

Chapter 7

Initiation as Ethnic Transformation

For members of ethnic groups other than Krio, the social logics of integration through initiation may be qualified as a process of ‘ethnic transformation’. Initiation into Poro is among the social obligations held by strangers towards their hosts, which – when undertaken – lead to the strangers’ cultural and ethnic assimilation. Ethnic transformation offers a resolution to the stranger’s indebtedness (after initiation, people can fully claim Sherbro identity) and a way for Sherbros to secure men’s long-term political allegiance.

In this chapter, I want to focus on the role of initiation in constructing Sherbro identity through plurality and heterogeneity. While scholars working along the Upper Guinea Coast have pointed out that initiation enabled identity switches in the history of the region (McGovern 2013; Sarró 2010), the process by which local communities are built through the ritual transformation of individuals of various ethnic descent has not been well documented.

My argument follows MacCormack (1979), who identifies Poro in Sherbro society as an institution that facilitates the integration of in-marrying men. Initiation is a ‘ritual of incorporation’ that produces structure and norms by allowing strangers to move from a liminal status to become full members of the social body (see Shack 1979b). Ritual integration is a process by which strangers assimilate into Sherbro communities and switch their ethnic identity. That this is so is underscored by the point that Sherbro discourses about ritual integration focus on strangers who resist it – in the present context, Temne-speaking populations. Poro stories about the betrayal of Temne strangers, who tried to use the initiation society to take power, provide a metadiscourse that separates

the 'good' stranger, eager to assimilate, from the ungrateful stranger, who fails to respect his social obligations. Nevertheless, in practice, Sherbros continue to integrate strangers of various origins, including many people who define themselves as Temne.

The emphasis on matrilineage has implications for social hierarchies that are expressed in and through society initiation. In patrilineal societies, Bondo and Poro support hierarchies created through matrilineal kinship: lineages of sister's sons are subordinate to lineages of mother's brothers, who retain political leadership.¹ Within Poro, 'matrilineality is again employed as a metaphor for rank' (Murphy and Bledsoe 1987: 129). By contrast, Sherbro society emphasizes matrilineal ties, which leads to a rapid 'full' assimilation of male strangers and their children. Children born to a Sherbro woman are considered to belong to their mother's group and their initiation into Poro validates kinship in her line. Initiated strangers (and their children) can access political duties, and being a descendant of a stranger is not correlated with a higher or lower rank in Poro hierarchy. The rank achieved by sons of male strangers is more closely linked to that of their maternal uncles – when these are in charge of the boys' initiation – and they can attain the highest ranks of Poro.

Before we address the significance of those processes for integration, we first need to analyse how Poro and Bondo can be markers of (local) ethnicity and play a role in delineating the boundaries of coexisting ethnic groups in contemporary ritual practice.

Poro(s) and Bondo(s)

The Sherbros are not the only group to have Poro and Bondo societies; the Mende and Temne also have both societies. Many times, I was told that there were ethnospecific traditions of Poro and Bondo. Such information emerged as a discourse that substantiated views of social compatibility or incompatibility among the groups; Sherbros on the Peninsula claim to be culturally closer to (and compatible with) the Mende. Most such stories should be read through the lens of existing tensions between Sherbro autochthones and Temne-speaking populations. We might expect that statements people make about irreducible ritual differences will be strengthened or weakened in relation to the role that initiation societies are assigned as ethnic markers due to conflict (Knörr 2000: 83).

At the time of my fieldwork on the Peninsula, it was the distinction between Sherbro and Temne Poro societies that was said to be significant. A similar distinction between Mende and Temne Poro societies was made by Dorjahn (1961: 37), who, with regard to the Temne Poro society, noted that its members, 'while maintaining that they would not fear to enter any Temne lodge session, insisted that they would never take part in Mende sessions'. During my research, members of the Sherbro Poro situated their ritual practice as closer to Mende

tradition. Nevertheless, there appear to be striking similarities between Sherbro and Temne Poro, such as rank names *Yamba*, *Raka*, *Gbanabom* and *Famancha* (*Mancha* in Temne) and certain aspects of initiation, which I will comment upon later (see also Dorjahn 1961, 1982).

Oral traditions in Temne-speaking chiefdoms indicate that Poro was introduced by Sherbro migrants, who travelled up the Jong River (Dorjahn 1961: 37). Sherbro sacred groves remained distinct from Temne Poro groves (Dorjahn 1982: 37). In Shenge, a coastal region where these two groups have coexisted over a long period of time, Hoffer (1971: 175–76) reports a story of transmission from Sherbros to Temnes at Yoni on Bonthe Island, which concurs with Temne oral tradition reported by Lamp (2016).² Because it was borrowed from Sherbros, Sherbros in Shenge consider the Temne Poro not to be ‘as strong’ as their own (Hoffer 1971: 314). On the Peninsula, members stress that Temnes ‘do not proceed correctly’ in their ritual practices and members of the Temne Poro direct the same criticism at Sherbros.

The existence of ethnospecific differences in ritual procedures, both in Poro and Bondo, places limits on the participation of members in performances taking place in sacred groves from another tradition. First of all, the use of herbal medicines is said to be different. Men stress that they do not use the same leaves to fabricate their medicines. Bondo members make the same distinction: members of the Sherbro Bondo stated that, upon entering the sacred bush of the Temne Bondo, they would bring their own food and drinks due to a difference in cooking procedures. The restriction against ingesting each other’s food reminds members of the limits of social association. Bondo secret knowledge is closely associated with the art of poisoning (Bledsoe 1980: 68) and women can easily use poisons in cooking. It is unclear whether going against this rule would result in illness caused by the ingestion of incompatible medicines, or punishment in one’s own society for the transgression of a Bondo law, or both. In any case, references to poisoning emphasize the power of Bondo members and sustain feelings of fear and suspicion. Differences in food and medicine preparation are not merely descriptive statements, but also metaphors for social distinctiveness.

Members also mention differences in the codification of the relations between Poro and Bondo members. The complementary role of the two societies is central to ritual organization. Poro and Bondo initiations socialize young men and women in their adult responsibilities. They create ‘categorically pure women and men’ who are prepared to control their sexuality and to enter ‘safe’ relations with the opposite sex (Bledsoe 1984: 465). The ritual contacts between Poro and Bondo members also proceed from the sexual symbolism that structures the local cosmology. In Sherbro practice, Poro men are not allowed to enter the Bondo bush, unless Poro senior members, such as the *Raka* and *Yamba*, are invited for specific ritual occasions or to settle a dispute between the two societies.

In Temne practice, women and men can invite each other at specific times in their respective sacred groves in order to perform rituals jointly. This difference was confirmed several times by members of both traditions, particularly women. Members of the Sherbro Poro disapprove of the way in which women are allowed to enter the Temne Poro bush on some ritual occasions. It was also described to me how, in one instance, members of the Sherbro Poro fled the Temne grove (where they had been invited) when they knew that women were coming. They were scared of breaking their own ritual laws. Hence, the limits on participation are grounded in symbolic differences that are codified as mutually exclusive.

Members, both men and women, can comply with the rules of another tradition when invited to specific ritual occasions. Yet, the knowledge of difference maintains the fear of entering a sacred bush in a foreign place, the rituals of which are unknown. For instance, some large towns such as Goderich host both Sherbro and Temne Bondo sacred bushes, but women said that they rarely enter, if at all, a sacred bush of the other tradition.

Furthermore, due to the close relation between Poro and local power, Poro members cannot easily take part in meetings in sacred groves when the tradition is unfamiliar to them. The Poro bush is said to be a place for important discussions and decision making:

We do not allow [members of the Temne Poro to enter the Poro bush] because when they enter, they will try to prove that they do everything better than us. They will want to make us drink their own *meresin* [accept their own ritual rules] so that we will listen to them. They will try to overthrow us. But the Mende, we accept them. They will acknowledge that it is our bush and they will share their ideas with us so that we will discuss and decide together.

In this statement, members of the Temne Poro are not associated with local leadership out of fear that they could take over. Differences in ritual practices imply diverging views on hierarchies and a potential for political conflict. By contrast, it presents members of the Mende Poro as allies, who respect the political legitimacy of their hosts.

Members often mentioned that Mende and Sherbro Poro traditions were close. Nevertheless, it remained unclear to what extent a member initiated in another Poro tradition could take part in local Poro meetings. Additionally, each locality has a specific hierarchy and members initiated in the same Poro can be restricted from attending too. Some headmen on the Peninsula stated that in order to discuss community matters, only Poro members who are part of the local chapter are invited. When other members are present, their participation

may be restricted. For instance, Jonathan could attend certain meetings in settlements other than Baw-Baw, yet he said that he had no decision-making power.

Mendes and Sherbros both perform what are called in Krio *af-af* (half) societies – that is, they perform masks as public entertainment. On the Peninsula, Baw-Baw and Mama Beach keep masks like the Goboi and the Nyafale. The Goboi is controlled by Poro members and appears during important ritual festivities. For instance, the Goboi from Mama Beach performed in New Year's Day celebrations in Bureh Town in 2019. Performers came from different settlements of the Peninsula. The Nyafale is a mask that, among Mendes and Sherbros, announces the venue of the Goboi, but it has rather secular and entertainment functions (Siegmann and Perani 1980: 29). For Poro members, their role as *af-af* societies attests to the cultural commonality of Mende and Sherbro Poros, and to their shared opposition to Temne customs. As one Poro member in Tokeh told me: 'If a Temne says that he will play the Goboi, it will look funny, as if he wanted to steal the tradition [*I go tan lek se na tif I wan tif am*]. He would not know how to sing or dance properly.'

Sherbro/Mende Bondo was also presented as a unity of ritual practices, in opposition to the Temne Bondo. During my stay, the *sowei* of Baw-Baw received a new Bondo mask and several instruments that she had requested from an international nongovernmental organization (NGO). On the day of the official handover, she told me that the NGO representatives had made a mistake. They



Figure 7.1. Reception of a new Bondo mask in Baw-Baw, 2012. © Anaïs Ménard

had brought a Bondo mask on top of which were attached two head ties, one white and one red. She removed the red head tie, explaining that it was part of the Temne custom. She showed me the mask with the white cloth attached to the head and said: 'This is Sherbro. It is Mende Sherbro.' Among the Mende, Bondo masks that are tied with white cloth are considered of divine origin and their use is restricted to the *soweis*³ (Boone 1986: 163, 194). But red cloth would not be tied to a Mende mask because it signifies 'danger and trouble' (ibid.: 236).

Colour symbolism is particularly significant with regard to the values embodied by society members. White is the colour of purity, cleanliness and justice: it is 'the colour of the spirit world of God and the ancestors' (Boone 1986: 23). MacCormack, in her study of the Thoma society among Sherbros, notes that 'water itself is whiteness': the 'underwater' is the world of spirits and ancestors (1980: 113). Dialogue between the living and the dead is mediated by pouring libations with *kol wata* – an offering made with a beverage (water, rum, gin or soft drinks) to appease the spirits (see Chapter 5). White represents adulthood and social responsibility; a *sowei* wears a white head scarf to display her high rank. White is opposed to black, the colour of selfishness and social disruption. For Sherbro, red is ambiguous. It connotes 'activity, power and vitality', hunting and warfare, and can also symbolize destructive forces (MacCormack 1980: 113).

The Specifics of Bondo

Bondo may appear to be a society with fewer political connotations than Poro and therefore as less likely to become a site in which ethnosocial struggles are played out. All the major ethnic groups in Sierra Leone have Bondo societies, and Bondo itself has been described as a single society into which women from the various groups enter. Boone (1986: 15), for example, underlines that the society is multiethnic in that 'almost every woman of the Mende, Susu, Vai, Temne, Sherbro, Gola, Bassa, and Kpelle peoples has passed through its initiations'. Bondo membership unites women around common ideals of femininity, female knowledge, morality and responsibilities. It creates a female independent sphere of power, in which women can control their own activities and acquire 'a bargaining position in social relations involving men' (Bosire 2012: 98). In this regard, women may stress more easily the cross-ethnic sisterhood that is formed through Bondo. Certainly, this aspect of female unity is reflected in the syncretic nature of Bondo performances on the Peninsula.

Ritual differences do exist between Sherbro and Temne traditions of Bondo. However, there is much truth in the vision of a panethnic society. In most places, what matters most is to be a Bondo woman, notwithstanding the tradition in which the woman has been initiated. This is particularly visible in Krio settlements, where women have various strategies to get initiated. Usually, they rely on connections with initiated friends or relatives who will introduce them

to their own society chapter (see Chapter 6). Bondo initiations happen quite often and do bring together girls from different origins. Sherbro *soweis* move between settlements to organize initiation periods⁴ and are active in crossing ethnic boundaries: some mentioned that occasionally, if there is no girl to replace a specific *sowei* position, they can invite a Mende *sowei* to fill the position during initiation times. Also, second- and third-generation migrants rarely send their girl children back to their hometowns to get initiated.⁵ This is partly motivated by financial constraints, but migrants who are considered to be ‘on good terms’ with the community are also expected to give their girls to local *soweis*.

The Bondo initiation period in Baw-Baw in 2012 gathered girls of different ethnic origins from Tokeh, Sussex and Baw-Baw. Apart from Krio and Sherbro, which both of the *soweis* spoke, one also spoke Mende and the other spoke Temne; both could sing in various languages as well. As one member said:

We do not sing without putting some Mende inside. Mende is [in our tradition]. Temne no, unless somebody comes and sings, the others will follow, because you know that if the society is [initiating], anyone who is a member must come and sing.

Both Poro and Bondo members are very adept at picking up song lines in other languages during ritual performances, although they only partially understand them, if at all. Temne songs, for instance, are said to be much more idiomatic: they employ a different metaphorical language, but some people who understand Temne can translate their meaning.

Initiations are social in nature. Women from different settlements can participate in each other’s Bondo celebrations. In Mende regions, Boone (1986: 27) notes that ‘several lodges in a town or in a chieftaincy will come together to initiate the girls in a group’. During the closing ceremony of the Bondo initiation period in Lakka, most of the women who had come to support the initiates were from Ogoo Farm and belonged to the Temne Bondo. They could organize their own initiation periods in Ogoo Farm, but they came because this time, a market woman from Ogoo Farm, whose husband lived in Lakka, had placed her daughter in the Sherbro Bondo. Around twenty market women, all dressed in *ashobi* – ceremonial clothes made of the same fabric – joined in a procession down Lakka clapping and singing. They carried a banner that read ‘Ogoo Farm Market Women Association, together as one’. Their presence and ‘play’ (Bondo singing and dancing) was welcomed by women in Lakka and contributed to the success of the ceremony. It is important to note that initiation aims at forming ‘a fellowship among neighbouring girls and women’ (ibid.: 41). Thus, a large number of initiates and families supporting them makes for a successful initiation.

At the same time, members of the Sherbro and Temne Bondo also articulated a form of rivalry that was not devoid of political implications. Through

links to the Poro society, Bondo *soweis* also establish relative political power for themselves. This is because, in leading initiations, they create and maintain a sphere of influence that also grounds them in relations of patronage with Poro senior members. Bondo *soweis* work in close alliance with chiefs or headmen – who are almost always important Poro members – not least because chiefs derive financial benefits from the presence of Bondo, as they collect levies from Bondo initiation (license fees) and ‘fines for breach in Bondo laws’ (Bosire 2012: 72). Thus inserted in wider networks of male patronage, *soweis* from one group may achieve relative power over those from another.

In Tokeh, Bondo members recalled that before the Civil War, members of the Temne Bondo had tried to organize their own initiation period and had invited their own *sowei*. But members of the Sherbro Bondo had objected and stopped them. One Sherbro woman explained:

The Temne, if they want to do it, they have to do it under our control. We have the children, we have the village. They will not [lead initiation] by themselves. We should be *wanwod* [united] and every family should put its own children ... We did not agree, we told them that they had no right to do that unless they gave us notice beforehand.

This statement marked hierarchies in structures of patronage. On the one hand, Sherbro women protected their own privileged access to political structures and their influence over local leaders. On the other hand, they articulated their right to ‘control’ what other women did and, presumably, to levy fees of their own. Bondo membership marked socioethnic differentiation, as Temne women were reminded of their subordinated status as strangers.⁶

Bondo also enables legal power for *soweis*. Bondo initiations in the Western Area are more closely monitored by the state than in the Provinces, and ‘scandals’ about enforced initiations, underage initiations or child abuse quickly end up in the newspapers. Initiations require a licence, and obtaining a licence depends on a *sowei*’s good relations with powerful men. Either the headman must put in a request for the licence in Freetown, or she must do so directly – either way, connections with government officials are invoked. Accordingly, *soweis* liked to underline the legality of their own practice and to cast doubt on the practices of other ritual leaders; sometimes, they accused the leaders of other traditions of not proceeding in the correct way. Members of the Sherbro Bondo claimed that they adhered to the rules of the governmental licence and did not initiate ‘underage’ children.⁷ For their part, members of the Temne Bondo said that they did not practise enforced initiation. When acknowledging some instances of abuse in Sierra Leone, they attributed these to *soweis* of the other tradition.

In spite of these divisions, Bondo still represented an opportunity for creating cross-ethnic sisterhood. Yet, probably due to its lesser role in maintaining

autochthonous control over local politics, the female society did not ‘transform’ women’s ethnic membership quite as dramatically as Poro did for men.

The ‘Ritual Process’ Revisited

Membership in Poro is part of the ritual process by which strangers get incorporated into local Sherbro communities. Initiation legitimates kinship ties, but also ensures that Sherbros maintain authority over in-marrying men and their children (see Chapter 3). The initiation of the in-marrying man integrates him directly into lines of male hierarchy and authority within Poro. The initiation of the children ensures the recognition of their descent through the female line; initiation brings them formally under the authority of the maternal uncle and enables them to access the rights related to their uncle’s social status. The major risk of wife-giving – the creation of competing descent lines by strangers and their descendants – is mitigated by initiation. Therefore, it is expected that a stranger is willing to initiate and/or to ‘give’ his male children for initiation to the local Sherbro Poro.

Hassan, a Temne fisherman born in Goderich, who had settled in Mama Beach during the Civil War, explained how initiation into a Sherbro Poro had affected his local relations:

I have become Sherbro now [*A don ton Sherbro*]. I am used to their system. I have spent fifteen years in a Sherbro community, I joined the [Poro] society, I got a Sherbro woman and I had children who are born Sherbro. Before I came here, I did not think I would join one day, because I was already part of the Ojeh in Goderich. When you come [to Mama Beach], people will tell you that you can join [Poro] if you like. But I saw my friends who were members telling me not to walk here or there, not to pass here or there. Now, since I have become Sherbro, when they have a meeting, I can go. They won’t accept you unless you have become [*yu don ton*] Sherbro.

Hassan represented himself as the ‘good stranger’ who respected his reciprocal obligations in exchange for Sherbro hospitality. His reference to his Sherbro wife and their children ‘born Sherbro’ follows the lines of a gradual integration as described in the preceding chapters.

Here, we turn to describing how it is that Poro membership works to integrate newcomers in the structural logic of kinship. As discussed above, the invitation and acceptance of initiation signals and creates relations of trust, status and respect; membership informs and aligns one with a group’s cultural traditions and political relations. Poro membership binds newcomers into local kinship structures. And, as it does so, it contributes to building ‘Sherbro’ as a

category that allows cross-identification. It is not only Hassan who becomes Sherbro without losing his Temne identity; his children and their children will soon make the same claims as so many others already discussed: Temne by the father, Sherbro by the mother; or, perhaps, Sherbro by the father, who was a Temne, and also by the mother.

As Hassan explains, he could live in the Sherbro community as a Temne. He observed that his non-initiation into Poro kept him from full and free association with his friends. He recounts that he assumed that his Ojeh membership made Poro membership unnecessary or undesirable, but changed his mind over time. His friends encouraged him to become initiated and withheld him from full community participation until he undertook it. This dynamic can work the other way too: facing the same social pressures, noncooperative strangers will not undertake initiation and will be further excluded from community life.

Hassan's initiation acquired meaning with reference to a process of ethnic transformation that involved two generations. The combination of marriage and membership marked his new (achieved) identity (he had 'become' Sherbro) and the (ascribed) identity of his children. He also made a direct link between initiation, his newly assigned Sherbro identity and his ability to fully take part in men's activities in Mama Beach.

However, the stories that reveal the intricacies of the ritual process of integration are of another type: they are stories of betrayal and refer to Temne strangers who tried to disregard the obligations of initiation. These strangers try to take over power in the given community. And, importantly, they do so by pretending to adhere to the rules of the Sherbro Poro. The 'betrayor' is either a trusted Poro member who attempted to leak secrets or a non-member who tried to get hold of information that would allow him to take over Sherbro leadership. By violating the language of secrecy, the man 'exposes' the society – the local term to express the consequences of divulging secrets – and threatens local political stability. Initiation, either of the betrayer or of his offspring, restores the *communitas*. Here is one such story:

A Temne man referred to as Pa L. arrived to settle in A. in 1975. At that time, the Poro society was initiating and he pretended to be a society man although he was not. He did not go into the bush but once took part in a secret ceremony for the death of a member. The house where the ceremony took place was right at the back of the society bush and he could see all the secret instruments of the Poro society. Yet, community men did not trust him. Once, when all *sokɔ* men [members] gathered for dancing, they were not satisfied with his performance and started doubting him seriously. Hence, Poro senior members decided to call a meeting for all society men at the wharf, near a big stone. They saw Pa L. coming but he passed the stone and avoided them. They called him

and asked him why he was not joining in; he responded that his heart told him not to come among them. Therefore, Poro senior members called for another meeting the next day, this time inside the Poro bush. At night, Pa L. escaped from the house without telling anybody. By then, he was staying with his woman, the headman's sister, with whom he had one child, F. Poro members gathered to decide what to do about Pa L., who had seen the secrets of the society. Although they agreed that the man should be punished, they could not find him and decided that his child should become a member. The 'devil [Poro spirit] ate F.', who was reborn with a Sherbro society name that means 'somebody who does not have an owner', because members of the society had been responsible for his initiation. When the boy came out of the bush, Poro members sang five songs for him: three in Sherbro, one in Temne and one in Mende. Two Sherbro songs sang about how 'my parents are liars' and 'the man does not hide, the man does not hide'; according to the Mende song, 'today, the truth has prevailed'; and according to the Temne song, 'I was pregnant; I had a child; now the child has watched the society bush'. After some time, F. began to like the Poro society more than Sherbros themselves did. His mother went to find Pa L. and asked him to come back to the village because now the child was a member of the Sherbro society. She told him: 'Your son is fishing; he's doing everything like a Sherbro now.' But Pa L. refused and never came back.

The description of Pa L. validates a common stereotype about the Temne as inclined to seek power. It also shows the dynamics of integration through Poro membership through the prism of punishment. In this case, Pa L.'s son is initiated to repair the trust broken by his father. In another version of the same story, I was told that Pa L. was caught by Poro members in a neighbouring Sherbro community and initiated by force. Either way, initiation restores and reinforces Poro (and Sherbro) boundaries. In both versions, the future of F. as a Sherbro and Poro member is also ensured, regardless of what happens with his father.

Stories of the betrayal of Poro tell a local audience which strangers can and cannot be trusted based on historical precedents. Often, the stranger is described as someone who enjoys special trust in the community due to his relationship with a prominent woman of the community. In Pa L.'s case, he was living with the headman's sister. The seriousness of the betrayal is underscored with reference to this initial position of trust.

A story in another locality told about the disgrace of a Temne resident who used to live with a *sowe* who was also the sister of the head of the Poro society. Like Pa L., this man pretended to be a Poro member, but other members had suspicions and called a meeting inside the sacred bush. When the man committed mistakes in Poro greetings, his deception was confirmed. He was then forcibly

initiated, along with his boys. Poro members invented a song that included the lyrics 'Pa M. [the head of the Poro society]'s elder sister almost died', which referred to the shame that had befallen the *soweï* because she herself did not know that her man was not a Poro member. In another version of this story, I was told that the same man had to meet senior members in the sacred bush because his son had committed an offence against the society. As in the story about Pa L., the betrayal plays out and the initiation of both father and/or son restores relations.

In both stories, trust is called into question by a man's inability to perform (sing, dance or greet) as expected in the local Poro. As he is revealed as a non-initiate, the man is taken to constitute a direct threat to political leadership. Members suspect him to 'spy' secrets in order to impose the authority of his own lineage – hence the logic of the son's initiation as a solution to the father's betrayal. Through initiation, male children are shifted from the authority of their patrilineal line to that of a maternal uncle by symbolic rebirth through the initiation society. The child is made to accept a new allegiance: 'the old life ... is the life lived in the bosom of the family and the lineage; whilst the new life is a life in which the prime allegiance is to the community as a whole' (Horton 1971: 103, quoted by Siegmann 1980: 94). For those who were born of strangers, the rupture from lineage is more complete.

Other elements of the story reinforce the understanding that initiation validates matrifiliation and produces the initiate's belonging to the community. In the first story, F. becomes 'somebody who does not have an owner' because he cannot claim to be a follower of his father, whose disloyalty put the community at risk. His Poro name also reminds him of his obligations, respect and obedience towards the men who initiated him. Two songs refer to the process of revealing the truth: 'my parents are liars' tells us that the betrayal has negative social consequences for both the wife and the child that need to be rectified. 'The man does not hide' speaks about the ritual process that the child undergoes to make amends for his father: unlike his father, he is reborn as a new man and no longer needs to hide. The last song in Temne and the mother's sentence ('your son is fishing; he's doing everything like a Sherbro now') express the newly created bond between the child and members of his mother's group that has been enacted ritually through initiation. The mother's sentence confirms the process of ethnic transformation that their son has undergone.

Strangers who have 'betrayed' the community are expected to give one or several children to the Poro society, a mechanism that ensures the attachment of males from a foreign patrilineage to their mother's community. It implies obedience to the rules set by landowning lineages and a strong moral commitment; in sum, it constitutes a statement of belonging. This final story illustrates the link between the initiation of children and moral obligation.

One man had settled in C. He was not a member, but went to Poro meetings in the sacred bush. One day, members discovered the truth and the man escaped.

He joined Poro in the Provinces, but because he had betrayed his host community, he was scared to return alone and instead did so with other members of his own chapter. A Poro meeting was called to decide what should be done with him. Since he had learned local secrets, it was decided that he had to 'give' his two sons for initiation in C. Nonetheless, the man decided to stay away from the people in C. He settled on land a bit further from C., claiming it as his. His third son joined Poro in the same area as he had, and when he returned after initiation, he helped his father in managing the community. The two men applied at the Ministry of Lands to obtain political independence on their territory, which was granted, and the third son later became headman.

This story discusses a man who clearly wanted to be part of C. on his own terms. He attended Poro meetings without being initiated; got initiated elsewhere as a partial restoration of his relationship (because he did not return alone); and, although he seemed to agree to the restoration implied by 'giving' two of his sons for local Poro initiation, he himself moved away from the community and his third son undertook initiation outside of the community.

In C., this story of an initial 'betrayal' of the Poro continues to be told because the man and his third son remain involved in political and land disputes between two settlements (C. and the one to which the two men relocated). It is recalled in order to indicate that the father and his third son had no allegiance to people in C. – worse, they had on several occasions pretended to have such allegiance and had betrayed their hosts. Aside from the initial betrayal, the father had also not respected the moral obligation implied in giving two sons for initiation. The initiation of his sons should have placed the man in a subordinate position from which he would not challenge his hosts on critical issues of belonging such as land and power, but he had disregarded this subordination.

It should be noted that stories like these caused lots of laughter among Poro members. They liked to shame the betrayer. Importantly, these stories also reversed the power relations between Sherbro and Temne populations that are currently at work on the Peninsula. Although the Temne seem to be gaining the upper hand in many arenas of local politics, these stories render those gains illegitimate. Against a few strangers who betray, Sherbro communities maintain power over the majority who seek the community's trust and validation.

Stories of betrayal illustrate Jackson's (2004: 160) view of initiation as a 'drama of restoration': the initiation of children following a 'betrayal' presents us with a norm for social integration. In these stories, we see clearly how ethnic transformation co-occurs *with* the expansion of kinship relations and *through* Poro membership. They show how a stranger becomes assimilated – how a Temne becomes Sherbro through the ritual process.

But these stories also hint at the mutability of ethnic identity from another direction. They reveal the child's own agency and the possibility for reversals. The most telling line in the first story is that F. does everything 'like' a Sherbro; he is

not completely and irreversibly Sherbro, despite Poro initiation and kinship. In the last story, the third son follows his father and not his brothers. Neither kinship nor initiation produces lasting ethnic identities; one must still prove attachment to the community. As in other descriptions of the 'transformative' idiom in West Africa (McGovern 2013), Sherbro identities in these stories remain fluid and dependent on individuals' strategies of alliance and self-definition.

In other words, initiation opens up the possibility of 'becoming' Sherbro by performing. This may involve fishing and participation in ritual performances (as we learn that 'F. began to like the Poro society more than Sherbros themselves did'). Those stories established a pattern for the desired social assimilation of strangers that marked eventually a switch in ethnic identity. They pointed to the fluidity of Sherbro ethnic affiliation.

Conversely, just as many people with other ethnic origins succeed in claiming and performing Sherbro identity, the possibility of losing that status is always present. Many times, people concealed their Temne roots by referring to their ancestors as Sherbro or by stating that 'yes, he was a Temne, but he did everything *like* a Sherbro'. Then, my interlocutors would explain their ancestor's involvement in fishing and Poro membership. This relates to Astuti's conceptualization of ethnicity as a '*way of doing* which people perform' (1995: 16, emphasis in original). Acting Sherbro by learning how to paddle and fish performs identity in the present. To do 'like' a Sherbro is to acknowledge one's origins, while showing one's continuous commitment and loyalty to Sherbro structures of power.

Ethnic Belonging, Transformation and Social Hierarchies

The matrilineal ideology and process of ethnic transformation allow highly fluid personal affiliation to landowning families, which opens up possibilities for children of migrants to claim their right to leadership. MacCormack (1979: 185) notes that individuals may stress their belonging to the paternal or the maternal side according to the political prestige attached to each. On the Peninsula, contestants for political leadership tend to stress Sherbro female descent, which explains how descendants of strangers can access power more easily. In patrilineal societies, by contrast, lineages of sister's sons are politically subordinate to lineages of mother's brothers and, in theory, are more constrained to access political power.⁸

In previous generations, matrifiliation among the Sherbros on the Peninsula may have produced sociocultural integration between local populations and newcomers, as detailed in Chapter 3. Oral history suggests such a vision, except that it also tells of the economic and environmental stresses linked to the expansion of fishing that began in the 1960s. However, in the years since the end of the Civil War, and certainly in the decade over which my fieldwork stretched, the political stakes surrounding ethnic affiliation have been high.

Moreover, the political system in the Western Area differs from the customary chieftaincy system of the Provinces, where leadership is maintained among ruling lineages. Yet, in rural towns of the Peninsula, local headmen are elected every three years in a system that was introduced after the Civil War. It must be said that the following data are the product of recent political changes and that the absence of ethnographic study prior to the war makes comparisons difficult. Nevertheless, it appears that local struggles over power are intensifying and leadership has become accessible to migrants (see Chapter 8).

Although headmen who are not Poro members can be elected, Poro membership continues to have relevance in terms of one's ability to contest and access political power. The following examples of local elections in Tokeh and Baw-Baw illustrate the shifting nature of power and the plurality of combinations among lineage affiliation, Poro membership and local political conditions in order to 'make' a Sherbro leader (see also Ménard 2017b).

In Tokeh, the headman who ruled throughout the war was descended from early Temne settlers, dating back two generations (see the analysis of Tokeh's oral tradition in Chapter 3). When they commented on his rule, Poro senior members in Tokeh stressed that the headman's grandfather had displayed moral commitment and friendship with the Sherbros. He had not wished to become a Poro member himself, but he had 'given' all of his children to be initiated in the local Poro – this, as one senior member told me, was 'because of the agreement he made with the Sherbro people. He agreed to dance to their tune'. This expression indicated the respect of community laws and social hierarchies. Another senior member stressed the role of marriage and initiation taken together. He said that the headman's father was Temne, but had been born in Tokeh and had married a Sherbro woman. As such, he was considered a local citizen. Moreover, his father had a society name and thus had 'become' Sherbro.

The former headman drew directly upon his father's mother to support his Sherbro identity. During his rule, in the context of the war years, Poro ritual practices had been difficult to maintain. Some members pointed to his Temne origins when deploring the 'loss of culture' – thus interpreting his assumed lack of commitment as a sign of 'strangerhood'. Still, most Sherbros preferred him to the headman who ruled after him and had won the successive elections of 2010, 2013 and 2017 (see the discussion in Chapter 3). The incumbent headman of Tokeh was part of Sherbro landowning lineages on both sides of his family tree. However, he had turned to Islam and made the Hajj. His voting base included mainly Temne-speaking populations and he had rejected Poro practices as incompatible with Islam. His detractors told me that he had 'become' Temne or 'he's Sherbro but his attitude is Temne'.

In the local context, the former headman, the descendant of a stranger, appeared as a defender of Sherbro interests: he acknowledged his Temne origins, but presented himself as a Sherbro 'citizen'. Collective memory, through the

statements of Poro senior members, positioned his grandfather as a non-initiated stranger, who had nevertheless abided by the local rules of ethnic assimilation for his own children. This, in turn, allowed the headman to claim Sherbro identity based on matrification and on the notion of local citizenship. Local citizenship appeared as an identity to be achieved by showing one's commitment to Sherbro 'culture' and by preserving local interests and values – namely the 'moral ethnicity' tying people to a locality. Like in F's story analysed above, ethnic assimilation opened up the possibility for strangers and their descendants to perform Sherbro identity, and this performance was regularly reassessed by people who considered themselves 'autochthonous' – or, at least, 'more' autochthonous. The contrast was strikingly made against the new headman, who had a full Sherbro ancestry, but had withdrawn from his fundamental Poro responsibilities and was supported by populations who had arrived recently.

A second case reveals more complex dynamics of ethnic positioning. In Baw-Baw, the village head election in 2010 was contested by two candidates. The first had paternal Temne ancestry, but strong connections to Sherbro families. He was a young senior member of Poro. He was supported by the two heads of the local Poro chapter, the *Gbanabom* (his father) and the *Yamba* (his father-in-law). Both of the older men lived in the lower part of Baw-Baw, near the seashore, where the sacred grove lies and where most founding families reside. The *Gbanabom*, who died in 2015, was Sherbro by his mother and Temne by his father. He identified as Sherbro and people considered him Sherbro. The second candidate was one generation behind in the assimilation process: he was the son of a Temne settler and a Sherbro woman, and he had a comparatively low hierarchical position within Poro.

The second contestant's background was weaker in social terms, and the Poro position of the first candidate's father granted him more respect from Sherbros living in the lower part of Baw-Baw. By contrast, they were concerned by the 'attitude' of the second candidate and considered him to have 'Temne ways'. They feared that he would prohibit Poro members from performing and that he would encourage more foreigners to settle. He was regularly accused of accommodating his own Ghanaian boat crews in Baw-Baw during the height of the fishing season. Yet, the majority rule applied and he was elected.

During his mandate, the elected headman's position was ambivalent. He obtained a governmental licence to organize the Poro initiation in 2012, by which he consolidated his leadership. His early commitment in favour of the 'Sherbro culture' was appreciated. At the same time, Sherbros suspected him of engaging in relations of patronage with 'his' people only – understood as Temne relatives – and of disregarding social hierarchies that placed him in a subordinate position towards senior Poro members. The same two contestants stood for the 2013 headmanship elections, with the same outcome, leading to post-election dissension. The conflict was solved through the project of leading another Poro

initiation. Members could not contest election results, but wanted to force the headman's support and respect by organizing another initiation. However, the initiation never materialized.

In 2017, the same two candidates ran again for headmanship. This time members of the local Poro campaigned against the incumbent headman. Poro members said that he had neglected his obligations towards autochthonous lineages, favouring what was perceived as 'his' group, the Temne; for them, his loyalty lay elsewhere. In the end, the headman was voted out. The competition was so fierce that in 2018, many people on both sides no longer talked to each other. When I discussed the issue with a Poro leader, he compared the situation with local politics in Tokeh: 'it was the same ways that [the headman] wanted to bring here. We gave him leadership, he brought Temnes here, he left us, he did not want to know whether there was still a Sherbro living here. He wanted to sell us'.

These two examples show that political power rests on a subtle combination between ancestry, Poro membership and 'attitude'. Matrification facilitates competition for power and provides legitimacy. Nevertheless, Poro membership and commitment to Sherbro 'culture' are the main factors that make 'good' leadership according to Sherbro standards. In a context where Poro members cannot directly control local politics, Poro membership ensures that the headman will encourage ritual practice, and the higher his position, the more he will feel compelled and responsible to give Poro members a voice in political matters. Yet, Poro membership is not sufficient. Headmen, regardless of origin, must demonstrate their commitment to Sherbro identity and give pre-eminence to local networks of patronage.

In recent local politics, firm commitment to Sherbro identity has been considered as more important than Sherbro identity by ascription. In Tokeh, the descendant of Temne settlers appeared more autochthonous than the headman, who was considered to have betrayed his group. In Baw-Baw, the previous headman was tolerated so long as he promoted Poro rituals and respected networks of patronage. 'Strangerhood' is thus defined less on the basis of ancestry than on the basis of one's loyalty towards Sherbro lineages, whose authority is maintained through Poro.

While the principle of matrification facilitates strangers' access to leadership, it also exerts an equalizing effect within Poro. The Poro society functions according to a ranked system that attributes specific ritual roles to each position. Local Poro chapters need these various positions to be filled to perpetuate initiation, and each initiation period distributes positions accordingly. On the Peninsula, I also observed that members can be 'promoted' to new positions. Little is known about the way in which positions are actually distributed, but many authors suggest that hereditary rights and wealth (payment of initiation fees) are the main criteria for accessing higher ranks (Fulton 1972: 1223; Little 1965: 358–59).

Dorjahn (1961: 37) observes that Poro titles in Temne society are transmittable from father to son. However, in Sherbro society, evidence suggests that descendants of strangers also have access to high ranks within Poro by following the status of their maternal uncles. If the maternal uncle is a powerful and wealthy man, there is every chance for the initiate to achieve a higher status within Poro.

One example will help illustrate this process. Early in my research, I was in M. sitting at the wharf with a political figure of the town. People usually refer to him by his initiation name. We will call him O. As I was enquiring about the relations of M. with an adjacent community populated by migrants, O. told me that people rarely give land within the town to somebody of Temne origin – that is why the Temne had settled outside. Foday, one of O.'s family protégés, came to greet us and we stopped our conversation. Foday introduced himself to me, and I enquired about the origin of his surname. He replied that it was a Temne name and was about to give some explanations about his family background when O. cut him off: 'You can find that name in two languages: Lokko and Limba. Perhaps you will find [a man who has that name] whose great-grandfather had migrated to a Temne village, that's possible. But Lokko and Limba are the ones who own that name.' Tension was building and Foday replied: 'Well, you can find [this name] in Nigeria, so which tribe is that?' O. ignored the question. I commented that M. welcomed people of Temne origin, after all. O. said: 'Well, I cannot really say we have [Temnes] here. He considers himself Temne.' When O. left later, Foday commented that in Sierra Leone, people usually identify themselves by their patrilineal line. His father is Temne and lives in Tombo. Most of his relatives, brothers and sisters live in Tombo. His mother was from a nearby Sherbro locality and O. is her brother. At the age of seven, Foday enrolled in primary school in M. and started living with his maternal uncle. When I met him, he had a regular job not far from M. and still lived in O.'s house.

In front of O., Foday took pride in mentioning his name and his father's ethnic identity. O. presented an opposing interpretation for the name's origin. The main argument lay in the fact that Foday considered himself Temne, while O. did not and tried to discourage him from doing so. He left the matter by saying 'he considers himself Temne', drawing a parallel between Foday's last name and family background: Foday believed that his name was Temne, although it was not; similarly, he considered himself Temne, but belonged to his mother's group. The tension of the exchange had also been heightened by my presence, since Foday's arrival had undermined O.'s statement about the presence of Temnes in the settlement. Foday presented himself as a stranger, while O. wanted to prove the contrary.

At that time, Foday was not a Poro member, but he was fascinated by the society. Yet, he was not ready to join at the next initiation in Baw-Baw in 2012: he said that his studies left him with no time and that he could not get by without his money-earning activities on the side. He was much more enthusiastic

about joining in a place near Tombo, where all his brothers had joined and that sounded more familiar to him. Yet, unexpectedly, the devil ‘ate’ him in Baw-Baw, and Foday came out of the sacred grove with the title *Yamba*. I could not talk to O. about this issue, but it is reasonable to think that in his view, Foday’s initiation was necessary, because he had been raised in his mother’s family and lived with O. himself. Moreover, he could challenge the authority of his uncle, as he had done in front of me. Had Foday been initiated in his father’s place, he would have become a member in a Poro chapter that would reinforce links with his patrilineal kin – he would have drawn closer to Temne.

Foday’s initiation did not place him at the bottom of the Poro hierarchy. He became a *Yamba*, which meant that he could lead initiations in M. Foday became attached to his mother’s group ritually and thereby became a part of M.’s future key senior members. It is reasonable to think that both the social status and ritual position of his maternal uncle, as well as his financial power, played a role in assigning the *Yamba* title to Foday.

Moreover, there is a social logic to giving higher positions to strangers. Members of higher ranks have an obligation to bring and support a greater number of initiates during subsequent initiation periods. This means that more people of the member’s social networks, either kin or friends, will join as well. Membership becomes exponential: members with a higher title become more involved financially but also more committed emotionally.⁹ Thus, giving high ranks to descendants of strangers within Poro is consistent with the logic of wealth-in-people. The local Poro chapter benefits from the commitment of men who can link various settlements together and expand the society’s numerical and social influence. Moreover, the social prestige gained by reaching an important rank should not be underestimated and has an impact on one’s commitment to the society. Initiation binds strangers to local communities by sealing the relations of indebtedness that are part of the reciprocity model.

Poro and Politics in a Postwar Context

However, during the last few decades, population growth has played out in the reconfiguration of host/stranger relationships. During the Civil War, the Peninsula became a refuge for populations who fled the fighting. More recently, economic opportunities in fishing have attracted new populations (see Chapter 1). As those residents have acquired demographic weight, they have mustered political legitimacy and have contested for leadership.

The political conflict between Sherbros and those residents has been displaced on the ethnoreligious field. Groups of strangers have rejected Poro practice as a means for integration, thereby contesting the grip of members over local politics. Assimilation, for them, is neither useful nor desirable, for they wish to establish politically independent communities, as I will further detail

in Chapter 8. In Sherbro discourses, the breach in host/stranger relations is articulated as a loss of trust when compared to the relations established with previous generations of strangers, who ‘used to get initiated’ and did not challenge Sherbro political authority. This corroborates Shack’s argument (1979a: 10) that ‘the smallness of scale, rather than ethnicity or race, would appear to be a more decisive factor in defining the attitudes of receptivity by African hosts towards strangers’. In this context, members of local chapters brandish the Poro institution as a symbol of their autochthony.

During the Civil War, Poro initiation stopped for multiple reasons. Security and livelihood concerns prevailed. Fishermen moved by boat discreetly, mostly at night. In Tokeh and Goderich, fishing was prohibited by ECOMOG troops, and fishermen moved to smaller settlements such as Baw-Baw and Mama Beach (see Chapter 1). Furthermore, Poro members stressed that a successful initiation needs time and ‘power’ – that is, the social and financial support of a significant number of members. Initiation is, above all, a festive occasion that brings people together from the whole Peninsula. In the disrupted social context of the war, people did not have the financial means to initiate and they could not take the risk of travelling for such a purpose. Gatherings were also considered suspicious and dangerous.

Moreover, men were expected to mobilize at all times in village self-defence groups. Poro members stressed that Poro was not used as a channel for the organization of those groups. The Western Area fell under the protection of the Organized Body of Hunting Societies (OBHS), founded in November 1997 as part of the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) organized to fight the RUF. The OBHS commandment recruited, trained and deployed young men in the Peninsula villages. It divided the Western Area in different zones, each one under the control of one or two commanders (Carpenter 2011: 88–94). In York, members of the Hunting society reported to me that they had taken part to the OBHS defence groups.

The fact that the Western Area was preserved from the fighting until 1998–99 may also explain that men’s mobilization through Poro was not effective. The maintenance of Poro initiation in other regions had much to do with the mobilization of ritual resources for fighting. Recruitment in the *kamajors*, the most widely known of the CDF groups, rested on the acquisition of esoteric powers and protective ‘medicines’ through initiation. The militias operated according to codes similar to initiation societies such as Poro (Ferme and Hoffman 2002). Richards (1996) describes that the RUF also used Poro-like rituals as a model of recruitment. In the Western Area, the OBHS operated on a different basis, closer to a national military group with tough training, but no esoteric type of initiation (Carpenter 2011: 93–94).

Finally, from the outset of the Civil War, the ‘bush’ tended to be associated with warfare and the RUF rebellion, including in regions that had not yet been

heavily affected by the fighting. The rebels were known for their ability to move and hide in the forest, which instilled terror in civilian populations and military forces. In the east and south of the country, people cleared forest patches around their communities, including sacred groves in close proximity of settlements, as a security measure against insurgents (Lebbie and Guries 2008: 56). Forest closures, including ritual ones, became a threat, as they could be used to launch attacks against civilians. On the Peninsula, civilians may not have feared the rebels at first, but the access to sacred groves was perceived as dangerous nonetheless. In areas of the Peninsula where ECOMOG troops patrolled, people mentioned that moving in, or near, sacred groves was particularly unsafe, as they could easily become targets for ECOMOG soldiers.

In the changing political context of the postwar years, the Poro sacred grove became an emblem of autochthony, as the example of Tombo shows. Tombo, before the Civil War, hosted Muslim populations of Temne and Susu origins, and many Sherbros had also converted to Islam. It is the hometown of Alhadji Towa Smith, the former Sherbro tribal head and the first influential Sherbro of the Peninsula, who had been to Hajj in the 1980s, after which he had built a mosque and had started advocating for the abolition of the Poro society on religious grounds. By the end of the war, and at the request of a group of influential Muslim Sherbros, Poro senior members performed a cleansing ritual to disinvest the Poro bush of its sacred powers. The argument went that the location of the bush at the centre of Tombo prevented market activities. After the cleansing ritual, that area of the bush was left undeveloped.

Until then, headmanship had remained in the hands of Sherbro and Krio landowning families. When the first Temne headman was elected in Tombo a few years later, some Poro senior members gathered to re-activate the sacred power of the Poro bush, in a desperate attempt to revive mechanisms of control over the population of latecomers:

When [power] transferred to the Temne, they began to boast that the Sherbros would not have any voice here anymore. So the first thing that the Sherbros did was to take a licence from the government to revive the society. [Poro senior members] told us that we needed to get control of the village back, that we needed to show [strangers] whom the village belonged to. It is true: some Temne are here for a long time but they are still afraid of the society. But some of us were not in favour of that and the ceremony had already been passed: the place had no power anymore.

The attempt was unsuccessful. Although Poro members put on ritual clothes and gathered in the sacred grove, they were forced to move out and the place was cleared by order of the headman. He justified his decision by arguing that this place was ‘just a cemetery’ (as Poro members are buried inside) and that

everybody should be allowed to enter. Thereby, he refused to acknowledge the connection between the site and its ritual powers, as well as the sacred status of deceased members buried in the (former) Poro grove.

When the headman decided to clear the bush, rumours spread that the *ka-majors* were still hiding inside. The rumours that presented the bush in Tombo as their hiding place used powerful memories of the war and exacerbated local fears that the war may resume. This constituted an additional argument for the new headman to put an end to the existence of the bush. The rumours, although being part of a political strategy, revealed how the bush, as a place that encapsulates violent memories, continued to generate anxiety for a long time.

The conflict in Tombo had a deep impact on the minds of Poro members across the Peninsula. Clearing the bush constituted a critical political act, as it suppressed the emblem of local political authority. It convinced members that they would no longer be able to contest power with ritual symbols. In this context, Poro members of other chapters hesitated long before organizing any initiation period. They were careful, in an unstable postwar context, to avoid being singled out by the government or migrant groups as intending to ignite conflict. The protection of sacred sites and associated ritual practices now required discretion.

Since the Civil War, Poro performances have been increasingly restricted due to the fact that sacred groves, which are used for initiation, are situated within settlements. By contrast, in Upper Guinea forest societies, Poro groves are rather remote and separated from inhabited areas. When initiation takes place, non-members are separated from members coercively – a practice that has been described in other West African Poro rituals (see Bellman 1984; Højbjerg 2007). In Krio, Poro members refer to this practice as *fɔ lok di ples*, meaning that while members perform Poro rituals in key sacred sites of the settlement, non-members and women have to stay indoors and wait until the signal is given by the Poro speaker to come outdoors again. Strict regulations apply with regard to personal mobility. Non-members are not supposed to know the identity of the initiates. Any time a new initiate is taken through the village to enter the sacred bush, the Poro speaker orders non-members to stay inside, which can occur several times a day at the start of the initiation period.¹⁰ In order to avoid unexpected encounters with the Poro spirit, non-members have to signal their presence when walking outside, particularly at night, either for women by clapping or for men by blowing in a bottle. Some sites too close to the sacred grove are also forbidden.

During the opening ceremony of Poro initiation that I witnessed in Baw-Baw, rituals asking for the ancestors' protection were performed in different sites around the village and at the main entrances, thereby drawing the boundaries within which society law applies. This ritual thus indicates the sacred space, marked by Poro wooden signs, protected from witches and evildoers. Within

these boundaries, non-members are required to respect Poro laws and orders given by members. In Baw-Baw, these boundaries were restricted to the lower part of the settlement. A steep slope and a stream separate the lower dwellings from the upper part of Baw-Baw along the Peninsula Road. It leaves the lower part, where the sacred grove lies, quite isolated. After the ceremony, as we heard the Poro speaker announcing the venue of the Poro mask, most of us (non-initiates) ran past the bridge and up the slope to find a safe space. Similarly, in Mama Beach, the sacred space was circumscribed to the lower part of the town.

The necessity to walk freely is regularly stated by strangers as a main reason for joining the society. During both initiation times and Poro rituals, non-members have to run away when they hear that the Poro spirit will come out. They also often leave their properties behind (shop items, fish, nets, food, etc.). Thus, cases of theft have been reported, as Poro members sometimes use this opportunity to steal business stocks and supplies. In Baw-Baw and Number Two in 2012, some women and non-members decided to close their businesses and move to another location during the time of the initiation period. Others avoided selling in the lower parts of the settlements. Furthermore, the risk of enforced initiation for non-members who watch the spirit by mistake is real.

However, in the postwar years, with newcomers outnumbering local populations, such rituals are more difficult to perform. Many people, non-members and members alike, voiced the concern that it disrupted business and tourism.



Figure 7.2. Food offerings for the opening ceremony of Poro initiation, Baw-Baw, 2012.
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Initiation is not the only event that has become problematic; ceremonies involving Poro rituals also create tense situations, particularly in populated settlements like Tokeh, which had a population of about 20,000 people at the time of my fieldwork. In May 2010, Poro senior members in Tokeh decided to organize a community ritual called *Kuk fɔ tɔng* (see Chapter 5), by which the water spirit is asked to provide fish and protect fishermen at sea. This ritual includes Poro performances, during which members pour libations in sacred sites within the town. In Tokeh, the sacred grove is situated in the old town, which mostly comprises beach bars and tourist facilities and delimits Tokeh to the south. In the other direction, the sandy road leads to the centre of town and the car park, the economic heart of Tokeh, where most shops are located. The new town begins a few metres before the paved road starts. It is now the most populated part of Tokeh and extends far inland. There are four Poro sacred sites in Tokeh: the sacred grove, the island and two other sites at the other end of town, which means that Poro members have to cross the new town during their performance.

However, in May 2010, the headman of Tokeh attempted to stop the Poro procession at the boundary between the old and new towns on the ground that the new town is mostly populated with strangers who are non-members and who would either see the spirit by mistake or be forced to run away and leave their properties without supervision. Poro members were shocked that the headman, one of their initiation peers, conscious of the danger to which his action exposed him, tried to stop the performance. Senior members were arrested by the police, yet they were soon released and police officers allowed them to resume the ceremony.¹¹ The headman later apologized. Nonetheless, the case remained controversial, as many members from other settlements had been invited for the occasion and resented the headman's action.

Among Poro detractors, two discourses supported the view that Poro members should ultimately put an end to their performances on the Peninsula. First, the continuation of ritual practices posed the question of their compatibility with the widespread presence of outsiders and the intrusion of government law into areas that are also regulated by Poro law. The 'modernity' discourse stressed the incompatibility of ritual practices with urban life: the ability of creating a 'locked' sacred space was said to conflict with open urban spaces. Migrants used the term 'modernity' – and sometimes 'development' – to demand the right not to be impeded in the conduct of their public activities by Poro practices described as 'traditional' and better suited to rural areas because secrecy is a necessary condition for them. This line of argument was also employed by Poro senior members, who considered that 'open places' – by which they meant a growing population, rapid urbanization due to the road construction, and the presence of state services such as the police – are not conducive to ritual activities that must remain secret. Poro, in the 'modernity' discourse, was presented as the anachronistic remnant of a rural past that conflicted with government law.

The headman of Tokeh explained that although he did not partake in rituals, he would be held responsible for cases of damages, theft or enforced initiation that took place during a Poro performance.

Second, the religious discourse opposed Islam to ‘pagan’ practices. Muslim leaders tended to condemn participation in Poro rituals. The manner of socializing within the society – based on drinking, smoking, beating drums and dancing – was heavily criticized. Religious arguments are in no way new. Dorjahn (1982: 57–58) has already described the enduring tensions between Muslims and Poro members in Temne chiefdoms. Hendrix (1985: 75) notes that in Tombo in 1980, 95% of the population was already Muslim. Although many people who claim Sherbro identity are also Muslims, and many Temne speakers are also Poro members initiated in the Provinces, the religious discourse polarized ethnic identities within a religious framework. For Sherbros, the local understanding of *trenja* (stranger) often indicated an urban Muslim lifestyle that ‘precludes society membership’ (Fanthorpe 2007: 13).

Yet, the conflict that had been built around religious issues was undoubtedly a political one. Both in Tokeh and in Tombo, Sherbros blamed their own leaders for the process that led to the rejection of Poro. These leaders were accused of having converted to Islam in order to gain political support. For people who supported them, it appeared necessary to suppress the remaining sacred institution of the autochthonous leadership. Somebody in Tokeh told me: ‘Now we beat [ritual] drums to ourselves. We don’t do it openly like before. The difference with Baw-Baw [where members organize rituals] is that the population there is not much.’ In settlements where large population of migrants had settled in, members were unable to perform ritual integration as they had done in the past, and newcomers were no longer ‘dancing to the Sherbros’ tune’.

Sherbros had mixed feelings about the presence of migrants, which stimulated the economy, but also inevitably implied a loss of power to them. At times, Poro members stated the possibility of using Poro as a means to re-establish political authority:

I would like that we would initiate one last time; then we will forget about it. It would be a way for other people to understand once and for all that they are not home. Because of the Poro tradition, people would be scared; they would respect the natives again. It would be a caution for them for some time. But after that, I believe it will die.

Poro initiation, by instigating fear among non-members, is often used as a coercive force in intercommunity conflicts. Since the end of the Civil War, Poro members in several regions of Sierra Leone have used enforced initiation against groups of Muslim traders ‘in attempts to re-establish the political primacy of “indigenes” over “stranger” Muslims’ (Fanthorpe 2007: 13). On the Peninsula,

due to changing demographic and political configurations, members know that the Poro society can hardly force newcomers' compliance with autochthonous authority. Rather, members are concerned with the necessity to ensure the continuation of ritual practices needed in a community. At the same time, Sherbros have increasingly branded Poro *kɔlɔhɔ* (culture, tradition) as a symbol of their autochthony on the local scene.

The Re-evaluation of 'Culture'

The possibility to preserve Poro depends on members' ability to navigate its ambivalent status as an emblem of autochthony and as an institution that can adapt to 'modernity' (see de Jong 2007) and help members to appropriate a changing political context. These interlaced meanings emerge as members discuss different strategies related to tourism.

The continuation of initiation is an issue that sets emotional and political arguments against economic ones. As sacred sites become less secretive, Poro members often agree that the practice of initiation may become impossible. In many instances, Poro senior members admitted that the site of the Poro sacred grove could be used for other economic developments, particularly for touristic purposes. Their discussions about what should be done with such a territorial symbol, it seemed, gave them a sense of control over changing sociopolitical parameters on the Peninsula. From a political asset, they could decide to turn it into an economic one. Poro bushes, which are all located close to the beach, have a high potential for tourism activities and are targeted by investors. In Lakka for instance, the sacred bush was leased in the 2000s for the construction of a five-star hotel.

In 2012, each community of the Peninsula was discussing the future of its own sacred site. Members and non-members alike often mentioned 'the last initiation'. In ritual terms, the process of ritual cleansing requires one last initiation, after which the necessary ceremonies are performed to disinvest the site of its sacred powers. The 'last initiation' could become the subject of disputes between generations. Senior members of the older generation have the responsibility to protect the sacred grove. They are organically related to it and going against the ritual oath by desecrating the Poro site exposes them to the risk of sudden death. Many warned that cleansing the bush would affect the spiritual wellbeing of communities. Some may also have worried about the loss of a source of authority and income, as Poro initiation and rituals generate important revenues. On the other hand, young members tended to lobby in favour of transforming sacred groves into an income-generating place. In Sussex, the two younger generations – the group who had been initiated the last time, now in their forties and fifties, and the ones who wished to get initiated – expressed a strong attachment to the transmission of ritual knowledge: most considered

initiation to be an identity marker that showed their respect for their ‘tradition’ and by which they would perpetuate the Sherbro *kɔlchɔ*. Yet, as we discussed the matter before the initiation period started in 2013, they still hoped to use the place for community purposes after the initiation had ended.

Transferring the sacred grove to another place is possible in theory, but land pressure on the Peninsula makes it almost impossible to find a new appropriate site. When Poro members decide to sell or lease their bush, they keep a small sacred site – often a nonsecret place used to pour libations – for the performance of rituals. In 2012, Poro members in Mama Beach were discussing the lease of the sacred grove. With a large presence of new fisherfolk in town, they told me that they would keep a site referring to the ritual power of the society. It would help maintain Sherbro rights to leadership and control over populations of strangers:

The only thing that [Temne people] are afraid of is the society. The bush should be left as a reference. Temne do not have enough courage to enter our own bush; otherwise they would have taken over the village already. With the bush, they know that the society is still there and that at any time we can perform. The bush should not be in the middle of the community, but then, we need to transfer it.

In this case, the eventuality of retaining a minor sacred site was seen as a way to maintain authority and to stress the continuing link between territory, ritual power and political right. And, indeed, in communities that had elected headmen who relied on the votes of people considered as newcomers by Sherbros, landowning families sometimes used the occasion of community rituals at minor sacred sites to contest what they regarded as ‘bad’ leadership.

Nevertheless, minor sacred sites were also created for the transmission of ritual knowledge. Community rituals such as the *Kuk fɔ̄ tong*, as well as funeral rites for Poro members, are considered to be essential for the wellbeing of the social body. Funeral rites, for instance, seal the relationship between inhabitants, the land and its spirits by making peace with ancestors. By ensuring the resumption of these rituals, Poro members shifted the discourse about reciprocity from the obligations between hosts and strangers to the necessary exchange with spirits and ancestors. As Mauss (1990 [1923–24]: 20) notes, ‘the spirits of both the dead and of the gods ... are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world. With them it was most necessary to exchange and with them it was most dangerous not to exchange. Yet, conversely, it was with them it was easiest and safest to exchange’. This move was also part of a strategy to encourage new memberships in Poro and to maintain the auto-referential frame of religious practices (see Højbjerg 2007). Indeed, the perpetuation of community rituals requires families to continue the initiation of the new generation.

Each initiation period revived a strong emotional attachment to ritual practices that seemed to postpone decisions about the fate of sacred groves. In Baw-Baw, the initiation of 2012 was supposed to be the ‘last initiation’. Baw-Baw local leadership, with the help of an investor, had offered to clear the bush, transfer dwellings to the cleared site and leave the beach for tourism-related infrastructures and activities. Yet, after the initiation period had ended, this plan was postponed. The decision of senior members to organize the first initiation after the Civil War, and to revive *kɔlɔ* in an atmosphere of political tensions, was respected and admired by members across the Peninsula. It propelled the community to the forefront of ritual conservation that kept the various local Poro chapters connected.¹² The fact that young adults expressed a renewed interest in initiation testified to its emotional intensity and its relevance in creating a sense of local belonging.

At the same time, political concerns remained central to the revival of *kɔlɔ*. In Mama Beach, two initiation periods took place in 2013 and 2016. The Sherbro headman, who took the responsibility for organizing those events, and with whom I met again in 2018, linked initiation to issues of power, as he said: ‘Even if you want to be a leader here [you need to be initiated] ... otherwise they will take leadership from your hands.’ He referred to the large presence of latecomers in Mama Beach. Yet, he also said that it was time to organize initiation for the next generation. Many young men were waiting for it. As I asked if the plan to lease the bush was still being discussed, as it had been in 2012, he responded that the potential investor had not accepted a lease agreement. Members did not want to sell the bush. He added that everyone had enjoyed the initiation period. He described how more than eighty fires had been lit in front of houses of Mama Beach in one day. A fire indicates that the initiate is safe. The headman said that all initiates were doing well ‘in the devil’s womb’ (initiates are said to be ‘eaten’ by the Poro spirit and reborn as adults). He was pleased that young men of his community were now initiates and that the society had ‘taken over people’s minds now’. As I enquired how the large number of ‘strangers’ had coped with it, he said that Poro laws applied down the village only, near the beach, and that people had complied with this arrangement. He reported two incidents with Temne men, who had watched the Poro spirit by mistake and had been initiated. Those were exceptions, but it was a clear sign that the ritual power of the Sherbro Poro could still be deployed against disobedient strangers.

The fact that priorities in Baw-Baw and Mama Beach had changed revealed the continuous relevance of Poro in politics. Initiations in Mama Beach prepared the ground for local leaders in Sherbro settlements to vie for headmanship and councillor elections in 2017. For senior members, initiation periods allowed them to gain prestige and consolidate their relations with high-ranking ‘patrons’ who play a critical role in providing political and financial support during election times. In the recent political conjuncture of the Peninsula, Sherbro local

leaders, who for most of them belonged to the Sierra Leone People's Party, have lost ground in local elections (see Chapter 1). By organizing initiations, they reaffirmed their political presence and influence, while cementing relations of patronage with government and party officials.¹³

The choices that members operated with regard to sacred groves indicated that Poro continued to be a relevant identity marker and channel for patronage in ethnopolitics. Members did not abandon the idea of leasing sacred groves in order to turn them into touristic facilities and yet, they weighed up different opportunities, each of them having equal validity and justifications, be they economic, political or emotional. Meanwhile, they continued to play on the symbolic value of Poro as a marker of Sherbro presence on the Peninsula.

A similarly ambiguous turn was the progressive inclusion of Poro in a discourse of cultural commodification. Seizing the development of a touristic niche in the postwar context, members have also branded their ritual practice with a new 'folklore' flavour, thereby delineating the boundaries of an 'authentic' Sherbro identity to be reaffirmed at various levels of governance. Through commodification, members shaped the features of a 'reified culture' to be displayed to local and national audiences. In line with de Jong's analysis of the Kumpo masquerade in Jola society (2007: 167–71), Sherbro public masquerades have become an expression of cultural authenticity, which substantiated claims to indigeneity.



Figure 7.3. Performance of the Baw-Baw Cultural Group (Goboi) at the Sussex festival, 2012.
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The growth of tourism coincided with two preoccupations. The first was the creation of economic opportunities, as it became necessary to develop activities outside the fishing business, in which competition is high and resources are lower than before. The second was the possibility to frame ritual practices within the discourse of ‘indigeneity’ that put forward the necessity to preserve local knowledge and endangered ‘traditions’ (Pelican 2009). This demarcated Poro from religion by placing it within the discourse of culture protection.

This move towards the ‘indigenous’ discourse was made possible by the presence of an international NGO, Welt Hunger Hilfe (WHH), which encouraged the development of local initiatives regarding ecotourism in beach settlements. Sherbro communities were the first ones to take part in the project and seized the opportunity to craft a narrative by which they presented themselves as ‘environment protectors’ against migrants who exploited the forest. The involvement of Sherbro villages in the project is further analysed in Chapter 8.

As each settlement developed its own tourism plan in coordination with WHH, Poro members in Baw-Baw decided to promote ritual performances and combine this with a discourse on ‘cultural preservation’. They claimed (by then) that it was the only place on the Peninsula that had been able to maintain its *kɔlchɔ* and keep its ritual practices alive. They started advertising masquerades and performances as authentically ‘indigenous’, targeting both a foreign and domestic audience, who come from Freetown to the beach on weekends. As an incentive, WHH provided new masks, instruments and clothes to Poro and Bondo ritual leaders (see figure 7.1), and funded an ‘environment beach festival’ that took place in Sussex in May 2012. The festival included a Kru canoe race, as well as several public masquerades – Bondo, Nyafale, Goboi and Gongoli – performed by the newly created Baw-Baw Cultural Group. The festival, although not branded as a ‘Sherbro’ cultural festival, exhibited the symbols of an ‘authentic’ local culture grounded in the knowledge and control of a beach environment that Sherbro autochthones continue to claim as theirs (see Chapter 8).

The discourse on *kɔlchɔ* counteracted some of the criticisms against Poro. It purposefully separated Poro from local politics by associating it with folklore. The presentation of cultural practices as income-generating activities also demonstrated the compatibility of Poro with both business and urbanization. Yet, despite its appeal to a wider audience, this type of cultural performances remained associated with the expression of local Sherbro identity, which linked cultural authenticity to claims of autochthony.

Conclusion

Sherbro narratives present integration through assimilation as the dominant model until at least the middle of the twentieth century. This process entails the cultural assimilation of strangers, who ‘become’ Sherbro by associating with

local matrilineages. The analysis gave prominence to a discussion of the integration of men, as initiation into Poro interlaces issues of identity, political power and territory. The ritual integration of men materializes social arrangements of reciprocity based on the stranger's indebtedness towards host communities.

The descriptions of 'ritual transformation' also evidence the shifting boundaries of individual ethnic identities and the process by which Sherbro identity incorporates the plurality of origins in its own definition. The local understanding of being 'Sherbro' also develops in relation to collective assessments of individual actions (or what being a 'committed' Sherbro person means in the present context), thus placing emphasis on the reproduction of the 'moral ethnicity' (Lonsdale 1994) that binds local communities in spite of (or perhaps by virtue of) the heterogeneity of individual origins.

However, current dynamics on the Peninsula also show that it is a model that recent strangers increasingly oppose. Certainly, the combination of migration and legal changes means that new migrants, particularly Temne, have gained sufficient demographic weight to elect their own local representatives. The role of Poro in making and unmaking local leadership has declined and members claim it as a symbol of a (threatened) Sherbro autochthony. Despite these changes, the institution keeps its political relevance in linking communities to centres of power. Renewed Poro initiations since the end of the Civil War also show one way in which Sherbro communities continue to integrate newcomers, gaining strength from incorporating, obligating and rewarding those who might otherwise be strong opponents. Yet, these rituals are also used to enter patronage networks with 'big men' and 'scare' political opponents. Lastly, recent developments in tourism have encouraged Sherbros to create a narrative of indigeneity that further delineates the cultural contours of Sherbro identity, in response to political attempts of suppressing Poro in the region.

In this respect, Poro remains an important marker of a territorially anchored Sherbro identity, as ongoing conflicts with migrant groups over land politics have been aggravated in the postwar context. These conflicts, which have structured host/stranger relations in more recent years, are analysed in Chapter 8.

Notes

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1. See e.g. Bledsoe 1980; Little 1965, 1966; Murphy 1980; Murphy and Bledsoe 1987; Siegmann 1980.
2. According to Lamp (2016: 13), Manuel Alvarez's account of circa 1615 suggests that the Mane, whom he located around Cape Mount on the southern coast, may have introduced

the Poro institution among the Temne, 'which preceded the separate introduction of a Poro tradition from the Bullom ... in the Yoni chiefdom shortly thereafter. The second Temne adoption of Poro from their relatives and allies, the Bullom, may have been an attempt to achieve parity with their new overlords, the Mane, on their own terms'.

3. The plural form of *sowei* in Mende is *soweisia*. However, I have followed here an English plural form, which is more consistent with local uses on the Peninsula.
4. It seems that getting a licence from the government for an initiation period is a complex procedure. Bondo ritual leaders who know their way around political and administrative circles and can obtain a licence are asked to lead initiations in various settlements. The Sherbro *soweis* seem particularly successful in navigating this terrain. The role of licensing and institutions in the legitimation of ritual practices requires further research.
5. Fanthorpe (2007: 15) mentions that in Freetown, only the most prosperous people send their girls back to their villages for initiation.
6. Against this statement, a member of the Temne Bondo mentioned the past existence of a sacred grove in Tokeh and remembered the last initiation at the end of the 1980s: 'It brought jealousy. [Sherbro women] said that our [society] is more frightening than the one of the Mende/Sherbro, that we have some ceremonies that they don't do, that they look like the ones of the *ɔkɔ* men. But we initiated a few Sherbro women ... But the conflicts can be resolved when we perform together.'
7. The local meaning that people attribute to 'underage' may vary. Sierra Leone's laws prohibit the initiation of girls under eighteen. Yet, in this case, Bondo women wanted to say that they initiated pubescent girls, but not small children.
8. In Sierra Leone's patrilineal societies, like the Kpelle, matrilineal ties structure Poro hierarchies. Ritual obligations tend to be kept within the hands of lineages of sister's sons (or strangers), who represent spiritual authority, while lineages of mother's brothers (or landowners) control local politics (see Murphy and Bledsoe 1987: 129; Højbjerg 1999: 538).
9. The financial advantage of allowing strangers to attain a position of power is salient in the case of 'big men' from Freetown or foreign investors.
10. The ritual procedure by which the spirit 'catches' new initiates is very similar to the Temne *amporo dif* (Poro kills) that Dorjahn (1982: 39) describes as a declining practice.
11. It appears that police officers who solved the case also did it in their capacity as Poro members and not with reference to government law. A few authors have also stressed that 'devils' are beyond the realm of legality: they cannot be arrested or charged in court (de Jong 2000: 163; King 2011; Nunley 1987: 57).
12. The organization of initiation periods on the Peninsula seems to follow the pattern described by Højbjerg (2007: 243) by which Poro is 'transmitted from one settlement to the next'. The first village to organize Poro holds a specific ritual place.
13. In his study of the initiation of politicians in Jola society, de Jong (2002) notes that initiation is a way to 'appropriate' national politicians, hold them accountable to local communities and access the public sphere.