specific” (Cowan et al., 2001, p. 27; see also Hernlund & Shell-Duncan, 2007). Culture is not rigid, stagnant and impervious to change; rather, it is exceedingly flexible, dynamic and shows great adaptability to changing times.

In Sierra Leone, the human rights approach is gradually gaining momentum. Since the human rights strategy engages the state apparatus and uses a broader framework that encompasses other basic human rights such as the right to education, freedom of association and so forth, it has captured the imagination of the communities being sensitised. There is intense local media scrutiny, local activism and human rights clubs in schools that have led to students (and, by extension, parents) using the language of rights. This has had the overall effect of opening up space for eradication efforts. Such efforts have also, we maintain, challenged the silence and secrecy hitherto associated with FGC and Bondo activities. In the context of resistance by Bondo society practitioners in the wake of FGC eradication efforts, the human rights discourse has been invoked leading to court proceedings premised on charges of violence against women. Indeed, the Sierra Leone police administration has developed a special wing to deal with domestic violence or other related crimes, called the Family Support Unit (FSU). The unit is partly sponsored by two United Nations (UN) agencies: United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It is under the ambit of this unit that crimes associated with FGC are reported.

The Bondo society members whose FGC practice is threatened by the eradication discourse have themselves turned to replicating the human rights paradigm by arguing that it is their human right to defend their cultural practice. On the other hand, anti-FGC activists responding to this development now argue that though it is the right of the Bondo to defend their culture, they must seek the initiates’ consent before performing the FGC ritual on them. Failure to seek consent, they argue, constitutes a violation of women’s rights or a breach of the recently enacted Child Rights Act which is punishable by law. What is thus highlighted here is an ambiguous situation in which different kinds of rhetoric and claims can be used and appropriated by different actors in complicated ways.

According to Anny Gaul, FGC is a “polarizing flashpoint in debates that occur at the intersection of culture, religion, gender, development, and human rights. The FGC challenge pits international (and often national) human rights standards against rights to cultural identity, centralized and intellectual vs. local and practical religious teachings and practice, and changing expectations about gender roles against realities of gender relationships as they are experienced at the family and community level” (Gaul, 2012, p. 5). According to international law, FGC is considered to be both a form of violence against women as well as a form of gender discrimination. It is seen as a violation of many provisions of both the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the right to life, the right to physical integrity, the right to freedom from violence, the right to health, and the right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of gender. The international human rights framework balances these claims with rights linked to culture: CEDAW, for example, mandates states to work to change discriminatory social and cultural patterns, implying the right of women (and men) to participate in a “process of social and cultural change” (Gaul, 2012).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: first we lay out the data elicitation method. Part two examines the relationship between secret societies and politics, while part three explores the co-existence and complementarity between these secret societies. This leads us to the various mechanisms the Sowe Council uses to enhance group coherence and coordination.

2. Methodology and theoretical framework

This study examines strategies of cohesion within the Sowe Council in the face of the international outcry and media frenzy around female circumcision in postconflict Sierra Leone. The study draws

on ethnographic methods: in-depth interviews, focus group discussion sessions, informal discussion sessions and participant observation. This combination of methods allowed us to explore the relationship between politicians and Bondo adherents as well as the relationship between politicians and the international community, within the context of post-war destruction and displacement in Sierra Leone. Through prior work experience as human rights activists with international organisations, we made contacts and met significant “gatekeepers”. These “gatekeepers” mediated our entry into the “field”. They subsequently introduced us to their local networks of friends and relatives.

Our aim was to understand the wider context in which the Bondo operates by taking local politics and socio-economic relations into account and in line with Smith (1987) to ground lived experience within its extra-local context. We conducted a multiple case study involving one ethnic community geographically located in the rural area but “extending out” to others in centres for internally displaced people¹ (IDP). Many people, including many Soweis of the Mende speaking community had relocated to the IDP camps in the capital city Free-Town during the war and were too traumatised to return to their homeland. In spite of the war being over, many have chosen to remain in the camps for internally displaced people. The multi-locale approach enabled us, in particular, to consider the effects of the recent civil war on core intrinsic practices of the Bondo society.

We therefore implemented ethnographic fieldwork in Bo and Freetown among the Mende and in various IDP centres where we also interacted with other Bondo practicing communities—the Limba, Themne, Kono, Susu, Sherbro, Fula and Kuranko ethnic communities. We chose to work in Bo primarily for logistical reasons: it has the largest cluster of Mende chiefdoms (we could access more people in the neighbouring chiefdoms and clans), and it is well networked by road transport.

We combined “convenience” sampling and purposive sampling (Bernard, 2006, p. 189). According to Bernard in purposive sampling, the investigator consciously decides which respondents are likely to serve in his study. Similarly Burns notes that purposive sampling is useful if it “serves the real purpose and objectives of the researcher by enabling him to discover, gain insight and understanding into a particular phenomenon” (2006, p. 465). However, to a limited extent the selection of the Mende ethnic community was based on a “sampling logic” focused on “those that are representative of the total population of similar cases” (Yin, 1994, p. 47). The Mende people are one of the most populous ethnic communities in the whole of Sierra Leone. In addition, the practice of the Bondo secret society is thought to have originated with the Mende (see Little, 1951; Walter, 1970). Our sample targeted both proponents and opponents of the practice of Bondo initiation.

Overall, we interviewed 70 people and held 5 focus group sessions over a period of nine months of anthropological fieldwork. The informants were comprised of: 56 women drawn from across all the age brackets (17–76 years). While 52 female respondents were members of, 4 others had renounced their Bondo society membership. Additionally, 22 Bondo society leaders (Soweis) of different ranks² (10 lived in IDP camps in Free-town while the other 12 resided in villages surrounding Bo) were interviewed. The other 30 Bondo members were women from various different “walks of life” (11 in Bo, 10 in IDP camps and 9 in Freetown). These included two current female members of parliament and eight other “politicians” (political party officials, journalists, civic government leaders like councillors and political appointees). Interviews were also conducted with fourteen men who were purposively sampled to address key aspects of the study such as the intersection between Bondo society and politics and the different forms of power accessible to Bondo members in community organisation. We were guided by Corinne Ann Kratz’s assertion that “women are not the only ones who create the practice and meanings associated with gender” (Kratz, 2008, p. 197). Similarly, the microstructure of everyday life, which is under women’s control, constitutes the foundation and invisible premise for macro structures controlled by men (Smith, 1987; see also Kandiyoti, 1988).

The interviews were complemented by participant observation. Following Bernard (2006, p. 189) the men were purposely sampled on the basis of their knowledge of the Bondo cultural practice in addition to their occupations which meant that they dealt with Bondo society issues in the course of

their work. Finally, we held five focus group discussion sessions with the main interest groups in relation to the practice: i.e. Bondo initiators, community leaders and NGO operatives championing the eradication of FGC in the research sites, as well as members of the wider public.

Generally, analysis was carried out at two levels: “individual-case” analysis and “cross case analysis” (Stake, 1995). Using these two levels, we identified patterns, consistencies and differences in what was observed and obtained from informants’ interviews and focus group discussion sessions. Following Edwards and Talbot (1994, p. 45), such an analysis “takes us beyond the notion of the case as illustrative” and allows us to look for “common themes and patterns to be elicited, hypotheses generated and theory generated”. This formed the general framework for analysis. Next follows an exploration of the intersection between the Poro and the Bondo secret societies and wider political dynamics including the double appropriation of the human rights discourse in regards to ritual female circumcision in Sierra Leone.

Faced with the wholesale condemnation of female circumcision as gender-based violence and a human rights abuse, and intense mediatization, the Bondo has responded with acts of aggression including forceful circumcision in the name of “defending culture”. This development, alongside the 2007 law that bans female circumcision on a child less than 18 years of age has led to a schism within the Bondo secret society. Despite differences in opinion among its members regarding the 2007 law, it continues to enjoy the support of the Poro in which most of the ruling male elites hold membership because of its symbolic power and high stake in local politics owing to its mobilizing ability. Despite tensions and crosscutting differences between various Bondo chapters, and its reliance on patronage with the Poro society, it continues to maintain cohesion and a united front, by appropriating a combination of common knowledge (Chwe, 2003), interaction and interpenetration of discourses through networks (Ansell, 1997) as well as the use of both restrictive and elaborated linguistic codes (Atkinson, 1985). The Soweï council which is the mouthpiece of the Bondo secret society mobilizes its members by constructing frames and through the condensation of symbols (Geertz, 1973, p. 79). These multivocal symbols are “dominant symbols” (Turner, 1986). The intersection between secret society membership and politics is best captured by the interdependent role of these secret societies in Sierra Leonean politics.

3. Secret societies, war and politics

The embers of the decade long civil strife (1991–2002) that embroiled Sierra Leone were ignited by pent up anger and frustration among the masses resulting from decades of exclusionary governance processes by successive kleptocratic regimes whose members privatized and siphoned off diamond proceeds with impunity (Zack-Williams, 1999). The war pitted the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forces against the government for control over political power and diamond. Various scholars have provided detailed ethnographic accounts and theories about the causes of the war (see Abdullah, 1998; Bangura, 2000; Clapham, 2003; Ian Smillie, 2000). This war witnessed the appropriation of local governance structures such as Chieftaincy, local vigilant groups and the Poro and Bondo secret societies as well as marauding youths.

In his analysis of the intersection between war, youth, and resources, Paul Richards maintains that Sierra Leone’s war epitomized a crisis of modernity. The country’s youth belonged to a modern, trans-Atlantic culture in which those in the remote diamond-digging camps watch Rambo videos and listen to BBC news. The youth appropriated these cultural resources by putting into practice what they had been watching for their war efforts. These teenagers who were soldiers and commanders saw their aspirations for schools and jobs dashed. Neopatrimonialism led to the government’s neglect of most of the countryside-leading to a crisis of youth alienation (Richards, 1993, 1996), unemployment and disenchantment. The RUF capitalized on the youth disquiet “ravaging Sierra Leone to its benefit by providing a social network and a sense of belonging for the masses” (Fogelberg & Thalman, 2004, p. 163). The youths were disaffected with the state and with local chiefs who controlled land and resources needed for marriage fee so as to establish a family and settle down. The RUF took advantage of this patriarchal oppression and recruited the youth with

which it brutally attacked the existing local governance structures, especially the Native Administrative architecture. In some cases, including the Moyamba District, chiefs grudgingly gave only barren land for the planting of annual and biennial crops—generally for subsistence—but not perennials. This suggests the preclusion of the youth from the more lucrative cash crops such as oil palm, cocoa or coffee which could effectively give long-term control over the land. Additionally, land with diamonds or gold were never given to the youth, except those that had already been mined for several years (Fogelberg & Thalman, 2004; Richards, 1993, 1996, p. 10; Zack-Williams, 1999) such as in the Kono and Tongo areas.

Both warring factions desecrated the sacred bushes of the Bondo and Poro secret societies for magical charms and their associated mystical powers for their respective war efforts, killed initiators, Paramount Chiefs and lesser chiefs. Local community members however protected their chiefs and herbalists who were shielded away from the rebels. Secret societies in conjunction with the locally recruited Civil Defence Forces provided physical security, law and order in the townships. The Poro and Bondo secret societies and all other social groups broke down during the war because of insecurity. Although initiation ceremonies were scarce during the war, they served as vehicles for mobilisation (Richards, 1996, p. 12). The war unleashed massive carnage, the abduction of child soldiers and “bush wives”.

As part of reconstruction efforts, Paul Richards has proposed the creative exploration of “Sierra Leone culture which has long developed ideas to limit the abuses of patronage [...] through the psycho-dynamics of initiation. This cultural creativity needs to be called back into play to explore new options to a moribund patrimonialism” (Richards, 1996, p. 162). During the war, Chiefs co-opted youths and women in their governance structures, a more participatory approach to governance that has persisted. Like in most of Africa, the state of Sierra Leone does not only maintain a direct relationship with its citizens as individuals, but this relationship is mediated through rural governance systems that were in place prior to colonialism and have greater legitimacy than the central state itself (Mamdani, 1996; Vincent, 2012, p. 9, 12). Though the war ended in 2002 the effects of the war were devastating and are still felt in present day Sierra Leone. Over 100, 000 people lost their lives in the war and over a million were internally displaced and still continue to live in internally displaced people’s camps (IDP). In a country of six million people³ (World Bank, 2014) that was bound to shake the stability of the society in a profound manner and for a long time. This brief cultural-historical background and the general dynamics and transformative effects of war is important for understanding the contemporary situation and the intersection between secret societies such as the Poro and the Bondo on one hand and wider political dynamics including the double appropriation of the human rights discourse in Sierra Leone on the other.

4. Gender symbiosis and the co-existence of tradition and modernity

Although both tradition and modernity are invented and mutable (see Ranger, 1983), Sierra Leonean politics is characterized by the co-existence of tradition and modernity as well as by a symbiosis between the main male and female secret societies. This implies that though men occupy major domains of power—women—in particular Bondo members—also appropriate some forms of power. The former and the later institutions socialize boys and girls into “desired” community members and ensure social cohesion. The Bondo whose *conditio sine qua non* for membership involves ritual female circumcision teaches women the art of home keeping, good social relations with in-laws, sex education, child-bearing and aspects of motherhood. Bledsoe maintains that “initiates were shown models of the male organ and instructed in sexual practices [] ... to facilitate future sexual relations with men”. She says: “a corollary of the female social solidarity argument is the contention that this solidarity is reflected in a symbolic emphasis in the Sande on femaleness and sexual isolation” (Bledsoe, 1984, p. 463). Bledsoe further notes that “mixing with the opposite sex is safer—and even demanded—when one is ritually prepared for it. Although secret society initiation seems to consist of rituals that render the individual more purely male or female than before, the purpose of this is to protect and buffer the initiate from potentially dangerous elements of the opposite sex, making eventual real mingling safer” (Ibid, 1984, p. 464; see also Douglas, 1966).

The Poro inculcates notions of family unity and community cohesion, the art of war and masculinity at large. Both secret societies therefore prepare young people for marriage since graduation from these secret societies has traditionally been the prerequisite for social adulthood among the Mende. Although the Bondo society is a space where members can meet and associate freely, the most significant forms of Bondo power are mainly available to the “privileged class”. In the Bondo affiliate secret society called *humui*, charged with the regulation of sexual control and behaviour, the woman in charge inherits this status through kin in a patrilineal descent. This implies that the powerful *humui* secret society, though headed by a woman, is controlled by the ruling class through patriarchal patrilineal descent. This resonates with EL Dawla’s view that “beneath the overt subordination to social norm the issue of female genital cutting is not just about mutilation but its core agenda that is usually hidden concerns aspects of social control and power that are engendered in the role of women in the society” (El Dawla, 1999, p. 129). In this regard, the female leaders of the *humui* only enjoy power as accomplices in upholding patriarchy and the patriarchal interests of the ruling class. Additionally, the *humui* secret society prohibits sexual relations between kin. However, in some cases “the Mende make exceptions through “family marriage” which is expressly meant to keep intact hereditary society secrets and medicines” (Little, 1951, p. 146; Phillips, 1995, p. 80). This is a further instance of how patriarchy co-opts some women by granting them privileges in order to maintain the status quo in which some women are given the semblance of autonomy and egalitarianism. In other words, the Bondo and the *humui* which are led by women, are in essence performing the role the patriarchal order wants it to. These societies retain power through hereditary paternal descent aimed at maintaining the status quo. It is clear that the Bondo is about personal economic and political gain to some adherents. This explains why they indulge in human rights violations to safeguard these privileges in the name of defending culture.

Although the Poro is an exclusively male institution, for a woman to become a paramount chief, she has first to give up her Bondo membership and be initiated into the Poro before she takes leadership. Although in some communities they are not members of Bondo/Sande, the highest ranking female member of the Poro society among the Mende is the *mabole*: her “... office... commands the highest respect and has an integral role in the ceremonial life and purpose of that association” (Little, 1951, p. 164). The *mabole* oversees initiation of boys and men into the Poro. The Bondo Soweis therefore hold leverage in the local political economy by virtue of the role they play in the preparation of girls for marriage (Phillips, 1995, p. 164) thereby ensuring both biological and social reproduction.

The displacement ushered in by the civil war has been both a blessing and a curse for the Bondo secret society. Before the war, sponsoring Bondo society initiation was a kind of symbolic status signifier to men who enriched themselves through the then lucrative diamond deals and initiates were spoiled with gifts. In the face of abject poverty, Bondo initiations constitute an important economic resource since there are limited economic opportunities available to the huge numbers of internally displaced, female-headed households/most of whom lack marketable skills. Many of the other avenues of raising income like prostitution are not appealing especially to women well schooled in Bondo ethics. The Soweis charge a fee for initiating girls into the Bondo and are also given foodstuffs by the parents of the initiates.

Traditionally, Soweis were normally “elderly” women, at-least in their 40s onwards. The rush for Soweis credentials has led quacks becoming Soweis and the Bondo has lost its intrinsic value and significance as the practice has now been compromised and reduced to a ritual cut. It might be suggested that the social upheaval orchestrated by the decade long civil strife has brought to the fore the notion of individual and community identity and old traditions have been adapted to the new context. This is the case even when all traditions are invented. The notion of authenticity has been determinant in forming this new tradition-helping to define the categories of “authentic” and “fake”-traditional soweis. Following Eric Hobsbawm (1983, p. 5) “invented traditions” denotes “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values or norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, as Morrison Cecily points out, where possible, they normally attempt

to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” ... “... invented traditions are not spontaneous group expressions, but, rather, a calculated expression by one person or group to promote a desired set of values” (Morrison, 2007, p. 5). This conflict of interest between “legitimate” Soweis and so-called “parvenues”, “authentic” and “fake”-traditional soweis has further made the Bondo a site of political struggle because of tension within the society itself. Additionally, the post-war context created a situation in which the Bondo becomes part of a wider political context, filling in-to some extent—for a broken or absent national public sphere, so that again, the practice becomes “about” more than just its “normative” meanings. Stated otherwise, the practice has ceased to be one which is undertaken for its “intrinsic” cultural reasons, and is now undertaken more as part of a deliberate political struggle. Although the economic plight of the Soweis and the deterioration of standards of the ritual practice in the Bondo society culminating in harmful health effects is blamed on the recent civil war, there is some tension here. On the one hand, there is a claim of only training Soweis who have a real “vocation”; on the other, there is an immediate accounting of the actual capital at stake. Although there are those still guided by the pursuit of intrinsic significance of the Bondo, individual economic needs and interests of the Soweis in contemporary post-war Bondo practice are so pressing to ignore. Although the effects of war are often more magnified on women, they are not solely victims of wars. Isiaka Badamus de-emphasizes the victimary view and presents information on the wide variety of women’s involvement in conflicts. Although decision-making about war is often the preserve of men, women are involved in many other roles in the field (Badmus, 2009). During the Sierra Leone civil war, culturally established gendered roles were taken “and ... newly combined by and within the roles of women participating in combat and in service roles. These new combinations employed as protection or coping mechanisms, could foster a shift or challenge, but no substantial change” (Badmus, 2009; Schroven, 2006, p. 47). War significantly transformed gender relations and the balance of power. Women became breadwinners, gained leverage over household decision-making, became more active in rural economy than prior to the war. They subsequently became vocal in demanding equal rights with men “in parental decision-making, property holding and political representation” (Brown, Fanthorpe, Gardener, Gberie, & Gibril, 2005, p. 9). They are increasingly challenging the oppressive features of customary law—particularly the infliction of corporal punishment by a man on his wife and children. Women now have a more proactive role in NGOs and advocacy organisations, but not in government and the private sector.

Additionally, displacement has paradoxically opened a new window of opportunity for the Bondo to access political leverage in parliamentary and presidential election campaigns thereby making the Bondo to be much sought after by politicians. Traditionally, the mandate and some forms of political power and leverage available to the Bondo were mainly confined to rural villages. Although often practiced in cities, with displacement the Bondo is now significantly practiced in urban areas and cities. In King and Albrecht (2015) exploration of a particular variety of urban secret societies, the Odelays, and their central role in making order in Freetown, they demonstrate the security functions of the Odelays which encompass working in collaboration with the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) in apprehending criminals, investigating and solving crimes, at times through their expansive social networks. Furthermore, the Odelays give members a position of authority from which to engage with centres of power. Members are able to use their gatekeeper function to negotiate relations with state representatives and expose the limits of the state’s reach. The urban context has “exposed” the Bondo to media, contemporary political public discourse, technology and access to other social amenities not available in the villages. Because of their influence among women voters who constitute 56% (CIA, World Fact Book, 2010) of the electorate, the Bondo has emerged as an influential political block especially in electioneering campaigns. According to interlocutor’s accounts the current president has visited their camps severally and directly wooed them to vote for him in general elections. A recent survey conducted in Sierra Leone showed changed attitudes and beliefs to political participation owing to the effects of the civil war (Bellows & Miguel, 2009).

Postconflict Sierra Leone witnessed an unprecedented mushrooming of Civil Society Organisations who quickly aligned their projects, concepts and programmatic approaches to international agendas including good governance, women’s rights, particularly the education and sensitization of

women against female genital cutting operations, and democratic reforms (Pemunta, 2011, 2012a, pp. 196–197). One unfettered effect of the ensuing local-transnational alliance of human rights NGOs has been accusations of complicity in denigrating “culture” by Bondo adherents who are often shielded by members of the Poro society leading to the double appropriation of women’s human rights. Despite contradictions, there is the coexistence of African and European cultural and ethical paradigms in the human rights discourse. The African and the alien should thus be perceived “as having equal importance in affecting the process of change because they are historical and contemporary realities. Each value system is capable of enriching the other” (Kigongo, 2002, p. 54). Those who contest the universality of human rights frame their arguments in terms of “resistance to Westernization” and therefore as a form of opposition to universalism. They point to the need to protect cultural values including ritual female genital cuttings from perceived negative Western influences. Women’s rights and their claim to equality are one key area of disagreement. A number of African countries have also “excluded a range of cultural practices from the ambit of anti-discriminatory provisions” in their constitutions. While cultural relativism is most often used as a defence to the infringement of women’s rights (Grant, 2006, p. 2), FGC is clearly a human rights violation. The debate between human and individual rights as well as universalism in Africa is because “more emphasis is on the collectivity, not on the individual: we do not allow that the the individual has any claims which may override that of the society ... obligations to other members of our society rather than or claims against them” (Ake, 1987, pp. 83–84; see also Pemunta, 2011, pp. 59–65).

The debate between universalism and relativism in the field of human rights is premised on a fixed and abstract conception of both culture and rights. The debate focuses on the relative merits of adopting a universal system of rights in comparison to protecting cultural diversity. When presented as such, the debate becomes one between culture and rights, in which the natures of both appear uncontested and self-evident. However, both concepts are fluid and changing, theoretically as well as empirically. (Merry, 2001, pp. 31–32)

Both culture and human rights are not static—they are continuously evolving and undergoing re-definition. Similarly, Hernlund and Shell-Duncan (2007) also contest the popular notion that human rights is a Western construct imposed by First World countries on the rest of the world, arguing that human rights has relevance and robustness to all humanity. They further argue that “a human rights culture” has become the plank of global culture and that cultural relativism should not be taken too far or allowed to become an excuse for abuse. But neither should human rights be allowed to privilege one culture over another. They further question whether FGC is best approached as a human rights issue. We maintain that FGC is a human, gender, and development issue that requires a holistic, multi-pronged, development approach (see Pemunta, 2011, 2012b). Support for the doubt of FGC as a human rights issue may be found in the fact that the vilification of a practice that can follow its labeling as a human rights violation can impede or halt scholarly inquiry, as Carla Makhlof Obermeyer shows when identifying the scarcity of medically objective inquiry into its side effects (Hernlund & Shell-Duncan, 2007; see also Merry, 2001).

The issue of FGC juxtaposes the local and the global: local knowledge confronts western science/medicine, the debate collapses the local, national and international spheres as captured by the human rights lens, the gulf between culture (as community rights) and individual autonomy, cultural relativism and ethnocentrism, racism, western imperialism, medicalization, sexuality and patriarchal oppression of women (Gruenbaum, 2001). It further shows how interventions/NGOs work and how discourses on human rights can be used in a way that evades cultural specificity or take the standards of one culture as universal when in reality, they are not. The tension between culture and rights is instantiated by the intertwinement between the Bondo and Poro secret societies.

5. Interdependence between the two secret societies

Interdependence between these secret societies is based on “patriarchal bargain”. Although collaboration between the Poro and the Bondo offers women some forms of power, they are actually serving the interests of the patriarchal order. Members of both societies however use their position

to evade the law and go unpunished for human rights violations in the name of “defending culture” whereas, they are actually defending their individual political interests and ensuring dominance in local politics.

The Chief grants permission for the construction of Bondo bushes and enforce Bondo laws. In return, he is rewarded with tasty food during the “coming out ceremony” of initiates. He also depends on proceeds accruing from initiations and fines for the breach of Bondo laws to service his administration. Fees levied by the chief on Bondo include “marriage fees” and Bondo licence certificate fee. On their part, the Bondo charge initiation fees to initiates, they also fine people who break Bondo laws either by invoking their secret ritual curse against the person or ask the Chief to enforce the fine. In some cases family members and friends of a victim of Bondo charges will lobby the chief to plead with the Bondo leaders on their behalf. Inter-dependence between men and women in the community is also attested by the office of the mabole that is integral in the Poro but traditionally occupied by senior Bondo leaders. Though the Bondo operates within a patriarchal order, the women manage to access some forms of power through what Kandiyoti (1988) called a process of patriarchal bargain: women create bargain arrangements with patriarchy in their communities to improve their life chances.

Standard wisdom holds that nobody can gain any significant leadership position in places where the Poro and Bondo is practiced without first becoming a member of the secret society (see also Bledsoe, 1984; Little, 1951, p. 7; Phillips, 1995). Madam Bangura—a female presidential candidate in the 2007 general election— who initially worked for an anti-female circumcision NGO—was roundly opposed on the grounds that she did not support the Bondo society. In emphasizing the importance of Poro membership, Bledsoe, points out that a man “cannot marry, reproduce, own property, hold political office, participate in meaningful political discussions, or even be considered legally responsible for his own acts” without membership of this male institution. For a woman to have a very central role to play in this powerful male institution, is indicative of the forms of power and leverage women also have in this patriarchal arrangement through prior participation in the Bondo. Even among “ordinary” Bondo and Poro initiates, there is a mutual understanding and reciprocal respect. Today both Sande and Poro complement each other in the task of instituting and protecting social roles and values. Although the organisational structure varies in Sande society, there are generally, lodges, and headed by a Soweï from the Sowo rank, who is viewed as arbiter, teacher and healer of women (Hackett, 1998, p. 113). Additionally, patriarchal bargain is employed in the institution of the chieftaincy, the main governing body of any formal settlement in rural or village areas. While some of the Bondo laws are enforced by the chief, he also relies on the Bondo to consolidate his chieftaindom.

Secret societies are very central to the running of the chieftaincy. Besides the tax they generate; the chief occasionally consults with the Soweï on issues relating to women in regard to governance. The Soweï further exercise some power based on their knowledge of traditional healing herbs. This knowledge is sought after by both men and women across the society including powerful men like chiefs and other leaders. Phillips argues that “Just as Sande depends on the goodwill of men so also do men rely on the cooperation of women of the bush”. She further observes that the Sande, though exclusively for female members, ultimately depends on the cooperation of the dominant men (1995, pp. 107–108). By teaching their initiates to respect their husbands, they are thereby producing patriarchally inspired desired femininity for their initiates, imbuing them with ritual fertility, and guaranteeing the prospects of marriage. In return for bargaining with patriarchy, the Bondo Soweï and women giving birth, enjoy some form of recognition and dignity in the society by being treated as warriors.

Bondo leaders often use the control they exercise over initiates and their families to align themselves to powerful people like land owners and leaders in the community. It has been reported that the renowned Mende female chief called Madam Yoko, used her dual positions as a Soweï and paramount chief to consolidate her rule by “select[ing] all the best young girls in her area to enter her Sande bush, and dispos[ing] them in marriage to important men who would help in her own advancement” (MacCormack, 1974, p. 183 in Bledsoe, 1984, p. 462). In contemporary Sierra Leone, the Bondo leaders form alliances with politicians for personal gain by exploiting the Bondo ideology of

female solidarity and sodality. An alternative view of Sande has been espoused by Bledsoe (1984) who argues that rather than reinforcing women's solidarity, Sande elite often side with elite men and exploit subordinate women (see also Hackett, 1998, p. 115). Bledsoe argues that the Bondo leaders strategically "manipulate resulting dualities" of Bondo teachings that span the domains of desirable, undesirable and dangerous for political and economic gain (1984, p. 466).

Sierra Leone ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in June 1990 as well as its two optional protocols (on the sale of children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography) and in May 2002 (On the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict). These commitments were subsequently enshrined in national legislation through the 2007 Child Rights Act—which supersedes all other national laws and is considered in tune with the Convention and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Fogelberg & Thalman, 2004). Although the 2007 Child Rights Act empowers civil society activists campaigning against female circumcision, the Bondo society has responded to this new development and the media exposure of the society through passive resistance, violent protest to collaboration or pseudo-collaboration. They present themselves as the sole "authentic" voice of the Bondo society—but also disparage any other information in the media about the Bondo unless it has been sanctioned by them. These varied responses depend on the complexity of the issues at hand. In what follows we explore different ways in which the Soweï council coheres its members and presents itself as the representative and defender of the Bondo tradition across Sierra Leone. First, we examine the origin, organisational structure and the functioning of the Soweï Council.

5.1. The Soweï council

This paper seeks to examine the different ways through which the Soweï council coheres the group and presents a common front in their claims of resistance against the impact of anti-FGC discourse and changes brought about by the Child Rights Law in particular. The Soweï council was born after a brain-storming workshop held in 1993 at the Yin Yu building in Freetown spear-headed by, amongst others, the prominent anti-FGC activist and author, Koso-Thomas. In that workshop, to which key Bondo society officials were invited, the Soweï said they would not stop the practice. Faced with accusations of harmful health effects and human rights violations associated with the practice, the Soweï in attendance saw the need to rally their fellow Soweï across Sierra Leone to form an umbrella body in order to articulate their position and "defend" the Bondo against the challenge posed by people like Koso-Thomas. Koso-Thomas, according to one Soweï council member, was a Krio and therefore "knew nothing about the "Bondo". This does not suggest that people are unaware of the existence of Bondo, rather, the Bondo is secret in the sense that the society is a repository of gendered knowledge that can only be revealed to certain categories of members, but never to non-members. Most often, "elders control secrecy, and in particular the secret knowledge of medicine, in order to reproduce their power" (see also Bellman, 1984; Little, 1965; Murphy, 1980). The Soweï council was thus conceived as a mouth-piece for the articulation of Bondo society concerns and as a means of fending off criticisms levelled against the Bondo society. At the same, clearly, it was developed in response to a perception that the means for making such a case in the Sierra Leonean public required a new kind of organisational approach.

The Soweï council positions itself as a medium for counter discourses to the anti-FGC rhetoric channelled through the media, NGO-sponsored workshops and in public discussion. Stated otherwise, the Soweï council is deliberately trying to match the media strategies of those opposed to the practice (especially INGOs/NGOs activists), by giving the adherents of Bondo society a "formal" public presence. Accordingly, the Soweï council, just like anti-FGC activists, engages the media and is open for invitations to conferences and workshops where its spokeswomen articulate the "Bondo side of the story on FGC" in Sierra Leone. One key point of contention from the Soweï council's perspective is the perception that concerted "exposure" of FGC in the media constitutes a form of abuse. This perceived attack has been met with anger, violence and aggression by Bondo loyalists. The idea of being "exposed" in the media has been turned into a kind of symbolic call to arms in order to galvanise members by the Soweï council. During a consultative focus group to engage the Soweï council on the implications of the Sierra Leonean Child Rights Act, we came to understand that the

Sowei council was registered with the Ministry of Social Welfare. The council, registered as a Community based organisation had therefore legitimated its position and engagement with the government through registration. It also has a clear organisational structure comprising twelve different locations in Sierra-Leone.

The Freetown Sowei council is vested with the role of coordinating the membership of the Sowei council across the country. It is mainly charged with articulating public responses to issues pertinent to the Soweis. Any binding decisions are arrived at after careful and engaged consultation with other Sowei council chapters from different parts of the country (Field notes). For instance in a different focus group in which a group of human rights based NGOs approached the Soweis in regard to making a public declaration to stop initiating girls below the age of eighteen years, the Soweis in question stated that they had to contact all the members of the Sowei council from all regions in Sierra Leone before agreeing to such a deal. One of the participants said:

That is why we should have declared saying we are not speaking on behalf of the Sowei council. On that we have to hold a separate meeting and send messages to the 12 zones of the Sowei council, we can't just take decisions on behalf of them without their knowledge. (Focus group 4 discussion with Mende Sowei's in Bo and NGO officials. Focus group held on the 12 February 2009)

The Sowei council is, therefore, structurally organised around a consortium of Soweis from different parts of the country, especially those living in the capital city. The leadership comprises a Sowei council president, vice-president, a public relations officer (PRO), an organising secretary and a treasurer. The headquarters of the Sowei council are at a location in Free-town next to what is said to be the oldest Bondo bush, having been in existence, reputedly, for over a hundred years. The bush is a place shrouded in secrecy. Like in the Poro and typical of other secret societies, Bondo members have a variety of strategies for preserving the "secret" of their society. For example, Bondo activities are typically shielded from normal view by being located in the bush, behind high fences, protected by medicines hung from the leaves of trees (Little, 1965; Murphy, 1980). Members of the poro inner circle meet in the forest: "the area of greatest secrecy, privacy, and mystery" (Murphy, 1980, p. 197). There are Sowei council branches all over the country which are normally located in designated Sowei council member's homes. The age of the leaders of the Sowei council, ranges between 48 and 72 years. A number of the Sowei council leaders were said to be literate and experienced in canvassing. Many are used to attending workshops and symposia on the issue of FGC in various contexts. The spokesperson of the Sowei council said:

From 1993, when the Sowei council started, it is just that I have forgotten the pictures at home, I should have showed you people, the time that we went to state house, we told Koso-Thomas to stop talking about Bondo. (Sowei council PRO)

Though the objective of the meeting was to deliberate on the implications of the Child Rights Law on the Bondo, this came immediately after a Soweis' protest in Kenema (South-Eastern Sierra Leone) hardly two weeks previously. The protests in Kenema were marked by pandemonium. The show of resistance against the anti-FGC message culminated in a local journalist, thought to be the presenter of the FGC zero tolerance programme on radio, being humiliated in public.

In the course of the meeting, the Sowei council PRO was in charge of proceedings. She was a confident and well-spoken lady of middle age. She started off by introducing officials of the Sowei council present at the meeting and referred to some of the objectives of the Sowei council:

In 1993, we formed the Sowei council. It was formed for occasions like these where everybody will be found. We will all be able to support each other in times of funerals and other things. It is not just about the Bondo all the time, so that was why we formed the council then to take over all control over all things (our emphasis). In 1993 we attended a seminar at the Yin Yu building for seven days. The Chinese doctor told us what he wanted and we in return told him what we wanted. But because our people are now part of this, they

are now trying to fine tune it again (the Child Rights Act of 2007). They are trying to destroy everything because they like telling more than what they should do. They did not call us. We were just hearing it on radio. We were going to these radio stations to respond. I heard a program on CTN/UN radio [according to the Bondo members, it is this program that led to Soweï members in Kenema to harass one journalist who works for CTN/UN radio] and I went to their offices at the campus⁴ and told them that I wanted to respond to that program. (Transcribed record of the events)

The advent of the war and of anti-FGC campaigns is seriously changing the way in which FGC is practiced. Parents increasingly initiate very young girls, partly as an act of “resisting” the anti-FGC discourse, but also in order to save on the cost of initiation.

The Bondo has changed such that now unlike in the olden days, some parents initiate young girls so as not to be blamed by their ancestors in case they do not initiate their daughter if FGC is outlawed. It is also thought that initiating young girls is cheaper than initiating mature girls when it comes to dressing them up in the coming out ceremony. The young girls are the ones who have exposed the society but girls who are mature have some sense and they do not reveal society secrets (Interview 46 on 18/02/09 with Soweï aged 36 of Mende origin but living at an IDP camp). If you initiate a kid, they [parents] are afraid of the expenditure that is why but if she is grown up, they have to spend lots of money. (proceedings of Soweï council consultative meeting)

The Soweï council thus seeks to co-ordinate and “control” activities of the Bondo society in light of opposition from anti-FGC activists but also in the context of these changes to the political economy of the practice. The Soweï Council has come to be seen as something akin to a “safe-house” from which the female initiators respond to criticisms levelled against their practices. Such responses take on different forms including passive resistance, violent protest, as well as forms of collaboration. To effectively “defend their culture” or “resist” the anti-FGC rhetoric, the Soweï council endeavours to appeal to its members by claims about tradition. This is done by the Soweï council insisting in their discourse that they represent the sole “authentic” voice of the Bondo society. Indeed, one respondents stated that, the Soweï council is central in administering Bondo sanctions.

If we get to know someone who has come spying into the Bondo bush, before doing anything we will first report the matter to the chief and the chief will call the family members and tell them that your child has offended the society. If the family wants peace, they will come with the child who visited the bush when she was not allowed because she is a non-initiate, then they will be asked to pay money to the Soweï council. Normally the Soweï council is the last/final stage where they will pay. (interview 24 on the 01/07/2009 with Soweï aged 47 living at IDP)

They also dismiss any other information in the media about the Bondo unless it has been sanctioned by them. The emergence of the council thus raises questions, not only about relations between the Bondo and non-members, but also about authority and control within the Bondo itself. The ideology of secrecy is integral to community organisation and politics in Sierra Leone. Geog Simmel has argued that “in larger groups, secrets are needed because everyone is so different” (1950). Simmel’s point is that the secret becomes a factor in shaping and ordering relationships. It is thus not simply shame which provokes anger at interrogation into the Bondo, but a sense of the need to protect an ordering aspect of social life. However, institutional secrecy causes tension because without the secret, the society becomes unstable. Next we explore the different ways in which the Soweï council seeks to cohere its membership and present itself as the representative and defender of the Bondo tradition across Sierra Leone.

6. Enhancing group coherence and co-ordination

Owing to the differences in the way that the Bondo society is organised across different regions, the Soweï council officials frame their language in such a way that these crosscut regional differences in order to enhance co-ordination. Thus, much of the discourse in the Soweï council gravitates around issues of tradition, culture and ancestry. The position of the council is presented and legitimated as “authentic”, “local” or “African” in regard to FGC and Bondo society operations. This is done in such

a way that any information from the radio or, indeed from anti-FGC actors such as Koso-Thomas, is represented as misguided or as, in some respect, “inauthentic”. At the same time, of course, appeals to traditional authority or “authenticity” are also appeals about internal unity. The question, then, is how does the Soweï council manage the regional differences in the way the Bondo is practiced in order to present itself as the legitimate voice of the Bondo “resistance”, while at the same time mobilising effectively against the powerful international discourse regarding FGC practice? We suggest that this is done through the generation of what has been called common knowledge (Chwe, 2003), and through the interaction and interpenetration of discourses through networks. Below we draw arguments from symbolic communication to conceptualise the strategies of the Soweï council.

Chwe’s (2003) analysis of what he calls “common knowledge” shows how collective action takes place, and the extent to which individuals offer to participate in something precisely because they know that someone else is also participating in it. He points out that public rituals, close reciprocal interactions, networks and repetition in discourse are crucial elements in shaping “common knowledge”. Using the example of corporate bodies, Chwe argues that multinational companies pay huge amounts of money to advertise in the most popular TV broadcasts. The logic of paying premium prices in order to secure an advertisement slot in such TV shows is that they are effective translators of “common knowledge”. In the same way, Chwe points out that the key texts of public ritual, such as national anthems, are punctuated with repetition, which also serves to generate common knowledge. Such aspects of “common knowledge” creation are evident in the Bondo Soweï council operations and discourse. For instance, the Soweï council PRO’s opening statement during the consultative meeting appeals directly to the notion of a common knowledge:

This place we are meeting is called K. This is where the women live and base. There is no woman living in this area that does not know this place. I am the PRO and my name is P. I am also called W. In the council, we are here with our president and the vice-president is living at XY (the members clap). We also have our chairlady madam B, our assistant PRO, our organizer, the treasurer and a dignified Soweï council member aged 72 years (people laughing). So all these people belong to this place. (Soweï council PRO)

One can see here how these opening statements are aimed at creating a sense of common knowledge which is, in some respects, binding on those addressed. Members are supposed to feel that all women know this place and therefore if as a woman you are here, you are part of the larger picture that encompasses all women. Implicitly, therefore, those women who are not there or do not know the place are “missing out” or are positioned outside of a form of necessary knowledge or shared understanding (Figure 1). Ironically, the meeting was being held in Freetown, home to the Krio (the only community in Sierra Leone that does not have Bondo society culture).

Figure 1. Soweï council members in a meeting held at a Freetown “Bondo bush”.



Nevertheless, the PRO was keen to underscore the fact that all women were in league with the Soweï council and, therefore, that the council was where women belonged: that every woman knew the Soweï council headquarters. As she says “it is where the women live and base”. In a sense, then, the Soweï council PRO is appealing to the “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) of Sierra Leonean women. By positioning her “creation of common knowledge” thus, her message becomes compelling, inviting the listener to subjectively immerse themselves in the community of Bondo society women (cf Ferguson, 2009). This common knowledge thus created is intensified and diffused through networks to consolidate coherence and coordination. Networks are fostered by linguistic codes to “blend idioms” into “condensed symbols” (Ansell, 1997, pp. 361-362; Turner, 1986, p. 29). For example, as the idioms of “disgracing our society”, “defending our culture” and “exposing” the society are frequently used by Bondo society adherents to structure the discourse of “resistance” against the anti-FGC discourse.

According to Ansell, linguistic codes structure different social interactions and relationships based on underlying presumptions about how different people relate to each other (1997, p. 361). As attested by the respondent below and several other respondents, the Bondo uses communication codes only discernable by members.

When I joined the Bondo we were taught to be friendly to each other and to respect elders. We sang new songs, songs of different occasions, coming out songs, early morning songs, fishing songs and so forth. Every song has a meaning. We use songs to talk to each other. The songs are in such a way that only members will understand what they mean and react to it. For example if the women cry out ayee joooh, it is a call for members to come up to address an issue which needs urgent attention. We also dance different dances which have different meanings which I will not tell because they are secret. (Interview 4 on 18/03/2009 with Bondo member, a primary school teacher, aged between 50 and 55 years)

This type of coded language is what Ansell (1997) calls “restricted codes”. Such codes are characteristic of discourses among close-knit communities in which community members have “access to the same fundamental assumptions” (Ansell, 1997, p. 362; Douglas, 1966, p. 22). Accordingly, these discourses continually make reference to traditional norms, taboos and practices in a way that marginalizes those not cognizant of the restricted codes. Drawing on the concepts of “restricted” and “elaborated” coded communication, we analyze and discuss the Soweï council’s strategies of coordination and its apparent collaboration with NGO operatives in the wake of the effects of the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act of 2007 on the Bondo secret society.

The operations of the Bondo society are ordained by ritual and oaths of secrecy only accessible to members. This is what Douglas (1966) referred to as “tacit knowledge”. Douglas argues that communities “high on ritual” have restricted codes of communication, which enhance communication and unity within the group but marginalize those outside the group. In this line of thinking therefore, the Bondo is engaged in a continuous social process of communication through their codes of secrecy that fosters social cohesion and co-ordination. Accordingly, the Soweï council employs restrictive codes that allude to the common knowledge of the sacred symbolism and dance ensconced in the Bondo society to further enhance coordination and cohesion. This is done in order to reinforce group unity and to supersede the regional differentiations in the ways in which the Bondo society is practiced. The excerpt below from the proceedings of the NGO/Soweï council consultative meeting attests to this:

The meeting started off with a song in Mende, the women comprised of Bondo Soweï council notables, the Soweï council president who is from the Themne ethnic group, the Soweï council P.R.O, a Mende speaker and other officials dance to the song by shaking their shoulders vigorously. The song continues and it has a message to the effect that Bondo is very important because it teaches so many things in addition to other ceremonies like washing of the skin or the hands for ritual effect. Then the Soweï council president says “let us be aware that wherever we are God is with us, so for anything, even if you are alone, just beware that God is with us through our fore fathers” (proceedings of Soweï council consultative meeting).

Figure 2. Soweï council members during a demonstration carrying banners written in Krio.



The Soweï council therefore galvanizes its members through both religious references and through the physicality of dance, and in the process establishes itself as the legitimate representative of Bondo society issues in public discourse. For instance the comments by the Soweï president allude to a shared ancestry which has underlying meanings and intensions both secular and spiritual (Figure 2).

A similar invocation of the ancestral spirits occurred during a speech by the Soweï council treasurer. Here, the invocation is used to frame anti-FGC reformists in attendance from the INGO that facilitated the meeting, as “outsiders”⁵:

The great, great grandfather and the great great grandmother have been doing it. It is just like when a child is still breastfeeding and you don’t just stop ... May God bless the white man. “White man”⁶ sitting here, may God bless you. If you are thinking about something good for us, let God help us (people talking excitedly). These are the real Soweis around here. These are the elders. It is part of our culture ... if God has sent you [the white man] to say that we stop this society, then we are very troubled (Soweï council treasurer).

Here it can be seen how a key member of Soweï council was able to define the organisation itself as the authentic voice of the Bondo society by invoking the idea of an unbroken ancestral tradition. Her reference to this tradition is implicitly divisive, distancing the anti-FGC activists (represented, in the context, by the five officials of an international organisation that facilitated the meeting), not only by the implicit suggestion that they need to be informed about the realities of the tradition, but also by the allusion to their ontological status as “white”.

The “white man” the respondent refers to was actually a mixed race Sierra Leonean and not a European or American. He was born in Sierra Leone (to a British mother and Sierra Leonean father); he went to school in Sierra Leone and still lives there with his family. However, because of his colour, he was singled out by the respondent above as the epitome of the anti-FGC discourse. The logic in this reference is that it is only the Soweï council which should be involved with Bondo matters of whatever nature because this is their tradition. The respondent says “If God has sent you to say that we stop this society, then we are very troubled”. The speaker appeals to a form of common knowledge (i.e. that interference in the affairs of the Soweï council should be “resisted”). The framing of discourse in this manner offers an opportunity to form idioms that resonate with Soweï council members. At the same time, the “white man” is used to symbolise the discursive camp of anti-FGC campaigners. Resistance to the anti-FGC campaign is thus represented as a trope that resonates with the wide membership of the Soweï council, drawing on all the “four corners” of the country. Simultaneously, of course, such appeals involve a kind of claim to authority, on the part of the speaker, *within* the Bondo context: that she, and those she represents, are the “real Soweis around here”.

“Common knowledge” and “restricted knowledge” are opposed categories. Statements like “no one is allowed to speak of Bondo”, except the Soweis—that is between and beyond Bondo members—while sacred/restricted knowledge is shared in the Bondo bush. This also resonates with the operations of the Poro initiation process which consists of schooling in the art of concealment, in which the importance of keeping secrets is inscribed with a knife on the initiate’s body (Ferme, 2001, p. 180). Bondo, like Poro business is often discussed in the oblique terms. Initiates taught: “meaning of various signs and symbols and how to use certain passwords that are privy to members, most allusions to the society’s business are so cloaked in proverbial language as to be obscure to an outsider” (Little, 1965, p. 357). Che maintains that individuals offer to participate in something precisely because they know that someone else is also participating in it. Chwe argues that multinational companies pay huge amounts of money to advertise in most popular TV broadcast like the Super Bowl in America because they are effective translators of “common knowledge”. The Super Bowl attracts averagely over fifty million viewers thereby giving the impression that what is advertised is in vogue—everybody associates with it and therefore it has a high purchase on the basis of the “common knowledge” transmitted on the show. This is analogous to the Bondo Sowe Council’s “creation of common knowledge” through its discourses. For instance, the sowe council Public Relations Officer (PRO) said:

This place we are meeting is called K. This is where the women live and base. There is no woman living in this area that does not know this place. I am the PRO and my name is P. I am also called W. In the council, we are here with our president and the vice-president is living at XY (the members applaud). We also have our chairlady madam B, our assistant PRO, our organizer, the treasurer and a dignified Sowe council member aged 72 years (people laughing). So all these people belong to this place. (Sowe council PRO, March 13, 2009)

In a sense, the sowe council PRO is appealing to the “imagined community” (Anderson, [1983] 2006) of women: those who are not there do not know the place. In other words, they are living out of society and are therefore missing out. By positioning her “creation of common knowledge” thus, her message becomes compelling by inviting the listener to subjectively immerse themselves in the community of women who in this context are Bondo society women (cf Ferguson, 2009). Implicitly, those women who are not there or do not know the place are “missing out” or are positioned outside of a form of necessary knowledge, power or shared understanding. This common knowledge thus created is intensified and diffused through networks to consolidate coherence and coordination.

6.1. Restricted and elaborated linguistic codes

Linguistic codes structure different social interactions and relationships based on underlying assumptions about how different people relate to each other (Ansell, 1997, p. 361). Restricted codes, for example, are characteristic of discourses among close-knit communities in which community members have “access to the same fundamental assumptions” (Ansell, 1997, p. 362; Douglas, 1966, p. 22). The operations of the Bondo society are ordained by ritual and oaths of secrecy only accessible to members.

Networks are fostered by linguistic codes to “blend idioms” into “condensed symbols” (Ansell, 1997, pp. 361–362; Turner, 1986, p. 29). In secret institutions, symbols and metaphors (Bellman, 1984) deal with the aesthetics and hermeneutics of indirect speech. They are useful for understanding the role of linguistic and material clues in a world where ambiguity is pervasive (Ferme, 2001, p. 10). “Exposure” does not of course, “represent defilement” (see Simmel, 1950). For example, the idioms of “disgracing our society”, “defending our culture” and “exposing” the society are frequently used by Bondo society adherents to structure the discourse of “resistance” against the anti-FGC discourse.

Interviewer: Why are there seeming tensions and differences within the Bondo such that some members are being punished in spite of them being Bondo members?

Interviewee: You know Bondo is a place of peace and unity and once you join the Bondo you take an oath to keep the society secrets intact. You should not reveal the society secrets even to your husband so it is not right that the NGOs are talking about it and they are discussing and exposing it over the radio, so the women will go against the people who disgrace them even if you are a woman and a member, they will not spare you (Interview 40 on 12/03/09 Mende woman aged 32).

As is evident in the excerpt above, these idioms have been condensed into statements against public discussion and portrayals of the Bondo by the mass media. Douglas argues that communities “high on ritual” have restricted codes of communication, which enhance communication (“tacit knowledge”) and unity within the group but marginalize those outside the group. In this light, the Bondo is engaged in a continuous social process of communication through their codes of secrecy that fosters social cohesion and co-ordination. As Chwe concedes “a communication network helps coordination in exactly two ways: by informing each stage about earlier stages, and by creating common knowledge within each stage.” (2000, p. 1). Accordingly, the Soweï council employs restrictive codes that allude to the common knowledge—the sacred knowledge and symbolism ensconced in Bondo society ideology to further enhance coordination and cohesion. This is achieved partly through dancing because “one has to pay attention to the dancing pattern, any lapse in concentration will disrupt the pattern” (Chwe, 2000, p. 5). The soweï council therefore galvanizes its members through association with God and through the physicality of dance, and in the process establishes itself as the legitimate representative of Bondo society issues in public discourse. A similar invocation of the ancestral spirits occurred whenever Bondo adherents justified the continued existence of the practice. In the following excerpt the respondent invokes the timelessness of the ritual practice of female circumcision:

The great, great grandfather and the great great grandmother have been doing it. It is just like when a child is still breastfeeding and you don’t just stop ... May God bless the white man. “White man” sitting here, may God bless you. If you are thinking about something good for us, let God help us (people talking excitedly). These are the real Soweï around here. These are the elders. It is part of our culture ... if God has sent you [the white man] to say that we stop this society, then we are very troubled. (Soweï council treasurer, March 13, 2009)

By distancing the anti-genital cutting activists who are epitomised by the “white man”, the quote above simultaneously constructs common knowledge that interference in the affairs of the soweï council should be “resisted”. The framing of discourse in this manner offers an opportunity to form idioms that resonate with Soweï council members. In this case the “white man” symbolises the discursive camp of female circumcision eradication campaigners in what is fast developing into the vernacular of resistance against anti-genital cutting discourse by followers of the Bondo society. The frames and idioms used by the soweï present tropes that are in turn blended into “condensed symbols” that cohere members into the bigger agenda and wider objectives of the Soweï council which is that of retaining the status quo concerning Bondo society initiation.

6.2. Symbols as condensation of meaning

The prevalent discourse among Soweï council key figures is peppered with figures of speech (imagery, alliteration, rhetorical questions, metaphors, metonymy, symbolism, irony etc.). These figures of speech are mechanisms of concealment. Secrecy underlies every domain of Mende culture: “ultimately, the key to many of these processes of enlargement is embedded in details—in clues that are secreted away from direct apperception”. In the dialectic of small and large, language requires both metaphor and metonymy (Jakobson & Halle 1956, cf Ferme, 2001). Such a dialectic link questions of gender and secret institutions to the materiality of language, productive technologies, and social practices (Ferme, 2001, p. 9). For example, the word “secret” or “society” in Bondo discourse has a

plethora of meanings and signification that constitutes the gendered knowledge which Bondo is the repository. Victor Turner in line with Edward Sapir has highlighted two main forms in which symbols are classified: referential and condensed symbols. Referential symbols “include[s] forms of oral speech, writing, national flags, flag signalling and other organisations of symbols which are agreed upon as economic devices for purposes of reference.” Turner further points out that, symbols are better analysed “in time series in relation to other events for symbols are essentially involved in social process” (Turner, 1986, p. 20). To the Bondo society, the word “secret”, as noted, stands for “sacrosanct” rituals safeguarded by administration of oaths. Conversely, the word “exposed” in contemporary Bondo society context marked by struggles against calls for eradication of female circumcision also constitutes a symbol. Simmel (1950, pp. 335–376) drew attention to how secrecy is related to the nonsecret—to the mundane in everyday life. Bellman has addressed the cosmological dimensions of Kpelle: fam o, the injunction not to speak about something, in both discursive practices—where the formula ifa mo signals the presence of secrecy in everyday life—and material manifestations that range from medicine to spirits and other agents with special powers (Bellman 1975, pp. 12–13). The word “expose” in this context therefore, represents “defilement” of the said sacrosanct “Bondo secrets” by the transnational media and anti-genital cutting activists of all “stripes and colours”. The discourse of exposure is charged with “emotional tension” and therefore fits the description of a condensed symbol (Turner, 1986, p. 29). This conceptualisation of the “exposure” of Bondo secrets by the media and anti-genital cutting campaigners as a condensed symbol, resonate with Swidler’s argument that opposition in organising symbols “(is) fundamental to the nature of symbol systems and to the capacity of symbols or discourses to convey meaning” (Swidler, 2005, p. 189).

Symbols that link the universal to the particular in a simple but yet influential way are imbued with power (Ansell, 1997, p. 373). While language and symbols reveal, they also limit. They constrain the individual’s mastery of social categories. “In a symbol there is concealment and yet revelation: here, therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance” (Bellman, 1975, p. 12; cf Beidelman, 1993; Carlyle, 1896, p. 199). Victor Turner termed symbols that link the universal to the particular “focal symbols” because their meanings can be interpreted in ways that capture different facets of an issue (Turner, 1986, p. 50). In the case of the soweï council, the symbol of “exposing the Bondo” is thus a powerful tool that ensures commitment of the soweï council members to the course of “defending their culture” against the eradication movement (Ansell, 1997, p. 360).

What I am saying is the scandal, when people organize radio programmes and they are aware of the fact that we have a council. They should call on us. But every morning they just organize radio programmes in which they expose Bondo issues. Is Bondo the only thing? So please let them stop organizing programmes about us over the media. Even the things that they say and show about us they are all lies. They are just sabotaging us. They are just to destroy us. Let them stop televising what we are doing on TV. They are all lies and they are just doing it to spoil everything. (Soweï council PRO, March 13, 2009)

The PRO above is implicitly calling on Bondo members to unite and forestall the media’s act of sabotage through the “condensed symbol” of being “disgraced” and “exposed” in the media by anti-genital cutting advocates. The soweï council has gone further to instill co-ordination and mark itself as the legitimate authority when it comes to Bondo issues by printing T-shirts. It is generally argued that when condensed symbols tangentially link with networks, they will in turn expand and diffuse the shared common knowledge. For the condensed symbols to have a powerful impact, they have to have the appeal of “common knowledge” which is conveyed to members by the use of networks. Achieving a synergy between networks and common knowledge will foster better group coherence to enable ease of mobilization.

6.3. Common knowledge, networks, condensed symbols and group cohesion

Scholars argue that networks and symbolism are integral in creating common knowledge that can enhance group unity and coordination (Atkinson, 1985, p. 83; Galaskiewicz & Burt, 1991; Hirsch,

2001, pp. 185–187). Hirsch, for instance, has demonstrated how a Chicago labour pressure group carried out recruitment through social networks based on a distinctive culture to sustain commitment and also to “create a distinctive view of the problem” (2001, p. 187).

The Soweï council uses linguistic codes to hook up networks and symbols to consolidate group cohesion through restricted codes that embody the Bondo society interlinked with “condensed” symbolic appeals to mobilize its members. The restricted codes refer to the ritual aspects of the Bondo wrapped in oaths of secrecy. This tacit knowledge enhances communication between members from different areas of the Bondo society. To effectively improve coordination and unity, the condensed symbols are tangentially connected to the tacit knowledge in a way that draws emotions (Ansell, 1997, p. 362; Calhoun, 1983; Hirsch, 2001). The soweï council’s construction of the symbol of exposing Bondo secrets in the media is choreographed to intersect with members’ emotions in a way that makes the discourse of “resisting” anti-mutilation sentiments highly charged.

They just go to the media houses [to criticize us], we also can sing and go all around and do everything because we are all Sierra Leoneans. I do not accept [criticisms over the media] because they are sabotaging us on radio. If there is any problem, they should call on us as a council. That is why we have the soweï council. It is just that we inherited this society; there is no other way out. (soweï council PRO, March 13, 2009)

Here, the PRO creates a “buzz” powerful enough to tap the various local networks available to the Bondo to achieve “common knowledge” on the issue of resistance— a unity forged in action. This is what in Calhoun’s (1983, p. 888) words might be called the “radicalisation of tradition”. Such emotive statements helps to transcend the minor differences characteristic of the practice of Bondo across different factions and in different regions in order to form a united front. This is achieved better through networks.

Although restricted codes can emotively spur union and coordination, their access is only limited because they operate laterally. Conversely, elaborated codes, though weak, have a wider appeal because they operate vertically. For better mobilization, the condensed symbols have to be diffused so that they can cover a wide array of adherents and mobilize them to take up the call for resistance and “pseudo collaboration” in the face of changes in contemporary Sierra Leone.

6.4. Sparse networks as a strategy for Soweï council coherence

There is a possibility that the soweï council establishes both sparse and dense networks to negotiate the changes brought about by the international anti-genital cutting discourse. Scholars of network theory point out that people and groups simultaneously oscillate between different networks (Podolny, 1993; Uzzi, 1997). In the soweï council focus group, the soweï council leaders subtly appealed to the government and the international organization to help them co-ordinate their members on some of the issues that they agreed on including the exclusive initiation of mature girls. The Soweï council has created “sparse” networks with the anti-mutilation campaigners by proposing to “collaborate” with reform activists to initiate mature girls who have attained majority age. It might be argued that getting the adherents of Bondo society to accept the issue of age of consent in the practice of female circumcision is a major milestone in efforts to end the practice. However, on the part of the soweï council leaders, this is a thorny issue to “sell” to some of its members such as those from the Fula, Temne and Limba districts who typically initiate very young girls between the ages of 4–12 years. Those resisting justify their action as partly in the name of defending culture against perceived Western colonialism. Such individuals are increasingly circumcising their daughters at tender ages so that they do not grow up and start “speaking the language of NGOs and the Whiteman”—contesting female circumcision in the name of children and human rights.

I must circumcise all my daughters immediately they are born despite the rumour the Whiteman is spreading in the name of human and children’s rights. If they are circumcised before majority age, they will have no choice. (Toure, interview, March 3, 2009, Free Town)

Ideally, the soweï council would like that have issues related to the Bondo be kept “within wraps,” as opposed to being subjected to public scrutiny. This scenario is untenable in this era of multiple flows where debates surrounding female genital cuttings have become transnationalized. Appadurai (1996, pp. 33–36) has designated these multiple flows using concepts including: ethnoscaapes, technoscaapes, mediascaapes and ideoscaapes. “Ideoscaapes are composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which consists of a chain of ideas, terms, and images, including freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation, master term democracy” Appadurai (1996, p. 99). Appadurai concedes that there are “deep disjunctures” between/among the first three, and that those disjunctures are refracted through the last two in multiple and conflicting ways. His use of the suffix-scape is evocative of “landscape,” suggesting both a perspectival or positional understanding of these five aspects of globalization, as well as a link to Benedict Anderson in the term “imagined worlds” (instead of an “imagined community”). Faced with this uncomfortable scenario, creating strategic weak links with reformers seems an option on the part of the Soweï council. Nevertheless, the issue of age of consent is bound to be a sticking point to ethnic communities that traditionally initiate very young girls and therefore poses a stumbling block that threatens to break group cohesion that glues the soweï council together. We argue that the defense of culture is intertwined with defense of real social, economic and political interests.

The Soweï council is not just an insignificant local traditional group, but rather a relatively powerful social movement with significant symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1990) in its local social field. Despite the commodification of the Bondo, it still plays the social role of ordering social relations in the community. By initiating girls into womanhood, soweïs accumulate social capital and therefore, it is the soweïs who stand to gain most from the social capital accessible to the Bondo society and they would therefore want to defend the practice.

Coyne and Mathers (2011) argue that rituals intercede in economic “exchanges and outcomes”, and that though some rituals could constrain markets by marginalizing some groups and thus hindering interaction, other rituals enhance bonding that increases trust through the spirit of reciprocity. Participation in ritual raises social approval and identity that is reinforced by path dependence. This identity has high purchase in social, political and economic aspects of individuals (Ibid, p. 77). What is “really” at stake for the Soweïs here is political significance, beliefs, ideas of value and meaning, wealth and social standing in the community. The soweïs and the Bondo at large have some form of political significance because they supported the government into power.

Since initiation is a major event to those who practice it, the soweïs also simultaneously get social recognition from family and kin members of their initiates. The soweï council therefore has the ability to represent common preferences and power (Bourdieu, 1990). What is at stake for the soweïs in this regards therefore is a web of interests spanning social, economic, political and Bondo cosmology. All these facets of signification interpenetrate each other in complicated and multifaceted ways that to a limited extent empower the soweïs in the context of postwar Sierra Leone. The soweï council thus has to find ways to negotiate and navigate the changes implicit in the Child Rights act in order to retain their role as conveyors of Bondo society ideology. The Soweï council has on occasions resorted to collaboration and pseudo collaboration as a strategy of dealing with change.

6.5. Elaborated codes and diffusion within the Soweï council

As argued above, “restrictive” codes enhance bonding. They consolidate networks through shared community “tacit” knowledge) while “elaborate” codes encourage “bridging” (Granovetter, 1973). By meeting the NGO officials, the soweï council hoped to level out the differences that were cropping up in the group concerning the Child Rights Act. By dispensing with the talk of eradicating the ritual procedure of female circumcision, anti-female circumcision campaigners are engaged in a double discourse to bring about “enduring” change as opposed to “a fleeting one”. However, in striking a compromise with campaigners of the Child Rights Act, some members of the soweï council from communities that have historically initiated young girls, make clear their disagreement with this position thereby challenging the Soweï council’s goals of cohesion and coordination. This echoes the

assertion that besides the bonding through restrictive codes, attaining collective action is also a political process that entails the “domination and marginalization of different groups in society” (Ishihara & Pascual, 2009, p. 1551). The tension arising from instances of bridging can be attested by the comments of the PRO who also comes from the dominant Mende ethnic group whose position on initiating mature girls is said to have been adopted by the soweï council. The initiation of mature girls does not however apply to many Mende in the East.

The PRO stated that initiating very young girls and keeping them for extended periods in the Bondo bush interferes with the girls’ education and is therefore not supported by the Bondo. However, to the accused soweï council member, there is an ulterior motive on the part of the soweï PRO who is seen as being motivated by jealousy at the prospects of someone else accumulating money from Bondo initiation fees. In the same light, the PRO acknowledged that achieving group cohesion on the politicized issue of age of consent was not an easy task and even fell short of enlisting the support of the NGO facilitating the consultative group to help them in this endeavor. By accepting to prevail on their members to initiate mature girls aged 18 years and above, some Bondo members insinuated that the compromise (“pseudo collaboration”) should include financial incentives and employment opportunities from the reformists to enable them engage in other economic ventures and reduce their reliance on initiation proceeds.

The economic difficulties some of the soweï experience underlines the economic and political interests at stake (see Pemunta, 2011, 2014; Pemunta & Bosire, 2011) and begs the question as to what should be typified and given significance to enhance better coordination within the Bondo. Next we examine the “politics of signification” (Snow, 2004, p. 384).

6.6. The “politics of signification”

For elaborated codes to be effective in diffusing the signified “frame”, the Soweï council has to be careful on how their ties with NGOs will resonate with Bondo society members without alienating and marginalizing some of them. On their part, the NGO members present in the consultative meeting took quite a tactful position. They began by disassociating themselves from the people who were making comments in the media about the Bondo society. This seemed to create an amicable atmosphere that made the soweï council members ready to listen to what they had to say. “Let nobody give you false news that you should not initiate into Bondo. It is the age that matters” (*the soweï council members break into a song, March 13, 2009*).

The Bondo employs secret codes only known to members for mobilization. In an immediate sense, other modes of mobilization accessible to the Bondo are their songs, dances and masquerades which form a key part of any public spectacle. It can be stated here that by engaging in bridging, the human rights operatives are engaging in a double discourse as a strategy of negotiating change. Several years of condemning the practice of female circumcision has not led to the much desired change resulting in a change of approach. Though the members of the soweï council are a bit relieved that the practice is not outlawed, the idea of initiating only young girls is a cause for concern because of the hard economic times that some of the soweï council members are undergoing.

Besides the international organizations, the soweï council also engages in instances of bridging with the government in negotiating change, but concurrently cohere the group in light of opposition to the core procedure of the Bondo society membership. Similarly, they also appeal to the government to intercede on their behalf, which also constitutes “bridging”. This is because neither the NGOs “collaborating” with the soweï council nor the government share “tacit” knowledge with the soweï because they are not members of the Bondo society. “Tacit knowledge”, Douglas (1966) maintains, “is normally high on ritual”. Bridging appeals to abstract concepts and it tends to be open to different interpretations.

By bridging the message, the soweï council hopes to have more control and group cohesion by engaging in what Taylor (1992) calls “politics of recognition”. As the dominant discourse gains

ground, other discourses from marginal communities like the Limba and Temne that have historically initiated young girls will be delegitimized. The soweï council will therefore be in a position to “mask” the abstract concept of initiating girls of majority age as “common knowledge”. By incorporating elaborated codes to facilitate bridging of such abstract concepts, the discourses of communities and Soweis that initiate young girls will be “muffled” because in the context of “elaborated codes” and “bridging”, they will be the subalterns (Spivak, 1984).

6.7. Elaborated codes, which way for the Soweï council?

It is widely argued that organizations and groups oscillate between restrictive codes (bonding) and elaborated codes (bridging) as they strive to achieve group cohesion and transform social capital into collective action (Ansell, 1997; Atkinson, 1985; Hansen, 1999; Hirsch, 2001; Ishihara & Pascual, 2009; Podolny, 1993; Uzzi, 1997; Woolcock, 1998, p. 175). However, it is also argued that bridging works vertically, in a “top-down” form (Woolcock, 1998, p. 176) because, as in the case of the soweï council, policy actors who are instrumental in bridging the discourse of initiating only mature girls work within a given framework. For instance, it is in the interest of the government of Sierra Leone to appease financial aid donors such as the USA who have linked the provision of financial aid to efforts to end female circumcision (see Pemunta, 2011, p. 16). Though the policy actors are better placed to bridge the soweï council discourse and enhance better co-ordination and coherence, their objectives, especially those of the donors are contrary to the Soweï council. By this, following Agarwal (2001) we argue that a strong form of “bridging” in which key policy actors like governments and donors are integral to the enhancement of social capital may end up in the social exclusion of the marginalized. This may take two forms. First, the marginalized groups will be empowered through the weak links (NGOs and government) through resource mobilization and access to information in ways that will expose the lapses in the soweï council’s “common knowledge”. They may as a result realize that they do not really have common aspirations (common knowledge) as those espoused in the Soweï council’s logic of “pseudo collaboration” and henceforth form a parallel discourse that would “frame their preferences better”. Secondly, the dominant ideology—the Mende tradition of initiating mature girls— may be “bridged” and presented as “common knowledge” through a political process of domination.

Nevertheless, as the Soweï council rallies its members to “resist” the changes that threaten to change the premise on which the Bondo society draws its “ability to represent preferences” they have engaged in acts of violence and aggression in ways that might eventually be detrimental to the Bondo. For example, the “Concord Times” vol. 16 No. 117 of 9 February 2009 carried an article captioned “Soweis’ abduct female Journalists” for allegedly defying the Bondo secret society by broadcasting a programme on female circumcision as part of events marking the celebration of the Zero Tolerance day against female circumcision. This came on the heels of a soweis’ protest in Kenema (South-eastern part of Sierra Leone) hardly two weeks before against the media frenzy that “exposes” the Bondo secret society (see also Pemunta, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Pemunta & Bosire, 2011). Bondo members are aware that they will not be subjected to legal scrutiny since issues to do with secret societies are classified as a threat to “national security”. Anti-female circumcision campaigners are having problems dealing with this scenario. The Bondo society’s near religious stature is facing a credibility problem as it is now conflated with blatant criminal acts.

7. Conclusion

FGC is clearly a human rights, gender and development issue (see Pemunta, 2012b). The concerted media scrutiny of female circumcision and the enactment of the Child Rights Act of 2007 have exposed some internal contradictions within the Bondo secret society, where the inherent tensions within the society had always been safely tucked under the heavy lid of secrecy. Like other secret societies, secrecy has been the cement that has kept the society intact. In line with Georg Simmel’s sociological dimensions of secrecy, its interactive and knowledge generating nature, secrecy among the Mende as instantiated in both the Bondo and Poro secret societies describe techniques of dissimulation that ultimately consists of creating remoteness: the feeling that things are not as they appear and that the real ground is elsewhere: behind what we see or underneath (see also Ferme,

2001, p. 4; Murphy, 1980, p. 197). While the socio-cultural power structures of the Poro and Bondo secret societies and their interactions with internationalist human rights discourse has exposed contradictions, the Sowe council has continued to appropriate various cultural codes to maintain coherence in the face of codemnations using counter-discourses against female circumcision through the wide scale dissemination to both members and non-members of the highly charged narrative that the society's exposure leads to its destruction. In reality, what is at stake is the socioeconomic and political interests of the Bondo. Despite the disintegration of the fabric that held the society together, the Soweis are continuously using their positions not only to defend their social, economic and political interests, but also to mobilize the Bondo society members to react aggressively against change in the name of defending culture. However, acts of violence threaten to compromise the moral standing of the Bondo as people cover their criminal acts by employing the claim of defending culture as a smoke-screen whereas they are defending their personal self-interests. The implementation of the Child Rights Act has been counterproductive because those in charge of prosecution such as state counsels are members of the Poro secret society and depend on politicians for their promotion. They constantly adjourn female circumcision related cases ad infinitum until the case file gets "missing" in the name of protecting "national security" (Pemunta, 2011, p. 14). The main threat to cohesion within the Sowe Council include lack of agreement over the age of consent. People are increasingly initiating children because it is cheaper and secondly because they will not grow up to start contesting female circumcision. In the face of changes brought by the anti-FGC rhetoric, to ensure unity, the Sowe Council needs to reflect the expectations of their vast followers across the country.

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Notes

1. These comprise internal refugee camps where people temporarily settled during the war after their homes were invaded by the war lords in the decade long (1990–2002) Sierra Leone civil war. A number of people still live in these IDP centres despite the end of the civil war.
2. The Bondo is hierarchically structured.
3. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2013/09/17/sierra-leone-president-dr-ernest-bai-koroma-keynote-speech-during-town-hall-meeting-on-africa-at-the-world-bank-harnessing-the-capacity-of-the-african-diaspora-in-buildin>
4. CTN studios are located at the University of Sierra Leone—Fourah-Bay College. The radio station was donated by the UN as part of post-war reconstruction funding for a new faculty of media studies and communication at the flagship Fourah Bay College.
5. It is generally believed by many Bondo adherents that calls for eradication of FGC were brought about by foreigners symbolised by the term "white man". The "white man" in this context refers to Europeans especially those they see working for international organisation like the UN (field notes).

6. The mixed race man was not amused to be called a white man and the convenors did not care to correct the Sowe who was referring to him as a white man.

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