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Liberia has been one of Africa's most violent trouble spots. During the 1990s thousands of teenage fighters laid siege to the capital and the world took notice. Since then Liberia has been through devastating civil upheaval. What began as a civil conflict has spread to other West African nations as well.

Stephen Ellis traces the history of the civil war that has blighted Liberia in recent years and looks at the political, ethnic and cultural roots of a conflict that led to the 1997-2003 presidency of Charles Taylor — now indicted as a war criminal. He focuses on the role religion and rituals have played in shaping and intensifying this brutal war. In this edition Ellis describes how many of the same problems still exist, providing a challenge that international policymakers will ignore at their peril.

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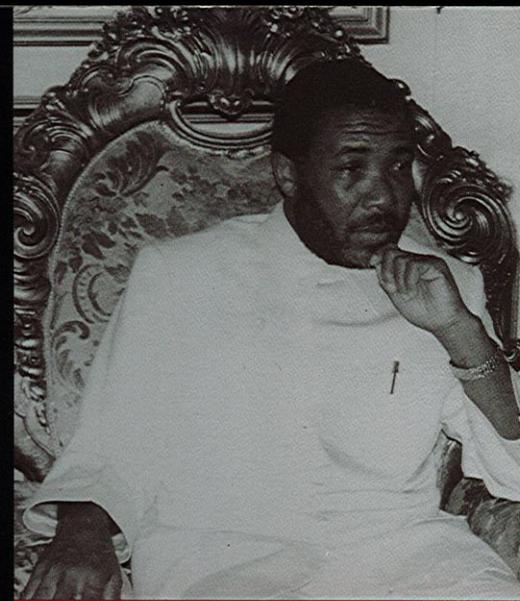
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THE MASK OF ANARCHY

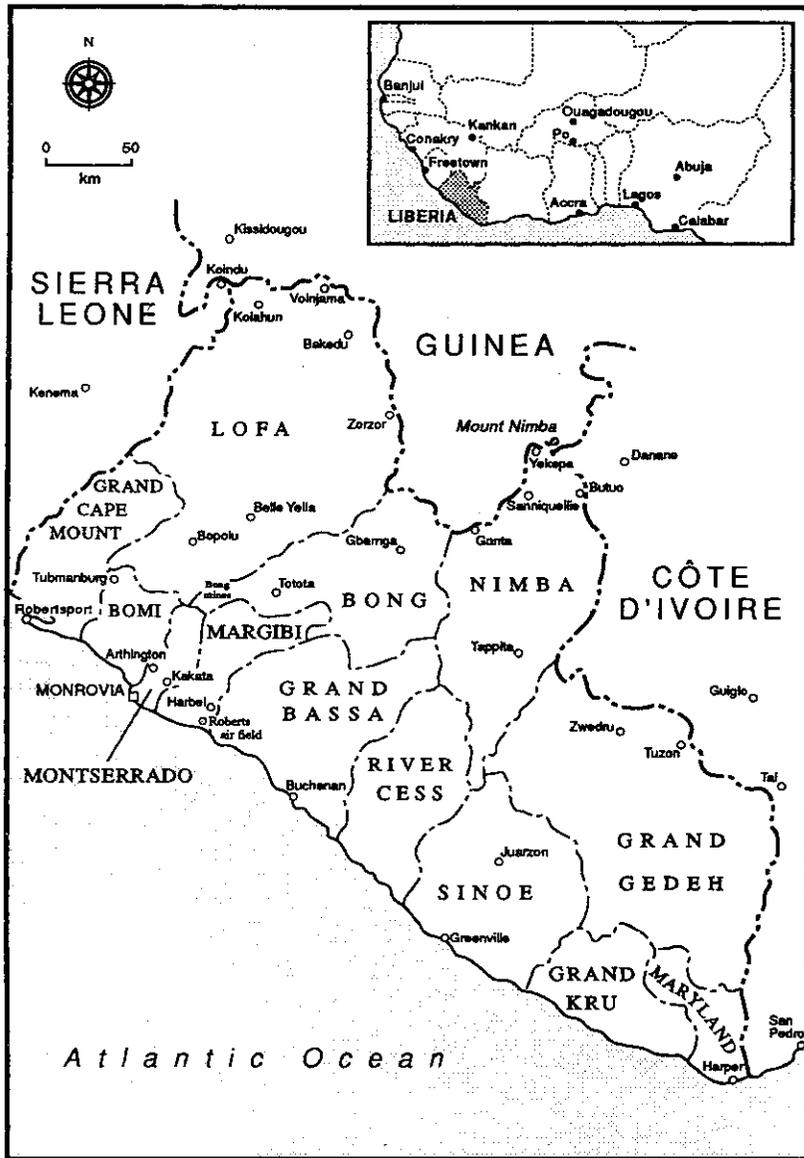


**STEPHEN ELLIS**

# THE MASK OF ANARCHY

*The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*

HURST



Liberia: counties and major towns



Liberia: ethnic groups

## MEN AND DEVILS

In considering how the extending reach of the Liberian state transformed local politics, and was itself transformed in the process, it is helpful to dwell a little longer on the subject of religious belief. Accordingly, the present chapter concerns what, for want of a better description, we may call the spiritual history of Liberia, as distinct from its political or administrative history.

This is no easy matter to discuss, for a number of reasons. First and foremost among these difficulties is the existence of a gamut of misleading labels attached to various distinctive elements of traditional Liberian religions as a result of the views conveyed by Europeans, Americans and Americo-Liberians, including missionaries, ethnographers, travellers and administrators imbued with a North Atlantic view of what constitutes civilisation, morality and development. A prime example of the imposition of new meanings on native Liberian institutions concerns the masked figure, the spirit of the forest, which is the ultimate authority in Poro ritual. This figure is known in modern Liberian English as the Bush Devil, a name first used, certainly with pejorative intent, by early Christian missionaries.<sup>1</sup> This is misleading because of the negative moral qualities attributed to anything labelled in English as a devil, since the Devil of Christian tradition is the personification of pure evil. The use of the term 'bush devil' implies that this figure incarnates an evil moral quality which is far removed from the character attributed to it by Poro initiates in the past, and even today. To Poro members, although the Bush Devil is certainly redoubtable, and even dangerous, it is not evil. Rather, the spirit of the forest is simply powerful, and its power can be used to inflict punishments which are believed to be in the ultimate interest of the community of believers. It is the guarantor of order.

The same problem is even more clear in literary descriptions of some of the ritual activities associated with traditional Liberian religious practice, most notably in regard to human sacrifice which, according to some texts which we will discuss shortly, was sometimes

<sup>1</sup> Nya Kwiawon Taryor, 'Religions in Liberia', *Liberia-Forum*, 5, 8 (1989), p.6.

used in pre-republican times as a form of communication between mankind and the invisible world. The practice of human sacrifice and of eating human flesh in various contexts in Liberia has often been described by European, American and Americo-Liberian authors as 'cannibalism', reflecting a repugnance in European and American thought attached to such an activity under any circumstances whatever. It is no part of the present argument to suggest that eating human flesh is commendable; it is enough merely to note that this practice has not always had the same associations or meaning for every society in the world as it has had for Europeans, as its quite widespread occurrence in time and space suggests.<sup>2</sup> It is not possible to establish exactly how widespread this practice was in Liberia before the twentieth century, nor even during it, but the evidence suggests that human sacrifice involving the consumption by initiates of human flesh was regarded as one of a range of instruments of religious communication in many parts of pre-republican Liberia. It is important to retrace briefly the history of the practice if we are to understand the reason for the many incidents of human flesh being eaten by fighters during the civil war of 1989-97.

It should be said that the description of politics using an idiom of eating, in which the assimilation of power is described by using the vocabulary of digestion, is actually widespread in Africa. Indeed, it has even formed the basis of a celebrated analysis of African politics as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Of course, this most emphatically should not be taken to mean that all African societies have practised anthropophagy, since the concept of eating may obviously be used as a metaphor only. At least one anthropologist has asserted that the eating of human flesh as a pattern of cultural behaviour has never existed in any human society, even in such well-known cases as the Aztecs of Mexico, arguing that accounts of cannibalism reflect the fear one social group may have of another.<sup>4</sup> Several authors point out that rumours that a person consumes human flesh are easily attached, in former stateless societies such as those of Liberia and Sierra Leone which continue to have a strong egalitarian ethos, to powerful people who are thought to show an excess of selfish individualism. In this view, fear of cannibalism is a form of 'moral panic' which occurs in specific circumstances and is to be understood as a mechanism for the regulation of

<sup>2</sup> P.R. Sanday, *Divine Hunger: cannibalism as a cultural system*, Cambridge, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Bayart, *The State in Africa*.

<sup>4</sup> W. Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: anthropology and anthropophagy*, New York, 1979.

power.<sup>5</sup> This is true enough, but it rather coyly evades the question of whether human flesh is ever actually eaten as a form of religious communication in these societies, or whether references to the practice are always metaphorical, a mere form of words. Other scholars, while also acknowledging that rumours of flesh-eating are often a symptom of 'tensions in society' arising from the activities of 'selfish power seekers in antisocial groups', leave little doubt of their belief that among certain groups of those forest peoples of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia who share specific repertoires of religious belief, the eating of human flesh, at least on occasion, has actually occurred, and has been sufficiently sanctioned by custom to constitute an identifiable practice.<sup>6</sup>

Reports of the consumption of human flesh and human sacrifice in pre-republican times are most often associated with exclusive secret societies. These were exclusive groups of people who were believed to be liable to possession by the spirits of carnivorous animals such as leopards and crocodiles, and who carried out ritual killings while in a state of possession. During the course of the twentieth century, the Liberian government outlawed these societies, but some of them nevertheless continued to function clandestinely, as we shall shortly see. During the mid-twentieth century there were also increasing numbers of reports of the existence of various other occult groups, often said to include national politicians, who were said to partake of human flesh and to practise human sacrifice. In the following paragraphs we will examine in more detail some of the allegations concerning these practices and suggest that the consumption of human flesh indeed occurred as a form of ritual behaviour in the past, at least on occasion, in connection with rituals of human sacrifice, traditionally considered the most potent of all forms of religious sacrifice. The precise conditions under which this occurred, and the people responsible for such sacrifices, changed radically during the twentieth century, to the point that human sacrifice continued to occur, at least occasionally, but became divorced from control by distinct religious hierarchies with widespread support in a given community.

The historical change in this particular religious ritual is closely

<sup>5</sup> Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, pp. xxiv-v, 80-1; Rosalind Shaw, 'The Politician and the Diviner: divination and the consumption of power in Sierra Leone', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXXVI, 1 (1996), pp. 30-55.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Abraham, 'Cannibalism and African Historiography' in A. Abraham (ed.), *Topics in Sierra Leone History: a counter-colonial interpretation*, Freetown, 1976, p. 127; Carol MacCormack, 'Human Leopards and Crocodiles: political meanings of categorical anomalies' in Paula Brown and Donald Tuzin (eds), *The Ethnography of Cannibalism*, Washington, 1983, p. 53.

associated with the rule of the political and religious elites of the Liberian state who, for a century or more, generally saw themselves as pursuing a mission to improve Liberia by bringing it Christian religion, modern ways of acting and thinking, republican government and economic development. Throughout their history in Africa, the religious attitude of Americo-Liberians has been indissociable from their politics. President Arthur Barclay said as much in his 1904 inaugural address, when he observed that 'every convert from heathenism to the Christian faith in this country is also a political recruit'.<sup>7</sup> As the republican government and long-distance trade networks dominated by Christians and Muslims spread their influence into even the most isolated rural communities, the grip of the national government became deeply implicated in the rural politics of clan and chieftaincy disputes and local religious corporations. Traditional religious institutions such as secret societies, priests and oracles became sites of struggle for control of local affairs. This occurred in an environment in which the acquisition of power was routinely couched in an idiom of eating, leading to great confusion as to whether powerful people really were eaters of human flesh, or whether this was merely a rumour or a metaphor, devoid of actual substance, attached to any person who acquired great power.

Belief that all power has its origin in the invisible world, where God and spirits dwell, is a constant of Liberian history. What has changed radically during the twentieth century is the means by which individuals may have access to such power. Formerly subject to rules and conventions which assured that rituals were carried out only by the appropriate specialists under controlled conditions, certain potent forms of religious communication, in the course of the twentieth century, came to be used as part of the process by which the republican political elite in Monrovia reached a series of accommodations with the local chiefs who were the mainstays of its system of indirect rule. Religious communication, including human sacrifice, quite simply was privatised.

### *Poro business is eating business*

Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most widespread, of all religious institutions in the Liberian hinterland before 1900 was the Poro.

Poro is often described by Liberians today as a 'bush school',

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Richardson, *Past and Present*, p. 122.

a reasonably accurate description. In effect, among the Kpelle, Mano, Loma and several other peoples of north-western Liberia and adjoining parts of Sierra Leone and Guinea nowadays considered to be distinct 'tribes', but formerly more accurately described as congeries of lineages, and also in some areas of Côte d'Ivoire, Poros is a system of initiation for young men.<sup>8</sup> Through Poros, boys at around the age of puberty are initiated into adult society and learn how to act and think as men. Initiation takes place at clearings in the forest which are taboo to outsiders, where boys are said to be eaten by the spirit of the bush, known in Liberian English as the Bush Devil.<sup>9</sup> The young Poros initiate has scars applied to his body in distinctive patterns which are said to be the toothmarks of the spirit which has eaten him. Indeed, the idiom of eating is very marked in Poros, reflected in sayings such as 'Poros business is eating business' or 'Poros is in the stomach'.<sup>10</sup> In the forest, young initiates live in a special village where they are instructed in the ritual knowledge of their community and educated in their duties as men. In particular they are taught the virtues of discipline, courage and obedience, rather like in an old-fashioned English public school. At the end of their period of seclusion, which in the past could last for three or more years but which, by the time the civil war broke out, generally occupied no more than a couple of months in the school holidays, the young men are received back in their towns as newcomers who are deemed to have been reborn. Their old selves 'died' in the bush, eaten by the Bush Devil, the spirit of the forest.

Although today there are men from Poros areas who are not initiated, often when they have had a strict missionary education, it still remains usual for young Kpelle, Loma and others to be initiated in this way, even when they are also practising Christians. As a man grows older, he may spend repeated periods in the Poros bush, for example in connection with the initiation of new generations of youngsters, and may thus rise in seniority. The

<sup>8</sup> According to a government ethnographer in 1974, eleven of the sixteen official Liberian tribes had Poros, and a twelfth the Sande only. S. Jangaba M. Johnson, 'The Influence of Islam on Poros and Sande in Western Liberia', paper read to a seminar on African Studies, University of Liberia, 18-19 July 1974.

<sup>9</sup> The following is taken from some of the main works on Poros, including George W. Harley, *Notes on the Poros in Liberia*, Cambridge, MA, 1941; *idem*, *Masks as Agents of Social Control*; Little, 'The Political Function of the Poros,' parts I and II; *Ethnologische Zeitschrift Zürich*, 1 (1980); Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*.

<sup>10</sup> Riddell, 'The Gbannah Ma', p.129; Beryl L. Bellman, *Village of Curers and Assassins: on the production of Fula Kpelle cosmological categories*, The Hague, 1975, p.68.

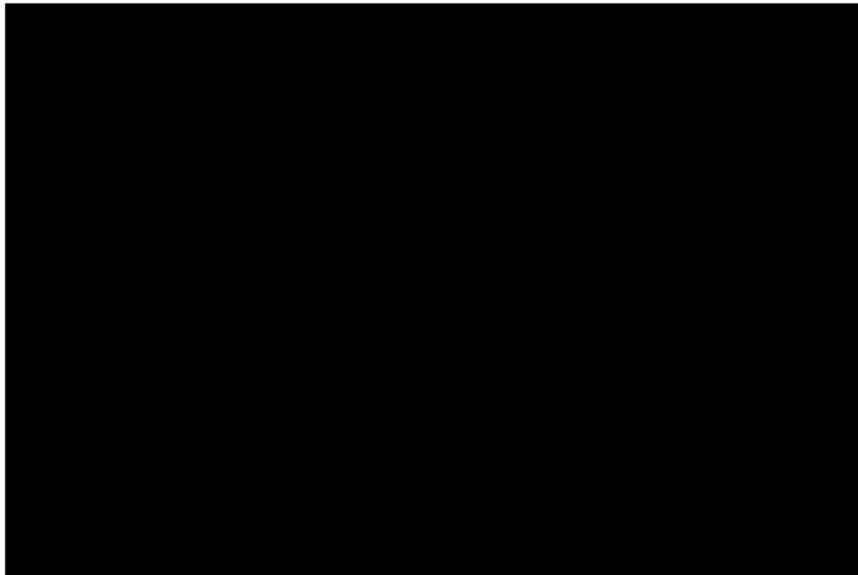
actual control of a local Poros chapter is in the hands of priests known as zoes. The office of *zoes* appears to be largely hereditary, circulating among certain locally prominent families, notably those whose ancestors made a pact with the earth when they first cultivated it, and whose descendants are considered to be the owners of the land. The earth is clearly of great importance, and when Poros initiates return from the bush they are smeared with white clay, a symbol of contact with the spirit world.<sup>11</sup> Girls are similarly initiated into adult society through the Sande bush, which serves a comparable purpose of education and is run by female *zoes*. It has a less evident political function than the Poros, but is at least as important in governing relations with the spirit world. In the past, before the advent of republican government and Christian education, any person who was not initiated into Poros or Sande, in those parts of Liberia where these were prevalent, was simply not considered part of adult society. According to an author writing on the notion of what constitutes a responsible adult in modern Liberia, 'Men and women who join those societies are perceived to have mastered the arts of communication that facilitate interaction within and without groups and in the adjudication of conflicts.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Harley, *Notes on the Poros*, pp.14, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Hassan Conteh, 'Reflections on Some Concepts of Religion and Medicine in Liberian Society', *Liberian Studies Journal*, XV, 2 (1990), pp.149-50.

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview, Upper Lofa County, 20 December 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Little, 'Political Function of the Poros', part I, pp.354-5.



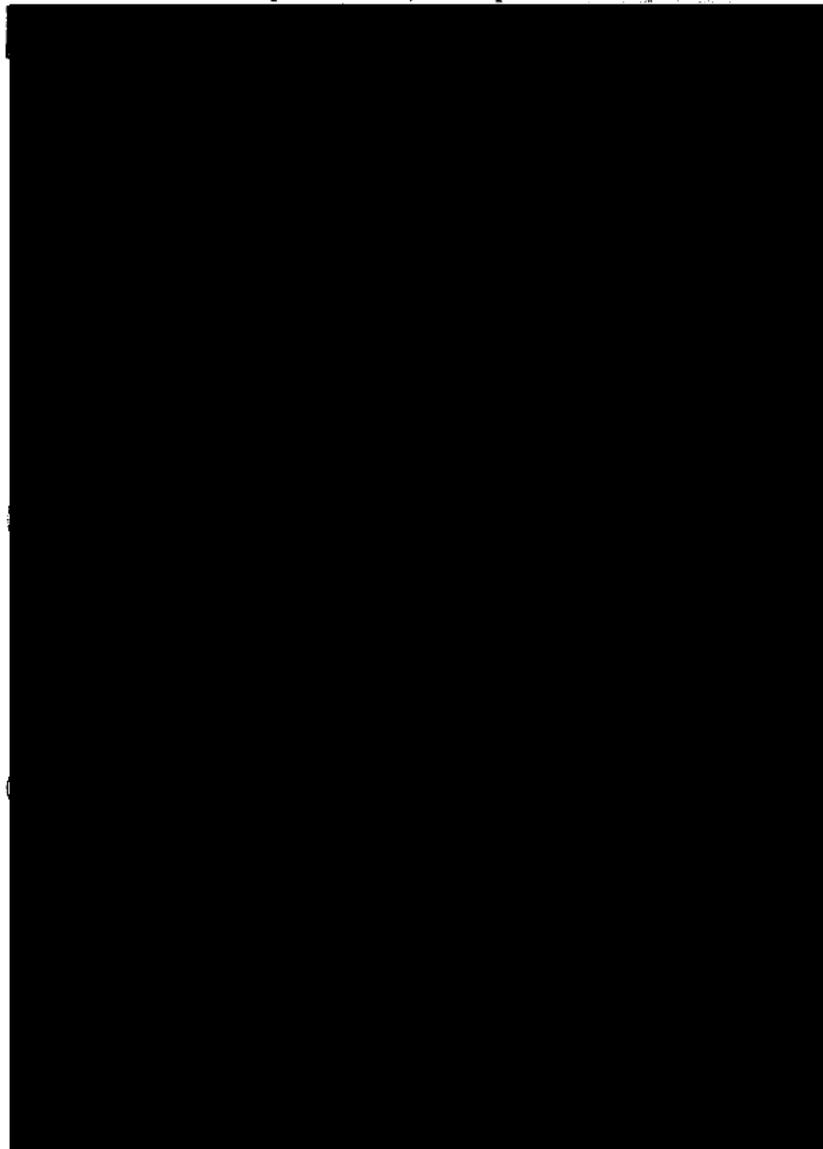
It has been noted already that the description, common in the ethnographic literature, of Poro and Sande as 'secret societies' is inaccurate in some respects.<sup>21</sup> Poro and Sande are schools in which boys and girls are initiated into adult society under the aegis of elders who control the rituals and other elements of their instruction and are strictly bound not to reveal details of their instruction to non-members. It is this last feature of the societies which suggests secrecy, but since, in principle, every man and woman in the communities where Poro and Sande exist has been initiated, it is rather unhelpful to label them 'secret societies', however hard it is to avoid the term. For present purposes it is important to make a distinction between Poro and Sande and a large number of more exclusive sodalities which have also existed in recent Liberian history and which may more correctly be described as 'secret societies', since they are elite groups whose membership and rituals may not be divulged even to other members of the communities in which they exist. Secret societies in the fullest sense of the term include a wide variety of corporations which cultivate esoteric spiritual knowledge, including snake societies which specialise in curing snakebite, societies which are

<sup>20</sup> Chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> Above, p.200.

*De delictis in his seculis...*  
*...*

believed to exercise control over thunder and lightning, and societies such as human leopards and crocodiles whose members are believed to be possessed by the spirits of wild animals.



<sup>22</sup> Person, *Samori*, I, pp.63-4.

For people who believe that the spirit world is real and that it may be entered by humans quite easily, or conversely that spirits may enter humans, a period spent secluded in the forest, such as in the Poro or Sande bush during initiation, makes a deep impression. The veteran American missionary George Way Harley, probably the most knowledgeable of all foreign writers on Poro, was surely correct in observing that Poro initiates in older times

<sup>23</sup> W. Branford Griffith, preface to Sir K.J. Beatty, *Human Leopards*, New York, 1978, p.viii.

during their years in the bush school 'lived in fear of death and no doubt felt that they were very close to the spirit world, perhaps actually in it'.<sup>24</sup> There, they were 'in close contact with the spirits...if not actually residing in the realm of the unseen'.<sup>25</sup> According to Harley, during their period in the bush in earlier times, initiates might eat human flesh. Boys who had been executed for offending the laws of the Poro society or who died of other causes during their period of seclusion might have their vital organs eaten by others. This was a way both of offering a sacrifice to the Bush Devil and of ensuring the continuity of the spirit of the victims, since a part of their life essence was deemed to enter into those who ate their hearts or other organs. The victims simply failed to return from their seclusion in the forest, and their families would be told that the Bush Devil had eaten them.<sup>26</sup> As Harley also notes, where transgressors of the Poro law were killed, the victim might be thought of, not as a wrongdoer, but 'as a sacrifice to law and order'.<sup>27</sup>

Poro rituals articulate a view of power as morally ambiguous, a source of both life and death, just as eating itself is a fundamentally ambiguous activity, being essential for life but also implying the death of another being. In a philosophy where animals, like everything else, are believed to have souls, the everyday act of eating merely to sustain life has important implications for, as Elias Canetti has noted, 'everything which is eaten is the food of power'.<sup>28</sup> Since eating meat implies the destruction of animals (and even eating vegetables has a similar implication, if all things are thought to have souls), it connects the acquisition of power with the process of destruction, so central to the principle of all religious sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> Eating irreversibly transforms the thing eaten, which is thereby obliterated, but which may also gain an enhanced status due to the transferral of power to an individual or a social group, such as in the act of sacrifice.<sup>30</sup>

Several commentators affirm that *zoës* of the Poro belong to formal grades of increasing seniority which require particular forms

<sup>24</sup> George W. Harley, *Native African Medicine, with Special Reference to its Practice in the Mono Tribe of Liberia*, London, 1970, p.128.

<sup>25</sup> Harley, *Notes on the Poro*, p.3.

<sup>26</sup> Harley, *Native African Medicine*, p.132.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.131.

<sup>28</sup> Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, London, 1987, p.257.

<sup>29</sup> H. Hubert and M. Mauss, *Mélanges d'histoire des religions*, Paris, 1929, p.xiv.

<sup>30</sup> MacCormack, 'Human Leopards and Crocodiles', p.56.

of entry, including, in older times, human sacrifice.<sup>31</sup> Entry to the rank of a very senior *zo* required the candidate to sacrifice his own son, according to Harley.<sup>32</sup> If this was indeed so, it would be consistent with the idea that, since human sacrifice was held to be the supreme form of sacrifice, it was appropriate for entry to the most powerful grades of Poro. However, we should not allow these remarks by George Way Harley to pass without further comment, for Harley, while a fine researcher on the Poro, was also a Christian missionary and a qualified medical doctor who abhorred certain of the practices of the Poro. He recorded what he could learn of the Poro and of other secret societies during the years he lived in Nimba County from 1926 to 1960, when these institutions had already been greatly influenced by the Liberian government. As a Christian appalled by the notion of human sacrifice, he may well have over-estimated the frequency with which such sacrifices and the ritual consumption of human flesh occurred in earlier Poro ceremonies – if, that is, we are to accept that they actually occurred at all. No author believes that Poro existed solely or even principally to perform human sacrifices; all agree that it uses the idiom of eating to express the re-emergence of boys as men as a result of initiation. What can hardly be doubted in Harley's writings is that many of his informants told him of people being killed and their flesh eaten in the forest in years gone by, and these oral accounts led him to believe that such sacrifices had taken place at least sometimes in earlier years, perhaps only a decade before he went to live in Nimba County.

Other foreigners who visited Liberia in the 1920s were similarly sure that such things had existed very recently, such as the British traveller who noted, concerning what she called 'cannibalism': 'Of its previous almost general practice before the opening up of the Guinea Coast I think there is no doubt in any knowledgeable mind', an opinion she based largely on discussions with Liberian officials.<sup>33</sup> Although it is impossible to determine precisely how frequently human sacrifice may have been practised, it was clearly spoken of as a principle associated with access to great power, including at the higher reaches of Poro. It is no small wonder,

<sup>31</sup> Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, p.47; Konneh, 'Indigenous Entrepreneurs', p.23; Riddell, 'The Gbannah Ma', pp.129-30; Patrick Joseph Harrington, 'Secret Societies and the Church: an evaluation of the Poro and Sande secret societies and the missionary among the Mano of Liberia', (Ph.D. thesis, Gregorian University, Rome, 1975), pp.17-18.

<sup>32</sup> Harley, *Native African Medicine*, p.133.

<sup>33</sup> Lady Dorothy Mills, *Through Liberia*, London, 1926, p.112.

then, that a Christian like Harley should have concluded that, at the heart of the Poro mystery, there is 'frightfulness'. Since what Harley called 'frightfulness', by which he appears to have meant human sacrifice, was also associated with a power which was morally ambivalent, he went on to say that 'it was overcome by a frightfulness more terrible still, until the all-highest could sit and say, "I am what I am".'<sup>34</sup> This assumption that power is what it is, inherently neither good nor evil, is still prevalent in Liberia, where senior *zoes* are regarded to this day as having aspects both of a curer and a potential agent of death.<sup>35</sup>

The durability of older beliefs in the spiritual nature of animals and even things is supported by numerous sources. A foreigner living in Nimba County in the 1960s recorded that the Mano villagers there believed in the material and spiritual nature of things and people. He was told that human beings have three spirits: one is the spirit which may wander freely during dreams; another is the 'essence' of a person, which becomes an ancestor spirit at death; and a third is the 'breath of life' which causes a person to draw breath, and which dies when breathing ceases.<sup>36</sup> Similar beliefs in the existence of multiple souls, some of which are held to survive the death of the physical body, are in no way peculiar to Liberia but are quite widespread throughout West Africa.<sup>37</sup> It is interesting, in this regard, to recall the belief of Samuel Doe's tormentors, on the night of his death, that he was trying to make a part of himself disappear and escape by blowing on his body.<sup>38</sup>

While early writers on the Poro believed that among its rituals were human sacrifice and the consumption of human flesh, these practices were most closely associated with more exclusive secret societies, most particularly the human leopard societies which formerly existed throughout much of modern-day Sierra Leone and Liberia. There are few accounts of leopard societies from before 1900, by which time they were already changing under the influence of colonial government in Sierra Leone and Guinea or of republican government in Liberia itself. Hence, in addition to the usual difficulties attendant on interpreting evidence on

<sup>34</sup> Harley, *Notes on the Poro*, p.32.

<sup>35</sup> Bellman, *Village of Curers and Assassins*, p.63, n.17.

<sup>36</sup> Blanchard, 'The Impact of External Domination', pp.73-5.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: some aspects of Ghanaian culture*, Tema, 1974, pp.37-9.

<sup>38</sup> Above, pp.10-11.

African institutions or customs written by colonial or American-Liberian officials and ethnographers, there is also a risk of attributing to the leopard societies of an earlier period characteristics which they acquired only as a result of their interaction with colonial government.

Some of the fullest early accounts of human leopards were those gathered by a British colonial commission of inquiry in Sierra Leone, which found evidence of the existence of secret societies dating back to the 1850s. Interestingly, the commission thought that leopard societies were of rather recent creation, suggesting that their more lethal activities might be some sort of response to colonial rule.<sup>39</sup> The societies it investigated were formed of 'men of mature age, past their prime' who met in secret conclave and regularly killed human victims in a form of sacrifice. They then ate the flesh of their victims, with a view to 'increasing their virile powers'. This act of eating bound them together and was in keeping with their identity as leopards.<sup>40</sup> In any event, 'the prime object of the Human Leopard Society was to secure human fat wherewith to anoint the Borfima,' the name of a cult object kept by each such society.<sup>41</sup> Another colonial account from Sierra Leone, from 1901, similarly reported that members of a leopard society had to kill a relative to obtain human fat to 'feed' their cult object.<sup>42</sup> A modern Sierra Leonean historian agrees that reports of human sacrifice from this period, accompanied by the consumption by initiates of human flesh, arose from the activities of leopard societies seeking medicine for their fetish.<sup>43</sup> To judge from these descriptions and others of similar societies in Liberia,<sup>44</sup> it seems that at the centre of a particular leopard society was a ritual object which required to be 'fed' with blood or fat from a sacrifice. This gave power to the cult object and, hence, to the society's members. Whereas a less powerful object, such as a mask or one of the portable miniatures known as *ma*, could be fed with animal blood or even with spittle, a leopard fetish demanded the blood of a member of the society which owned it, who was required to supply the sacrifice of a blood relative, in other words a member of his own family. A German medical doctor who saw

<sup>39</sup> Beatty, *Human Leopards*, p.4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.vii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.v, 3-4.

<sup>42</sup> T.J. Alldridge, quoted in Furbay, *Top Hats*, p.123.

<sup>43</sup> Abraham, 'Cannibalism and African Historiography', p.126.

<sup>44</sup> Sibley and Westermann, *Liberia*, pp.179-80.

the cult object of a leopard society in the 1940s described it as 'a lump of black wax about the size of a child's head, wrapped in cloths and bits of leopard-skin'. At its core was vegetable and animal matter. He was told that the appearance of cracks in the wax covering was taken as a sign that the fetish required 'feeding' with blood, and that this tended to occur in the dry season.<sup>45</sup> The idea that objects which contain a powerful spirit require to be fed, like humans, is not a peculiarity of Liberia, but is recorded in some other parts of West Africa, too.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike Poro and Sande, membership of leopard societies was restricted to the most senior members of a community. A British official writing on human leopards in Sierra Leone opined that they did not apparently form 'an organised society in the ordinary acceptance of the term'. 'At most,' he thought, 'it is a temporary binding together of a few individuals of like disposition to effect a common object, but in any case these individuals must have the means of identifying each other wherever they may happen to be.' Among the Mende they were mostly 'persons of between middle age and old age'.<sup>47</sup> Two anthropologists who studied the Kpelle of Liberia in the 1920s found that 'in the strongholds of the [leopard] society all the men of importance in the community are sometimes compelled to become members'.<sup>48</sup> It was, they thought, little different from 'ordinary secret societies among the West African natives except in its utilization of human beings in its fetish worship'. The main purpose of obtaining human flesh was to 'feed the charm', thereby 'bringing strength to the members or protection to the community'.<sup>49</sup> This last remark is of particular interest as it suggests that, despite their occasional lethal activities, leopard societies were regarded as socially valuable. Their elite character implied the possession both of great esoteric knowledge and of great power, including the power of life and death, which could be used for the greater good of the community in which they existed. It certainly appears that, in their 'classical' form, meaning, in the present context, that which they had before the submission of hinterland societies to the Liberian government, the most powerful religious societies were regarded as a source of protection at the same time as they were known to take human

<sup>45</sup> Junge, *African Jungle Doctor*, p.185.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, London and Kumasi, 1923, pp.111-12.

<sup>47</sup> F.W.H. Migeod, *A View of Sierra Leone*, London, 1926, pp.227-8.

<sup>48</sup> Sibley and Westermann, *Liberia*, p.180.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.181.

life. The Kwa-iru society among the Grebo of south-eastern Liberia, for example, acted as 'a kind of police' on behalf of the village assembly.<sup>50</sup>

In pre-republican times, the elders who generally controlled religious corporations also had economic privileges which enabled them to regulate commercial exchanges in their communities. A researcher in Nimba County in 1967-8 met some old men who said that they had taken part in trade expeditions taking kola nuts from the forest to exchange them for salt and trade goods with the Mandingo in the days before either French or Liberian forces had entered the area. They said that the trade was 'conducted by members of the Leopard and Crocodile societies', both elite societies. The stated fee for joining these societies was the sacrifice of a member of one's own domestic group in a cannibalistic feast; the ability to make such a sacrifice symbolized one's access to sufficient labour to mount a trading expedition.<sup>51</sup> The researcher, an American, grappling with this sensitive issue adds later: 'While there is no sure way of verifying the occurrence of such cannibalistic feasts, I was able to talk with several old men who were reputed to have been members of one or the other of these societies many years ago, and they all vouched for the practice of such rites.'<sup>52</sup> We may note in passing the recurrence of a highly pejorative vocabulary by outside researchers, such as reference to 'cannibalistic feasts' to designate what appear to have been religious rituals involving human sacrifices and the consumption of human flesh. More interesting in the above description is the fact that oral traditions record the role played by elite secret societies in regulating trade in older times, a point confirmed by a modern Liberian scholar.<sup>53</sup>

The most powerful medicines, which included those requiring human blood for their maintenance, were of special use in time of war. During the small-scale, seasonal campaigns which occurred regularly in many parts of Liberia before the twentieth century, and whose principal aim was the acquisition of slaves and plunder, *zoes* and other religious specialists were solicited by warriors to provide them with powerful war medicine. Many war medicines were made from human body-parts.<sup>54</sup> According to two anthro-

<sup>50</sup> Johnston, *Liberia*, II, p.1070.

<sup>51</sup> Riddell, 'The Gbannah Ma', pp.129-30.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.140, n.3.

<sup>53</sup> Konneh, 'Indigenous Entrepreneurs', pp.22-3.

<sup>54</sup> Schwab, *Tribes*, pp.232-4; Harley, *Native African Medicine*, p.3.

pologists among the Kpelle in the 1920s, 'warriors become brave by eating parts of the body of an enemy, by drinking his blood...or by using his skull as a drinking bowl.'<sup>55</sup> Wars were common, and were often carried out primarily for enrichment, but their duration could be controlled by the religious influence of secret societies, not least to prevent them from destabilising whole communities. The control of peace and war was thus also connected to the relations between generations, as young men were expected to seek prestige and wealth through war, but might then find their power limited by a secret society dominated by elders.

Where an elite society such as a leopard society existed in a Poro area, it is not clear exactly what was the relationship of this elite group to the Poro. There is agreement among all sources that the Poro lodges have always included a number of higher degrees or more specialised societies from which ordinary members are excluded. Some authors maintain that high degrees of Poro before the twentieth century were identical with the leopard societies in those same areas,<sup>56</sup> although other sources make no mention of this. However, since in such an area every single male human leopard would also be a member of Poro, the distinction may be a rather pedantic one. What is clear is that the language of the secret societies, the idiom of eating, was identical to the language of Poro.

There are further similarities between the leopards and other secret societies and less exclusive institutions such as Poro, whatever the institutional connection between them may or may not have been in the past. In both cases, respect for them was based in part on fear. This is not surprising, for fear is a component of respect for any form of public order whatever, in any part of the world.

#### *Secret societies under Liberian administration*

The power of life and death attributed to the most powerful religious institutions of pre-republican times reflected their role as pillars of social and political order in the communities of rural Liberia before the twentieth century. It was for this reason that the Liberian government, as its soldiers and administrators occupied the hinterland, and as new market forces penetrated towns and villages,

<sup>55</sup> Sibley and Westermann, *Liberia*, p.207.

<sup>56</sup> Beatty, *Human Leopards*, p.20; Harrington, 'Secret Societies and the Church', pp.17-18; Fulton, 'Political Structures', p.1228.

had to develop a policy for dealing with these institutions, just as it had towards chiefs.

The Americo-Liberian rulers, imbued with a Christian mission to eradicate what they saw as the satanic, superstitious and backward practices associated with traditional religion, were disposed to distrust the secret societies which they knew to exist in the rural areas which they aspired to govern. In 1912 the government banned by law the leopard society and many similar societies and instituted draconian punishments for members.<sup>57</sup> Although the text of this legislation has not been discovered, it appears to have been sweeping. A later administrative code, which consolidated a number of regulations and laws dealing with hinterland affairs, specified that illegal societies included the human leopard society, the Neegee, Susha, Toya, Kela, Uama-yama societies, and 'all secret societies of a political nature'. Membership of such societies was punishable by twenty years' imprisonment.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the existence of this legislation, there is no doubt that human leopards and crocodiles and similar secret societies continued to exist in many areas after 1912. A British traveller in Nimba County during the 1920s spoke to several men and women, some of them quite young, who had been condemned to long prison terms for leopard activities, and she saw parts of their costumes. Two of them admitted to her having eaten human flesh.<sup>59</sup> Some authors have interpreted the underground continuation of the secret societies as 'a reaction to the threats to traditional life by the pacification of the interior by the Liberian government',<sup>60</sup> a form of self-defence on the part of local communities threatened by national government. It is the case that secret societies were associated with both political and commercial interests, so that their members were threatened by the government's reorganisation of chiefdoms as well as by its propensity to grant trade privileges to Mandingo, almost invariably Muslims who tended to remain outside traditional secret societies. One modern author has described how Muslim teachers and traders made inroads into the economic monopolies previously held by senior *zoes*, such as

<sup>57</sup> S. Henry Cordor, *The Study of Africa: an introductory course in African studies for Liberian schools*, Monrovia, 1979, p.12.

<sup>58</sup> Article 69, 'Revised Laws and Administrative Regulations Governing the Hinterland', Government of Liberia, Department of the Interior, 1949, National Documentation Center, Monrovia.

<sup>59</sup> Mills, *Through Liberia*, pp.118-21. There are photographs of leopard prisoners facing pp. 170 and 172.

<sup>60</sup> Fulton, 'Political Structures', p.1228.

in the kola trade. He records that in the 1930s, a marabout named al-Hajj Muhammed Tunis introduced the Tijaniyya brotherhood of Sufi Islam to Liberia and 'helped abolish the dreaded Leopard society'. This was particularly effective among the Vai, many of whom converted to Islam.<sup>61</sup> The Tijaniyya have continued to make inroads in western Liberia, not least as a consequence of the persecution of Poro and other traditional institutions by the government of Ahmed Sékou Touré in neighbouring Guinea in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>62</sup>

While the intrusion of both republican government and wider market forces often represented a threat to the power of local notables, some were able to turn the process to their advantage, such as those people who succeeded in having themselves appointed as paramount chiefs and who developed an interest in collaborating with the central government in the official system of indirect rule. An individual prepared to use fully the considerable powers at the disposition of a paramount chief might find that membership of a secret society added substantially to the range of coercive instruments available, due to the ability of societies to commit killings without recourse to any judicial organ. In such cases, a secret society came to represent less a council of local elders than the entourage of a local despot. The position of the secret societies was thus as ambiguous as that of the government-organised chiefdoms themselves, being rooted in local tradition but also liable to domination by ambitious individuals using their position to gather formidable power. Evidence of the ambiguous position of the secret societies, or rather of their leading members, may be gleaned from many reports gathered from the 1920s onwards. A Belgian administrator with long experience of similar societies in the Congo, who did comparative research in Liberia and recorded the opinion of a Liberian administrator on the activities of human leopards in the future Nimba County in 1926-7, thought that the extension of settler government had transformed leopard societies into 'political instruments' wielded by 'a veritable gang of killers'. By the 1930s many, he thought, were acting for personal gain rather than on behalf of any wider community.<sup>63</sup>

It would be inaccurate to assert that the leopard societies were politicised as a result of Liberian conquest, since these associations

<sup>61</sup> Konneh, 'Indigenous Entrepreneurs', p.106.

<sup>62</sup> Augustine Konneh, *Religion, Commerce and the Integration of the Mandingo in Liberia*, Lanham, MD, 1996, p.74.

<sup>63</sup> Paul-Ernest Joset, *Les sociétés secrètes des hommes-léopards en Afrique noire*, Paris, 1955, pp.113, 158-9, 161, 178-86.

had always been both political and religious in nature. Rather, they became increasingly motivated by factional rather than communal interest as incorporation into a system of indirect rule created opportunities for individual political entrepreneurs to shake off the traditional checks and balances which required chiefs to reach their decisions in council. This is a crucial point since the powers wielded by the *zoes* of the Poro, and even more so by elite societies given to human sacrifice, were held to be exercised properly when they were used on behalf of an entire community, exactly as European governments during the same period reserved the right to take human lives, in the form of judicial punishment or formal war, for the greater good of the nation. Hence, if human leopards became more violent during the twentieth century, and more self-interested, it was a reflection of the fact that local government in general had tended to lose many of the checks and balances which it had previously contained and to become more despotic.

That the traditional secret societies survived in many areas, albeit with a notably different character, was partly because their very secrecy made them so difficult to suppress. There is no doubt of the rigour, or even brutality, of the government's early attempts to destroy the secret societies entirely. President Edwin Barclay (1930-44) seems to have been particularly severe in his policy against the human leopards, sending informers into the rural areas to report on them, although in the event these officials sometimes became recruits to the secret societies themselves. An African-American League of Nations official who visited Liberia in 1930 recorded:<sup>64</sup>

This strange, ferocious society had killed and consumed hundreds of individuals, raided towns, and even, on occasion, had brought human flesh to the market for sale. At first, in the effort to check the outrages, Barclay tried sounding out natives to locate the mainsprings of the movement, but when these investigators had tasted the flesh, they too became addicts. Finally, Barclay had the whole society rounded up, and some 600 were brought in, all of which could not be executed, naturally. Barclay picked the sixteen ring leaders and ordered them shot; some others he put in prison virtually for life.

Barclay organised military expeditions in which dozens of human leopards were killed, such as that commanded by Colonel Elwood Davis, an African-American officer commissioned in the Liberian

<sup>64</sup> Charles S. Johnson, *Bitter Canaan: the story of the Negro Republic*, New Brunswick and Oxford, 1989, p.169.

army. The English writer Graham Greene, travelling in Liberia in the mid-1930s, recorded a meeting with him in which Davis claimed to have 'court-martialled and shot fifty members of the Leopard Society in a village near Grand Bassa'.<sup>65</sup>

Some leopard societies were able to survive this repression, however, precisely because they had the support of some of those very same paramount chiefs who were also pillars of government policy in the hinterland. Ten years after Colonel Davis's campaigns, an ethnographer writing in the 1940s described the leopard societies among the Loma people as 'virtually a gangster organisation', to which initiates had to provide a human sacrifice,<sup>66</sup> and went on to state that in Nimba County it had become 'a convenient tool for chiefs, most of whom were members', to perpetuate their power independently of the central government. The same author quoted a former district commissioner who said that the chiefs used the leopard society to '[get] rid of all persons they considered undesirable, like possible competitors, and did whatever else they chose. With its assistance they had the land in a reign of terror'.<sup>67</sup> A chief could respect government regulations by day, and, disguised as a leopard or possessed by the spirit of a leopard, murder his enemies at night.

As it became clear that the government's 1912 ban on secret societies was not fully effective, the government developed a more nuanced approach towards traditional religious sodalities, making a distinction between the human leopards, which it continued to regard officially as illegal, and the Poro and Sande schools, which it encouraged as vehicles for the transmission of tribal culture and exempted from the ban. George Way Harley, who first came to Liberia in 1926, noted that the Poro and Sande had been 'completely suppressed' by the Liberian government at an earlier period, but later revived 'in a very modified and emasculated form' on account of their 'disciplinary function', but shorn of what the American missionary habitually called their 'frightfulness'.<sup>68</sup> Harley had a high regard for the institution of Poro in its new form but considered the leopard society, on the other hand, as a 'degradation' of its former self.

<sup>65</sup> Graham Greene, *Journey Without Maps*, London, 1948, pp.161, 186-93.

<sup>66</sup> Schwab, *Tribes*, p.297.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.299.

<sup>68</sup> Harley, *Masks as an Agent of Social Control*, p.vi; R. Earle Anderson, *Liberia: America's African friend*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1952, pp.50, 92. Anderson makes clear that Harley is his source for his information.

Christianity and Islam are dualistic religions, in which good and evil are represented as absolute contrasts, personified by God and Satan. This is not the case with traditional Liberian religious thought. In the theology of Poro, for example, the spirit of the forest is held to be powerful and capable of both cruelty and beneficence. The high priests of the society, the *zoes*, are pillars of public order but may also be required to perform human sacrifices, traditionally of their own relatives or children, in order to keep this order intact. Such sacrifices, while terrifying, are not held to be evil as long as they are carried out in the right way and for the proper purpose. The question arises as to who precisely may decide which of these purposes is morally correct or socially permissible. Two early European writers familiar with the Poro complex noted that the Kpelle with whom they discussed the matter considered the supreme being to be just and good. The authors concluded that, in the view of their interlocutors, 'God is the

<sup>83</sup> Junge, *African Jungle Doctor*, p.186.

source of the moral law, but not of moral actions; these latter receive their stimulus and character from the teachings in the Poro-bush.<sup>84</sup> For the proper moral order to be upheld, therefore, depended not on the will of the supreme being, but on the performance of traditional religious rituals in the right manner since it was these which gave form and shape to moral law. Harley, despite his detestation of the 'frightfulness' which he identified in the Poro's earlier practice of human sacrifice, recognised that 'the spirits of the ancestors are the personification of good.[...] The central figure in the Poro is in the last analysis, a personification of the ancestors.'<sup>85</sup>

However, the balance of power in traditional religious institutions was upset as a result of the manner in which the Liberian republic co-opted local government in the twentieth century. Members of leopard societies, for example (or, more accurately, people who were believed to have been entered by the spirit of a leopard), came to operate in a context in which they may fairly be suspected of being more concerned with their individual or factional interest than with the welfare of a wider community. The Liberian conquest of the hinterland did not actually destroy local institutions of power so much as reach a series of understandings with them. It was a process of reciprocal assimilation,<sup>86</sup> in which people who succeeded in being recognised by the government as tribal chiefs gained great power and wealth through access to the resources of the Liberian state, on the one hand, while Americo-Liberian politicians and officials, on the other, gained entry to local politics. One way in which officials from Monrovia could gain influence in local politics was by joining secret societies which not only gave them access to conclaves of local notables but also strengthened the perception that they had access to powerful spiritual resources, to add to the Christian churches and the Masonic craft which settler families already dominated. Normally, entry to a high grade of a society like Poro would require long years of apprenticeship, which politicians and officials hardly had time for. One short cut to immediate high-level entry was through human sacrifice, regarded as an instrument for achieving great power, traditionally necessary only in very specific circumstances and requiring sacrifice of a close relative. But an outsider, such as a politician, could use this technique to gain instant entry to an elite secret society.

<sup>84</sup> Sibley and Westermann, *Liberia*, p.193.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Esther Warner, *Trial by Sasswood*, Oxford, 1970 (first published 1955), p.117.

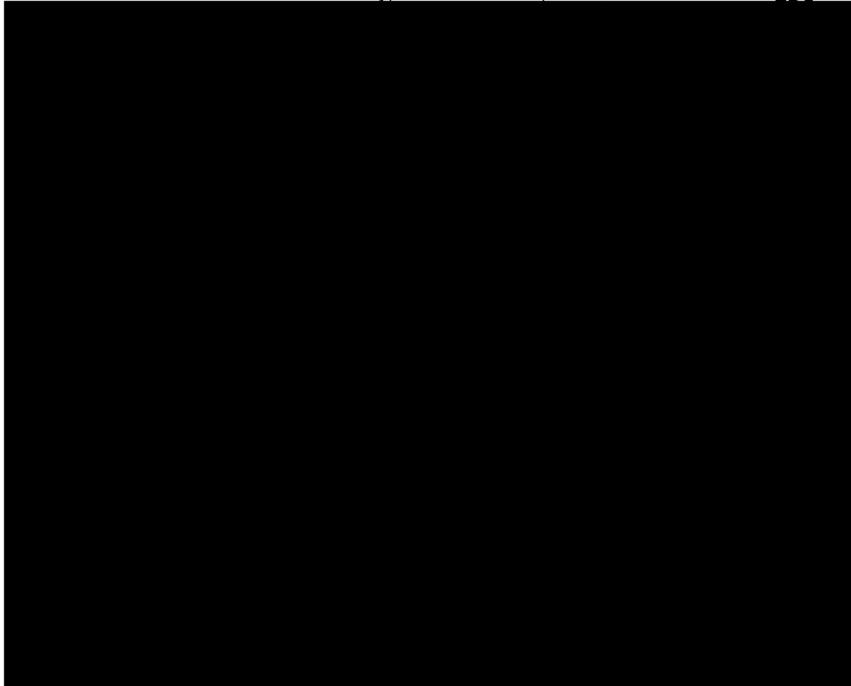
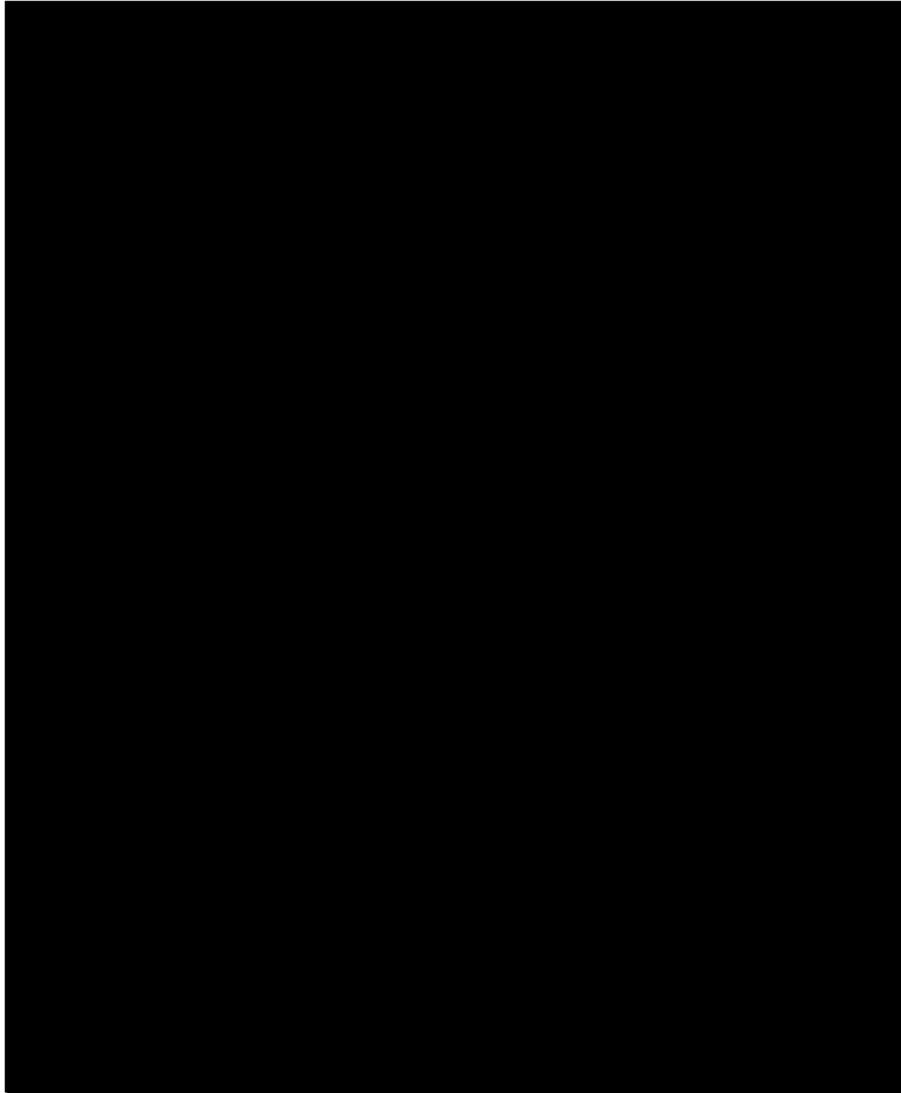
<sup>86</sup> The phrase is from Bayart, *The State in Africa*, pp.150-79.

Instead of providing his own son or daughter, he could, through simple access to the mechanism of the market, provide another human victim instead.

We do not know whether the Honourable James Paye, Ph.D., of the Liberian Senate, whose fearful dilemma we have described, chose to forgo making a human sacrifice, in which case he is likely to have declined in the esteem of some of his supporters, or whether he did so at the expense of his Christian principles, thus advancing his career. However there is abundant evidence that at least some Liberian politicians, faced with a choice as cruel as that facing James Paye, opted to make a human sacrifice, as we shall examine next. This has become an important part of modern Liberian political culture, although not one which is openly discussed. An essential element of the many Liberian religious sodalities is, after all, secrecy: ifa mo, 'do not speak it.'<sup>87</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Bellman, *Village of Curers and Assassins*, p.68.

<sup>88</sup> Harley, *Masks as Agents of Social Control*, p.vii.



More recently still, Charles Taylor has been initiated into a high degree of Poro, apparently in late 1996 or early 1997. This became publicly known when he married his second wife at St John's Methodist Church in Gbarnga on 28 January 1997. While making his marriage vows he gave one of his names as Dahkpanah, a title used for *zoes* of the Poro society.<sup>99</sup> Taylor's initiation into the society shortly before his wedding is reported to have been masterminded by one Isaac Cisco, the chief native investigator at the Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>100</sup> One leading NPFL official claims that a special form of Poro initiation has been developed for politicians, which takes only one day to complete and which requires the absolute minimum of scars, just a couple of nicks

<sup>89</sup> Fulton, 'The Kpelle Traditional Political System', p.18

<sup>90</sup> Cf. the anecdotes in Hayman and Preece, *Lighting Up Liberia*, pp.131, 141-3.

<sup>91</sup> Furbay, *Top Hats*, pp.127-8.

<sup>92</sup> Crocodiles are commonly referred to as alligators in Liberia.

<sup>93</sup> Greene, *Journey without Maps*, p.161.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* The emphasis is Greene's.

<sup>95</sup> Kenneth Best, *Cultural Policy in Liberia*, Paris, 1974, p.28.

<sup>96</sup> Fraenkel, *Tribe and Class*, p.172.

<sup>97</sup> Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p.29.

<sup>98</sup> Brehun, *War of Horror*, p.25.

<sup>99</sup> *The Inquirer*, 31 January 1997.

<sup>100</sup> *Bassa Voice* (Monrovia), 6 February 1997.

with a razor under the arm where they will not be seen.<sup>101</sup> Certainly, Charles Taylor showed particular concern to cultivate *zoes* from the start of the war, and during his election campaign in 1997 he donated minibuses emblazoned with his name to the National Council of Zoes, Chiefs and Elders.

While the Poro and Sande societies have functioned openly, and even received official encouragement, since the 1920s, the more exclusive of the traditional secret societies have remained illegal. Nevertheless, the archives of the Liberian government itself contain many reports indicating the continued existence of secret societies given to human sacrifice, or at least of groups of people wishing to acquire human body-parts for ritual purposes. In 1957, for example, the superintendent of Maryland County reported that a child had been found dead 'with parts cut from the body'. The missing parts were the tips of one finger on each hand, both ears, and part of the genitals. The superintendent instructed the local chief to use what he called the 'country custom' – probably the traditional trial by ordeal called *sasswood* – to find out who was responsible.<sup>102</sup> During Tubman's presidency reports of ritual killings began to circulate in Monrovia. During late 1954 an opposition newspaper carried several reports that people were being abducted and killed by candidates for political office in forthcoming elections. Two leading politicians of the True Whig Party were persistently named as being connected with these deaths, which were said to have as their purpose the acquisition of power through human sacrifice. Former President Edwin Barclay, who had engineered the succession for his protégé William Tubman but who had become disenchanted with his style of government and was now campaigning against him, circulated a petition of protest which he submitted to the President.<sup>103</sup> Tubman's reply was scathing, but he admitted the existence of rumours 'alleging that dangerous people called "heartmen" were walking at nights to capture and murder innocent persons, and to extract their hearts' and that Monrovia was 'horrified and terrorised'.<sup>104</sup>

Throughout the years of the True Whig Party ascendancy, there

<sup>101</sup> Author's interview with John T. Richardson, Monrovia, 8 April 1997.

<sup>102</sup> W. Fred Gibson, superintendent of Maryland County, to Paramount Chief of Nymowe chiefdom, Hedo Hodo, 8 June 1957, and Gibson to Tubman, 12 June 1957, National Documentation Center, Monrovia.

<sup>103</sup> Wreh, *The Love of Liberty*, pp.70-5.

<sup>104</sup> 'Special Message of William V.S. Tubman, President of Liberia, to the Extraordinary Session of the 43rd Legislature of Liberia', 13 June 1955, National Documentation Center, Monrovia.

were regular rumours and reports of this sort. An American travelling through Nimba in the 1950s found that her Liberian employee was afraid of becoming a victim of ritual killing. She told the man that he should not worry because the secret societies 'are not so strong in Africa as they used to be'; but he replied: 'It is still the old days in Africa, Ma. The secret societies are not less strong; they are only more secret.'<sup>105</sup> Ten years later, a Peace Corps volunteer in Lofa County recorded that 'the Leopard Society is by no means an extinct sect'.<sup>106</sup> But increasingly, reports of ritual killings were associated less with the traditional secret societies, such as the human leopards, than with so-called 'heartmen', defined by one modern Liberian newspaper as 'groups of organised killers often contracted by political aspirants and businessmen to kill people and extract their body parts to perform rituals'.<sup>107</sup> Heartmen are said to supply hearts to 'juju men to make their clients succeed in life for high jobs in government or in private employment or for protection against enemies'.<sup>108</sup> Modern heartmen, then, are not considered to be officials of any traditional society, but appear to be freelance killers who specialise in procuring corpses or human organs for those who require them, particularly business people and politicians in search of wealth and power, who may belong to an outlawed secret society or may simply contact an independent occult practitioner who claims to be able to confer power on his or her clients, in return for payment, through the manipulation of spiritual forces requiring human blood or human body parts.<sup>109</sup>

Before 1980 such matters were rumoured far more often than they were formally investigated. This is hardly surprising because the practice of ritual killing by members of the political elite, even if it was no more than a rumour, struck at the heart of the True Whig Party's claim to exercise hegemony in Liberia. The Americo-Liberian settlers generally derived their prestige and their elevated social position from their claim to represent a superior civilisation, which was Christian and technically advanced.

<sup>105</sup> Warner, *Trial by Sasswood*, pp.132-3.

<sup>106</sup> Marvin H. Unger, *Paupaw, Foofoo, and Juju: recollections of a Peace Corps volunteer*, New York, 1968, p.73.

<sup>107</sup> *National Chronicle*, 13 March 1997.

<sup>108</sup> *New Democrat*, 2, 158 (31 October-2 November 1995).

<sup>109</sup> Conteh, 'Reflections on Religion and Medicine', p.149.

Tolbert's successor, Samuel Doe, seems himself to have believed that human sacrifice could be a means of obtaining spiritual power. Charles Taylor, to name but one, was convinced that the Statue of the Unknown Soldier erected by Doe in 1981 to commemorate his coup, and which was destroyed in the battle of Monrovia in April 1996, was sanctified with a human sacrifice.<sup>114</sup> There are eye-witness accounts of Doe's soldiers eating parts of Thomas Quiwonkpa's body in 1985.<sup>115</sup> Throughout the late 1980s, cases of ritual killings came before the law courts: in 1985, for example, six people, including a former senior official of Doe's party, were sentenced to death for a ritual killing in Maryland.<sup>116</sup> In the three subsequent years, at least twelve people were hanged after conviction, and thirty-five presumed victims of ritual killings were identified, also in Maryland.<sup>117</sup> Doe's defence minister, Gray Allison, was convicted of a similar offence in August 1989, and while his trial was certainly politically motivated, few doubt that he was guilty as charged.<sup>118</sup> There were regular reports of similar court cases involving less senior figures, such as four members of an independent church arrested in 1988 on suspicion of 'killing, cooking and eating a child'.<sup>119</sup> Although most reports do not imply that such groups were traditional secret societies, one article does suggest that the Neegee, 'a secret society that is linked with deals in human parts and human sacrifice for the achievement of various mundane activities', was still in existence despite being illegal since 1912.<sup>120</sup> Even if we were to maintain that the vast majority of

<sup>113</sup> Personal communication by former minister in the Tolbert Government, Monrovia, 27 March 1997.

<sup>114</sup> Huband, *The Liberian Civil War*, p.92. Many people in Monrovia also make this allegation.

<sup>115</sup> Above, p.60.

<sup>116</sup> Amnesty International, quoted in Kappel and Korte, *Human Rights Violations*, p.161.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Médecins sans Frontières, internal document.

<sup>118</sup> Kappel and Korte, *Human Rights Violations*, pp.223-5.

<sup>119</sup> Paul Gifford, 'Liberia's Never-die Christians', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 30, 2 (1992), p.352.

<sup>120</sup> Conteh, 'Reflections on Religion and Medicine', p.149.

<sup>110</sup> Milligan, *Bolahun*, p.27.

<sup>111</sup> Carl Meacham, 'Peace Corps Service in Liberia, 1965-66: reflections of an African-American volunteer', *Liberian Studies Journal*, XV, 1 (1990), pp.100, 103.

<sup>112</sup> Tipoteh, *Democracy*, pp.127-8.

reports such as these are mere rumour or calumny, still there remain a few instances, such as the Yancy and Anderson case mentioned above, in which evidence was tested in court and the accused freely admitted the charges.

It is striking in the pattern of human sacrifice which may be discerned after the 1940s, particularly those cases which were said to involve politicians, that members of such cults do not appear to have sacrificed their own kin, which was traditionally thought to be the most effective of all forms of sacrifice, but simply to have paid heartmen for victims. Human sacrifice, in other words, had become fully subject to market principles. The attitudes of national politicians towards such practices had come a long way since the government had outlawed secret societies in 1912, and since the ferocious campaigns against human leopards in the 1920s and '30s. Senior officials had discovered that entering secret conclaves of this sort gave them access to sites of political influence in the rural areas. Thereafter, it appears, some prominent Americo-Liberians went on to establish cults of their own, making private cults of human sacrifice a feature of elite Liberian life.

In short, it seems that there has been a mutual assimilation of the Christianity professed by Liberia's governing elite and of traditional religious beliefs, and that this has accompanied the mutual political assimilation which took place over the same period. Doubtless these theological and sociological tendencies are intimately related. It is no doubt a wild exaggeration to suspect all rich or powerful people of using such methods, as many Liberians today do. There is, for example, no hard evidence that ritual killings were ever carried out in order to secure advancement in the Masonic craft as so many Liberians believe, perhaps because they have assumed that Freemasons practised ritual killing in the same way as members of certain indigenous secret societies. The fact remains, though, that the evidence that people were killed during the twentieth century for purposes of human sacrifice is so strong as to be overwhelming, although precisely how frequent such killings have been is impossible to determine.

*War, power and the spiritual order*

One Liberian newspaper noted that heartmen were 'a nationwide plague until the war when it became unnecessary for one to even hide to kill for killing was the tool of the trade'.<sup>126</sup> At least some observers, then, see an element of continuity in the exercise of violence in peace and war, in the sense that activities which had previously been carried out by heartmen or other specialists in secret, could now be carried out openly by combatants in the civil war.

There is certainly abundant evidence that religious beliefs in the broadest sense have affected the way in which fighters have behaved. We may recall that early accounts of the NPFL, 'at a time when its rank and file were largely young Gio men and women from rural Nimba County, describe them being initiated through quasi-traditional rituals. Some smeared their faces with the white clay they called *leh*, a practice associated with people in contact with the spirit world, such as in Poro rituals'.<sup>127</sup> A similar observation applies to many other practices which foreign observers have found

<sup>126</sup> *New Democrat*, 2, 158 (31 October-2 November 1995).

<sup>127</sup> Above, p.113.

particularly puzzling or bizarre in the Liberian war. Transvestitism is often taken as a demonstration of the strength of a warrior, containing an element of wildness, an ability to transcend established genres. Among the Gola, 'gender ambiguity and androgyny' are said to be 'potential qualities of all living things as well as spirit entities. Cross-sex impersonations and role exchanges occur in a number of Gola rites, and gender transformation or ambisexuality is a facility of wild animals of the bush and of all nature spirits.'<sup>128</sup> Some sources claim that such cross-dressing is traditionally used as a sign of the dangerously liminal status during the passage from boyhood to manhood,<sup>129</sup> in which case its use by adolescents setting out on the essentially adult business of making war is not surprising. A foreign correspondent visiting the capital of Ulimo-K at the height of the war was told that 'combining male and female attributes is considered a powerful charm'.<sup>130</sup> The widespread adoption by fighters of war-names is also indicative of a change of status as they assume a new, warlike personality. The tactics used by fighters in the 1990s often also have a basis in the traditional search by warriors to obtain the strongest possible war medicine, which often contains human body parts.<sup>131</sup>

Some Liberians, when asked why male fighters during the civil war dressed in female clothing and adorned themselves with various objects, reply simply that this was done to frighten people. Others say that these are techniques traditionally used in war. Both observations are true enough but fall short of a fully satisfactory explanation insofar as they imply that the civil war was of a purely traditional sort. In effect, some of the trappings and some of the military tactics retained from older ways of waging war were used in the 1990s, but, crucially, the traditional limits placed upon war had been removed. The wars of the Liberian hinterland before the twentieth century were generally small-scale, seasonal, and primarily intended to acquire plunder or slaves. The principal mechanisms of control were religious in nature, making military entrepreneurs subject to the authority of various religious institutions. Only exceptional individuals, outsiders like Samory Touré, could escape these controls. The contrast between that situation

<sup>128</sup> Warren L. D'Azevedo, 'Gola Womanhood and the Limits of Masculine Omnipotence' in Thomas D. Blakeley, Walter E.A. van Beek and Dennis L. Thomson (eds), *Religion in Africa*, London and Portsmouth, NH, 1994, p.361, n. 9; cf. Moran, 'Warriors or Soldiers?'

<sup>129</sup> Bellman, *Language of Secrecy*, p.111.

<sup>130</sup> Steve Weizman, 'Into Battle with Guns and Magic', *Guardian*, 14 July 1994.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Schwab, *Tribes*, pp.232-4.

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and the events of the 1990s suggests the value of examining the ritual control of violence during the civil war, or rather the lack of such control, if we are to understand why the war happened in the way it did.

At the beginning of the war, the NPFL showed itself intent on acquiring some religious support by drafting in all manner of ritual experts. There was no need for them to be at all traditional or even to be Liberian. When asked why people had to be imported from Côte d'Ivoire and other parts of West Africa to inoculate fighters against bullets and supply them with other war medicine, when there were plenty of Liberian *zoes* available to do the job, a senior aide to Charles Taylor replied that this was because the young NPFL fighters had no confidence in the ability of their local *zoes*, old men from their own towns and villages for whom they had little respect.<sup>132</sup> Although almost all the fighters believed that it was possible to obtain spiritual medicine which would make them invulnerable to bullets and successful in battle, they were at the same time contemptuous of those individuals who, according to the traditional values of their home areas, should have been able to provide them with this. We have noted that throughout recent decades, under pressure from the government and the churches, Poro and similar traditional authorities have lost power as control of political life passed into the hands of officials appointed by the state. At the same time, many of the powers and privileges of the traditional secret societies, including the perceived ability to acquire spiritual power through sacrifice, were effectively privatised. Human sacrifice was practised no longer by *zoes* but by heartmen, freelance vendors of human body parts, for the use of individual clients. One consequence, which became clear during the war, was that many young people have ceased to believe that traditional secret societies and their officials can make war medicine, a skill which is thought to require great power. On the other hand, the same young fighters still believe as strongly as ever in the possibility of such spiritual power: what was lacking during the war was a ready source. This was the reason for bringing in foreign experts, who supposedly had access to exotic forms of power.

Only the most exceptional *zoes* were regarded by the irreverent young NPFL fighters as having really impressive power. A good illustration is the case of Singbe, who was a *zo* living before the war near Mount Gibi in Margibi County, a place with a national reputation as a centre of spiritual power, and possibly the place

<sup>132</sup> Author's interview with John T. Richardson, Monrovia, 8 April 1997.

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of residence of the *zoes* whom the government had once attempted to establish as the central administrators for all Liberian Poro societies.<sup>133</sup> To judge from descriptions, Singbe was probably a polio victim whose physical deformity added to his mystique, since garbled reports of his powers may have led people who had never seen him, but only heard of him, to assume that he was a dwarf, regarded as a particularly powerful being. One later newspaper article described him as 'the mysterious handicapped CO Singbe' who 'emerged in the early days of the Liberian war'.<sup>134</sup> Mount Gibi was said to be guarded by strange animals and dwarfs, and its summit could be approached only by senior *zoes*. The NPFL forces who first arrived in this area in 1990 regarded the mountain with trepidation, but some young fighters, being contemptuous of traditional *zoes*, ventured onto its slopes anyway. They did not return, allegedly because of the mysterious powers wielded by Singbe. The 'much talked about' Singbe was able to organise a local militia to fight against the NPFL by means of 'magical military operations'.<sup>135</sup> The most fantastic reports of his powers circulated. He was said to be able to tie people up from long distance and to be invulnerable to bullets. Reports of his exploits even reached the press in Sierra Leone, where one Freetown newspaper described him as 'a powerful spiritual dwarf', capable of killing eighteen NPFL fighters in one attack.<sup>136</sup> Charles Taylor, impressed by such reports, promptly persuaded Singbe to accept a post as an NPFL general and put a pick-up truck at his disposal, which greatly enhanced Singbe's mobility, adding to the stories of his amazing powers. He is reported to have died in 1992 during a skirmish with Ulimo.<sup>137</sup> There were many other reports of fighters using spiritual forces on a major scale, such as when the NPFL's advance into Grand Gedeh in 1990 was stopped by a river in flood. The AFL defenders of the area, many of them Krahn, were widely held to have achieved this with the use of 'African science'. However, the secret of how the AFL had achieved this is said to have been treacherously revealed to the NPFL by Oldman Toe, a prominent traditional priest who had held a grudge against Samuel Doe since

<sup>133</sup> Above, p.250.

<sup>134</sup> *Bassa Voice* (Monrovia), 6 February 1997.

<sup>135</sup> *The News*, 28 April 1992, which also contains a picture of Singbe.

1981, when his son, the youngest member of the PRC junta to have taken power with Doe, had been executed.<sup>138</sup>

Fighters in every militia, while often being unimpressed by traditional priests other than the most prestigious ones like Singbe and Oldman Toe, needed power to help them win military victories. They had been brought up in a society in which power, by nature invisible, was expressed in an idiom of eating. They had been led to believe that the eating of human hearts and drinking of human blood could bestow power, since the spiritual essence of the victim was imparted to the eaters, a principle in regular practice through the use of animal sacrifices. Thus, the fact that fighters ate human flesh on many occasions during the war, was not a consequence of physical hunger so much as a means of intimidating their enemies and acquiring the power to win victories, an idea clearly derived from older rituals of sacrifice. Some people assert that fighters were encouraged to carry out such practices by their ritual specialists, while others may have simply improvised their behaviour on the basis of a received belief that this would make them powerful. They often referred to the human heart using mechanical images, calling it 'the engine' or 'the main machine'. During the third battle of Monrovia on 6 April 1996, one Liberian newspaper wrote: 'Our reporters on both sides saw fighters engaging in cannibalism and sorcery. In some instances, the fighters would kill and butcher the chest and extract the heart and later eat it. According to the fighters, "to eat the heart of a strong man at the front makes us strong too".'<sup>139</sup> Even the usually cautious US State Department was moved to observe that 'Fighters - whether AFL, LPC or one of the ULIMO sub-factions - also targeted their enemies, fighters and civilians alike, removed their victims' body parts and ate them in front of civilians.'<sup>140</sup>

Interviewed in April 1996 by Liberian journalists who asked them about such activities, some fighters 'confirmed that the war was being fought by "men" and not "boys", meaning that sorcery was used'.<sup>141</sup> This is an interesting juxtaposition of ideas since it implies that, for the fighters, the manipulation of spiritual power, including through eating human flesh, was not only likely to give them a greater chance of success but was also one of the signs

<sup>138</sup> Youboty, *Liberian Civil War*, pp.342-3.

<sup>139</sup> Throble Suah, 'In Pursuit of One Man', *The Inquirer*, April-July 1996, pp.2-4.

<sup>140</sup> US Department of State. *Liberia Country Report on Human Rights Practices for*

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of adulthood. Since many of the fighters were young, often barely teenagers, it suggests that they regarded the battle as tantamount to an initiation into adult life, as no doubt many teenagers would, all over the world, if they were required to fight in a war. It is not particularly surprising to learn that adolescent boys consider that to have fought and killed makes them into real men. It is, however, illuminating to discover that they believe the use of esoteric techniques including the consumption of human flesh, to be a part of this transition. This is certainly not a universal human belief but does have a grounding in Liberian history.

Nor was it just teenage fighters who held the idea that they could have access to spiritual power through the consumption of human flesh, or at least by a ritual use of human body parts. Even Christian ministers may be suspected of engaging in such practices, as was the Reverend Jimmie Dugbe, who in 1995 was indicted by a grand jury on suspicion of attempting to kidnap a five-year-old girl to kill her 'as a sacrifice for him to retain his position as General Superintendent of the Assembly of God Mission Church'.<sup>142</sup>

Also in regard to elite ritual practices, this time within Taylor's immediate entourage, were allegations made by one of Taylor's closest collaborators after having defected from the NPFL in 1994. This source claimed that 'We saw a lot', referring to his time as one of Taylor's right-hand men. He claimed that a highly secretive ritual group known as Top 20 met regularly at Taylor's house under the direction of his uncle, Jensen Taylor.<sup>143</sup> On a separate occasion, a group of no less than sixteen NPFL generals and fourteen Special Force commandos made similar allegations regarding Taylor's interest in esoteric ritual practices.<sup>144</sup> Such claims were widely believed.

The abundant evidence that fighters and others who lived through the war believed that power might be obtained from spiritual sources, and the observation that their behaviour included elements which are part of traditional religious practices, does not mean that the act of fighting was some sort of cultic behaviour. The main purposes of fighting were to gain wealth and prestige or to take revenge. But in order to achieve these goals, power

<sup>142</sup> Taryunon Nyenon and Gibson Jerue, 'Rev. Dugbe Ordered Detained', *The Inquirer*, 5, 32 (1 March 1995).

<sup>143</sup> Interview with anonymous source, 'Jackson Doe's Death', *New Democrat*, 1, 30 (23-29 June 1994).

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War, power and the spiritual order

was necessary, and it was here that some fighters had recourse to what they believed to be sure techniques, such as acquiring the strength of others through eating their vital organs or drinking their blood. During the war the practice was vulgarised to the extent that what had once been an esoteric practice performed by officers of elite sodalities with deep roots in society, now became the standby of adolescents drunk on cane juice or high on amphetamines and marijuana. All that they required was a gun.

Democratisation religieuse. Réforme.

At this point it may be helpful to summarise the argument so far. Both the more exclusive traditional secret societies in Liberia, and more widespread institutions like Poro, employ an idiom of eating. According to some older accounts, Poro, human leopards and some other secret societies actually made use of human sacrifice in their initiation rites in the past. A sceptic might argue that this cannot be proved since there are few reliable accounts from before the mid-twentieth century, and hence, the idea of eating parts of a sacrificial human victim could be no more than a metaphor. That seems unlikely to this author, since the weight of evidence suggests that human flesh really was eaten in some religious rituals, as well as in war, before the twentieth century. This may be debated. What can be demonstrated more convincingly, however, is that during the twentieth century, a process occurred by which the institutions and political culture of the Liberian republic and those of various rural secret societies were assimilated by one another, as the power of the central government penetrated the hinterland and vice versa, as people of rural origin penetrated the institutions of national power, culminating in the overthrow of the True Whig government by Samuel Doe and his colleagues in 1980. In this process, the earlier constitutions of both the republican institutions and the secret societies were eroded from within. In both cases there was a tendency for the institutional checks and balances which prevented the abuse of power to fall into decay. What was subverted was not just the legal constitution of the Republic of Liberia, but also the spiritual constitution of the secret societies, Islam and the churches alike. Power, whether local or national, was increasingly unregulated other than by factional intrigue.

One consequence of the centralisation of power and of its contestation by intense factional manoeuvre was an inflation in the vocabulary by which power was expressed and understood in

and used by heartmen, independent commercial entrepreneurs who obtained human organs and sold them for monetary gain to those who believed that they could acquire wealth and power by their ritual use and even consumption. In fact, it was privatised.

Human sacrifice, including the eating of sacrificial flesh, appears to have occurred in national politics with increasing frequency from the mid-twentieth century. Related practices certainly took place during the war of 1989-97. It is emphatically not the argument here that such beliefs caused the war. It could be better said that the war occurred because the way in which the Liberian republic had evolved had left many people with acute feelings of political and economic frustration, and a conjuncture of circumstances, including such factors as the policy of foreign states, produced a context in which war could occur. Many Liberians hungered for power to rectify their situation. And since hunger for power was commonly represented as being capable of fulfilment by the consumption of the vital organs of others, combatants in the war have on occasion had recourse to this practice in a literal, not a metaphorical, form.

No doubt there were many fighters in the war who never took part in such sacrifices. It could be argued that, even if this practice did occur during the war, it remained a marginal one and therefore that too much importance should not be placed on it. The point of the argument in this book, however, is that studying evidence of religious change in Liberia for clues as to the changing distribution of power, so often perceived to stem from the invisible world, helps us to determine why the Liberian war happened in the way it did.

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