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# THE MENDE OF SIERRA LEONE



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# THE MENDE OF SIERRA LEONE

West African People  
in Transition

by

KENNETH LITTLE



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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

## PREFACE

By Raymond Firth

PEOPLE in Britain know very little about people in West Africa. Yet now that one West African colony, the Gold Coast, is well set on the road to self-government and others may follow, it behoves the outside world to pay more attention to what manner of men they are who live there. This book about the Mende helps to fill a need. For, backward as Sierra Leone may have been since the philanthropic impulses which established Freetown as a home for liberated slaves in the early nineteenth century spent themselves, its people are sharing in the social and political awakening of West Africa. The Mende of the Sierra Leone Protectorate are a numerous and proud people, likely to make themselves felt with increasing force in the affairs of the region. The fact, too, that they share a common culture with their neighbours across the Liberian border may come to be of significance if their group consciousness should take the form of a political nationalism.

This book does not really need a preface. Dr. Little is no novice who has to have an introduction to his public. Already he is the Head of a University Department of Anthropology, and is widely known as the author of an important and authoritative work, *Negroes in Britain*, based largely on his own field study of the coloured community in Cardiff nearly ten years ago. He has asked me to write these few opening words here, I take it, mainly as a gesture of friendship—especially recalling, perhaps, that for a few days I shared with him his field experiences in the heart of Mendeland. There I was witness to his amicable relations with the people, to his wide knowledge of their affairs, and to the enthusiasm and care with which he was collecting his data. Under his guidance I visited chiefs' compounds, mosques, mission schools, administrators' offices and traders' stores. I saw African soap being made

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from palm oil and wood ash, and marvelled at the virtues of cleansing clothes and giving smoothness to the skin said to be possessed by the resulting black round balls. Doubtless a psychoanalyst could explain how soap even in this guise can stimulate lyrical advertisement ! He also showed me men weaving on the narrow loom, making strips of cotton fabric no more than six inches wide, and helped me to bargain for some of the Mende 'country cloth'. I took down samples of the curious Vai script, and tested its value for communication. I was taken inside Mende households, and was shown from the outside a round Njaye cult building, with its speckling of red and blue dots on a white wall. As we went round together on foot and by motor-lorry on this ethnographic Cook's tour, I was given a glimpse beneath the surface into current social and economic problems: attempts to prevent soil erosion in upland agriculture; improvement of methods of tax collection; the burden of peasant indebtedness to the Syrian trader; rôle of girl's initiation rites; promotion of Mende literacy; relations between Muslim, Christian and Pagan; efficiency of administration in the chiefdoms. But in particular I could appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the field task that Dr. Little had set himself, and the success with which he was grappling with it.

Dr. Little had his headquarters for much of the time at Bo, the principal town of the Mende country. When Mr. Graham Greene set off for Liberia on his *Journey without Maps*, he stopped a night at Bo. In his account, he says he was happy there, despite the usual tough dry tasteless chicken of the rest-house, the lack of medical equipment and of any mosquito rods for his bed, the presence of a large cockroach in the bathroom, and of a 'native' standing and complaining about something outside all night with folded hands. In similar circumstances, an anthropologist would have taken less notice of the cockroach and more of the 'native'. But Mr. Greene was happy because he had at last left behind something he distrusted—the Protectorate was different from the Colony of Sierra Leone, he felt; he was with the real African at last.

This is the feeling that many Europeans have. I had it too, as the little train got away from Freetown, and went up past places with attractive names, like Moyamba, Rotifunk, and Mano, before arriving at Bo. Partly, it was due to the mere leaving of a comparatively large town and seaport, with its numerous stores,

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Government offices and busy traffic. Partly, it was the reduction in contrast. The unpaved badly eroded back streets and slums of Freetown in 1945 were a grim background to the complex administrative organization, the developed commercial atmosphere, and the urbane European life of the bungalows. In the Protectorate the difference of standards was much less, the contrast less glaring. Again, one was in the midst of an African tribal culture, with a coherence and a value system that, while more alien, tended to evoke that respect which one is always inclined to accord to what one believes to be an integrated way of life.

But the change to the Protectorate is not to be expressed simply as the discovery of the 'real African'. As Dr. Little shows in this book, between the Creole of the Colony and the Mende of the Protectorate there is friction, jealousy, suspicion, due in part to the competition for jobs and in part to clash over social status. But he shows also how far Creole and European standards have penetrated. Literacy rather than geographic origin is the main distinguishing social criterion. The literate Mende of the Protectorate is as close in many ways to the Colony Creole as he is to his non-literate local cousin. Moreover, there are many Creoles in the Protectorate. Yet all literate Mende and many Creoles have wives or kin who are not in the literate stratum and who are a vital link between the literates and the unlettered tribal society. The 'real African' nowadays is well aware of Western values. Superficially at least he has absorbed many of them. In the economic field his activities are ultimately geared to the Western market system, and politically he has a sensitivity—deeper than is often suspected—to changes that are taking place in relations between Africans and Europeans elsewhere.

For the anthropologist here is a society of West African Negro type with a strong consciousness of solidarity, but split into a large number of relatively small and variant political units. What are the indices of the society? What are chief modes of activity of its members? What are the forces in common action?

The analysis Dr. Little gives in this book and his answers to these and other questions are unpretentious. The author is not concerned to invent new terms, to finesse with precise definitions, or to try and put forward original theories of social action. His aim is to give a straightforward ethnographical account of Mende society in a fairly comprehensive way. No such account has previously been given. It is sometimes deplored that of recent years

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the fashion in anthropology has been to write extensive monographs about a single institution or facet of culture and to ignore the claims for general ethnographic description of all the major aspects of the society in one volume. From this point of view Dr. Little has made a contribution to general African studies. He examines the traditional account of the shaping of Mende society and the outstanding part which warfare seems to have played in that process. He examines also the history of the Mende Rising against the imposition of house tax and the legacy which that has left in the Mende political system. (It has entered even into Mende art. I have an interesting memento of this, a series of water colours for school instruction painted by a headmaster and depicting in crude but vivid style the various stages in the Rising from the time the District Commissioner leaves the Chiefs' Council amid jeering and laughter while the warriors display their swords in defiance until the leaders of the rebellion meet their fate on the gallows and the District Commissioner receives payment of house tax in palm wine and other commodities. And then the epilogue: 'What we get in return for house tax'—schools, motor roads, dispensaries, letters by post, railways, and—perhaps with unconscious irony—'native administrations, district commissioners and court messengers'.)

The analysis goes on to deal with rice farming and with its social and religious implications as a major preoccupation of Mende life; with the principles of local grouping, kinship grouping and social stratification; with the system of authority; the rôle of women in social affairs; the general process of socialization of a Mende individual; the system of religious and magical beliefs and practices; the part played by Islam in modern Mende life; and the multiple functions of the secret societies.

In all this there is material of theoretical as well as ethnographic interest. Examination of the rôle of the *mawé* shows an extended family system in a projection of gross household type in which a core of agnatic kin is augmented by other cognatic and even affinal kin. All the members of this body in varying degree share in this management, especially in its farming operations. Here is a type of unit, primarily on a kinship basis, which can be set alongside analogous units among Central African and other peoples who do not confine themselves to using a unilineal principle in their corporate kin groups. That the structure of the kin group is a function of the social services the group performs is

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an arguable proposition. But in such argument Dr. Little's material should be taken into consideration.

One asks how a set of chiefdoms with the major units independent and the chief as a purely secular figure lacking ritual sanctions could enter into effective co-operative action. This question is illuminated by the author's analysis of the rôle of the Poro society. It is shown how no person can hope to occupy a position of authority in the chiefdom without being a Poro member and receiving Poro support. Even nowadays the Poro seems to play an important rôle in the election of a chief. The primary function of the Poro is to equip every Mende man for his life as a member of the community. But because its net is so wide the society also has been able to serve as an important regulating force in Mende life and to provide social and ritual ties which cross the boundaries of chiefdoms for political functions.

These two examples are an indication of some of the important problems raised. Some years ago it was said by Dr. E. B. Worthington that research on African cultures as they are today in a state of transition was perhaps the most important need in African anthropological studies. This book is a definite contribution to such research.

RAYMOND FIRTH



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE material for this study of the Mende people was gathered 'in the field' during my stay in the then Sierra Leone Protectorate throughout 1945, and again in the latter half of 1946. My main aim in undertaking the investigation was to provide a general description of Mende culture, with particular regard to the changes which were coming about in Mende institutions. Respecting the latter, in an article published in 1955 I examined the role of the emergent educated class of Protectorate-born person and endeavoured to show how achieved forms of status were tending to multiply.<sup>1</sup> This, however, was before Independence and in the meantime even greater changes, sociological as well as technological, have come about in Mendeland. This second edition of my book does not take them into account, but records what I found twenty years ago.

The Mende, as I shall indicate in the text, form the largest single cultural group in Sierra Leone, and their culture is shared to a considerable extent by peoples living in a wide region around them. Despite this there was, when I wrote, no comprehensive study of Mende life. The only ethnographic material available was scattered in numerous periodicals and in a number of books by travellers and visitors to the area. A good deal of this was out of date by modern standards, though there were important exceptions. For example, Dr. S. Hofstra, who worked in Mendeland in the nineteen-thirties under the auspices of the International Institute of African Languages and Culture had written several papers of great value to the student.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of my own enquiries necessitated a good deal of travel in the country, although I spent quite a large part of the time at Bo. Bo was the administrative headquarters of the then Protectorate and (as it is now) the largest town in Mendeland,

<sup>1</sup> 'Structural Change in the Sierra Leone Protectorate', *Africa*, XXV, No. 3, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> See later citations and Bibliography.

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although 'cosmopolitan' by local standards. Methodologically, there were two sets of difficulties to overcome. At the start, I was regarded by the people, literate and non-literate alike, as an official of the Government. This had certain advantages in affording an easy perhaps too easy, access to notable members of Mende society. It also had a number of obvious disadvantages which were greatly accentuated by the circumstances of the recent war. It was only too clear that certain war-time measures, like the quota of rice required from every able-bodied male person in the Protectorate, had aroused a good deal of resentment against the 'Government' and its officials. There were complaints about the black market in foodstuffs and other commodities, and the 'Government' was alleged to be giving special favours to the European firms and Lebanese traders over the Africans. The prejudice arising out of these attitudes and complaints had to be obviated, as well as the more conventional difficulties, with which every field worker is confronted, of establishing *rapprochement*.

Most, if not all, non-literate people are suspicious of the European outsider, and the Mende are certainly no exception to the rule. In the present case, perhaps, the difficulty was also increased slightly by the fact that 'secrecy' itself is of institutional significance in Mende life. A large part of their culture is controlled by societies and cults whose more important rites are intentionally concealed from the wider community. As I shall explain in the text, there is also a special political and economic value attached to information of certain kinds. For example, in certain circumstances, it is both 'treasonable' and bad politics to disclose the genealogical history of a 'ruling house'. One of the greatest sins a Mende man can commit is to 'give away' the 'secrets' of the country. I had personal experience of this when an African stranger to Mendeland, known to be a friend of mine, accidentally touched on one or two matters of local and controversial importance in the course of addressing a gathering of chiefs. It was said—and in my rôle of investigator I took the suggestion as a back-handed compliment—that the only way he could have come by the information was through me!

The secret societies, and the Poro in particular, play a very large part in the regulation of life throughout most of Sierra Leone and Liberia. It is virtually impossible to provide an adequate description and analysis of Mende culture without dealing at some length with their organization and social function. At the

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same time, certain ethical as well as methodological questions are involved. The affairs of non-literate peoples used to be of interest to very few besides the social anthropologist, administrator, and missionary. But today these peoples are entering rapidly into the world community and they naturally expect the same regard for their susceptibilities that western nations extend to each other. More positively, the implication is that the social scientist should be bound by the same considerations of restraint in writing about the affairs of these present non-literate communities as he would in studies nearer to home. The anthropologist is bound to consider everything that comes within view as proper grist for his mill; but he has also an obligation to the people studied, if he is to deserve their confidence. This meant, for me, that a number of the things that I saw and heard myself cannot be reported.

To the Mende, a good deal of their traditional lore is sacred as well as secret and cannot, in any circumstances, be imparted to an outsider, whether African or European. Each new initiate in the secret societies takes an oath never to disclose what he learns, and from this there is no future release. Naturally, such an oath would be as binding upon an anthropologist as anyone else, and so I purposely declined more than one invitation to the membership offered me. I was, also, I must admit, somewhat diffident about the requisite surgical operations!

I wish, therefore, to make plain that all the information I gained regarding the activities of secret societies was as a non-member. In view of the implications of the matter, I would also like to add that I purposely refrained from putting specific questions to society members. Instead, the method I adopted was this. I drafted an account of the activities in which I was interested, basing it on already available material and on my own indirect observations. This account I checked with informants, asking them merely to indicate what in their opinion was incorrect. By gradually revising and reconstructing it I was able to gain sufficient understanding of the institutions concerned without embarrassing anyone. In fact, I doubt very much if any Sierra Leonean who has been brought up in a traditional home will find much that is new in this book. In addition, I have deliberately omitted certain particulars from these present writings which do, in fact, include the question of secret signs and symbols. I regret doing so, because the material concerned includes a store of proverbs richly illustrative of important patterns of culture. How-

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ever, from the Mende point of view it is essentially private and so I am regarding it as such.

This description of my difficulties is sufficient introduction to the more general problem—that I will now discuss—that of establishing contact with the people studied. The ordinary Mende man is not attracted by the idea that one is writing a book to let the outside world know about him. The Mende are proud, and justly so, of their culture, but unlike most of their contemporaries among western nations they are in no hurry to advertise it.

I found, in the long run, that one of the best methods of approach was through the educated members of their society—chiefs as well as commoners. It is quite untrue, as some members of the European official class in West Africa proclaim, that the educated African, merely because he happens to be educated, is necessarily out of touch with his non-literate fellows. Quite often, it is the reverse, and it is the educated man—the local teacher or catechist—to whom the people pay more attention than to the local headman. Once persuaded of the sincerity of one's intentions many members of this group did a great deal to allay traditional suspicions on my account and a number went out of their way to seek out fresh channels for me even at the cost, in some instances, of laying themselves open, also, to the charge of 'betraying the country'. A further group of people who rendered invaluable aid were the missionaries who, too, are apt to be maligned. I, personally, do not always see eye to eye with certain evangelical methods, but I confess most readily that in the Sierra Leone Protectorate I found individual missionaries with a rare knowledge of and sympathy with the people whom they are endeavouring to serve.

Once the initial and psychological barriers had been broken down the task was less difficult. Despite their strong trait of secretiveness, the Mende are a friendly people with a sly sense of irony which they are as ready to turn against themselves as others. They appreciate an outsider's willingness, particularly if he is a European, to respect their customary etiquettes. They are even prepared, if they like him and provided it can be done without public ostentation, to talk quite freely about themselves and their way of life. They are ready, nearly always, to discuss their farms and the technicalities of farming; and topical matters, like 'woman palaver', usually evoke an interested response. The tabooed subject, as already stated, was the one which had to do in any way

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with secret societies, more particularly the Poro. Genealogies were essentially a matter for private conversation and the question of land tenure was also delicate, but sufficiently topical and controversial to be introduced without fear of resentment. The reaction to religious matters I found vague and even apathetic, though more specific references to 'medicine' could usually be relied upon to arouse a considerable and rather self-conscious degree of curiosity.

Obviously, therefore, one's technique had to vary a great deal with the circumstances. It was never possible to hurry things. Certain data required a lengthy and deliberate skirting of the subject. Other material which, as mentioned above, included farming matters, could generally be obtained by direct questioning, through working on the farm, and by ordinary observation.

There are a few further matters to mention before concluding this preface. The first is to apologize for certain omissions because I have written very little about the technical side of Mende culture, such as arts and crafts. Readers interested in these matters should consult Dr. Hofstra's article, 'The Social Significance of the Oil Palm in the Life of the Mendi', *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, Band XXXIV, 5-6, 1937, and Dr. M. C. F. Easmon's pamphlet on 'Sierra Leone Native Cloths'. There are also many shorter articles in past numbers of the *Sierra Leone Studies*, previously published by the Sierra Leone Government and now by the Sierra Leone Society, Freetown.

Also, lack of space unfortunately only permitted my providing data on the social aspects of farming. Particulars of its economics and ritual, however, will be found in two papers entitled 'The Mende Rice Farm and its Cost' that I published in *Zaire* (Louvain), March and April, 1951.

In particular, I should like to draw the reader's attention to the more recent works of other authors, including a short note on Mende names for the months of the year by Mr. J. Bockhari.<sup>1</sup> More extensively, on the historical side, Dr. A. P. Kup has written about the antecedents of the Mende<sup>2</sup> and a number of geographers as well as historians have thrown fresh light upon the earlier trading and political relations between Mendeland and the Sierra

<sup>1</sup> 'The Derivation of Mende Names for the Months of the Year', *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Series, No. 4, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> *A History of Sierra Leone, 1400-1787*. Cambridge, 1961.

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Leone Colony during the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Of particular value in this regard is the detailed documentation and information provided in two books by Mr. Christopher Fyfe.<sup>2</sup>

A number of articles by the Rev. Professor Harry Sawyerr and the late Rev. W. T. Harris have thrown additional and more detailed light upon religious belief and ritual. For example, ancestral rites are classified by Professor Sawyerr in terms of goodwill, thanks, propitiatory and mediatory offerings. Both of these writers also clarify the distinction to be made between several categories of ancestors. In addition to four main varieties, Professor Sawyerr lists an amorphous group who when alive were of migratory tendencies and never really belonged to the family hearth or to the village or town. He also explains that the Mende talk of the *kekēni*, the fathers, whose memories are relatively fresh, and the *ndeblaa*, the forebears, who are virtually forgotten but are nevertheless a moral force in their communities.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Harris makes a similar point, and he also shows that the 'prayer-leader' (*hemoi*) plays his part in the nature cults as well as in ancestor veneration.<sup>4</sup> He gives an example of the former ritual, illuminates the place of the Supreme Being in Mende cosmology, and traces the derivation of the two names by which 'God' is known. His explanation demonstrates how these names—*ŋgewo* and *Leve*—are used in conventional sayings to rationalize various social institutions and to regulate social behaviour.<sup>5</sup> Further examples are provided by Professor Sawyerr in an earlier article dealing with the Mende belief in God within the wider context of African religion.<sup>6</sup>

In a somewhat similar connection the Rev. Isaac Ndanewa

<sup>1</sup> See, *inter alia*, P. K. Mitchell, 'Trade Routes of the Early Sierra Leone Protectorate', *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Series, No. 16, June 1962, and J. D. Hargreaves, 'The Establishment of the Sierra Leone Protectorate', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, No. 1, Vol. 2, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> *A History of Sierra Leone*, 1962. Oxford, and *Sierra Leone Inheritance*, 1964. London.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ancestor Worship—The Mechanics', *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> 'Ceremonies and Stories connected with Trees, Rivers and Hills in the Protectorate of Sierra Leone', *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Series, No. 2, June 1954, and 'How the Mende People first started to pray to *ŋgewo*', *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1963.

<sup>5</sup> '*ŋgewo* and *Leve*', *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> 'Do Africans believe in God?', *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Series, No. 15, 1961.

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has explained how *Ngewe* is involved in the ritual of the 'swear' (*sondu*) when an offended person invokes a curse on someone who has offended him. The medicine on which the curse is pronounced is said to release a spirit which goes out hunting for the culprit and others associated with him and when it finds them duly punishes them. Mr. Ndanewa's account also shows that elaborate preparations are required in order to make this procedure legal. They include payment of a nominal fee to the local authority, securing the services of a medicine man, public announcement of the prospective ceremony, and an explanation on the spot of the reason for the swear and why a particular medicine is being used.<sup>1</sup>

The implications of the 'swear' and of other supernatural sanctions for social psychiatry have been examined in a paper by Dr. John Dawson. He points out that personal misfortune and mental or physical illness are often attributed to the infraction of an important taboo. Specifically, the culprit is said to have contravened the rules of certain secret societies which possess powerful medicines. These societies, such as the Humoi and the N'jaye, also possess the means to deal with the effects of his anti-social behaviour and Dr. Dawson shows that treatment involves a species of group therapy. It is not just a 'doctor-patient relationship', but a form of social re-integration. The methods used are designed to counteract the supernatural powers that have been activated by the 'patient's' misdemeanour as well as the effects of the disaster he has suffered. The practitioner deals, Dr. Dawson argues, with the complete man as a total entity treating physical, psychological and social symptoms.<sup>2</sup>

Closely related to religion is folklore. Our knowledge of the latter and its implications for Mende social life has been increased by scholarly articles from the pen of Gordon Innes. He distinguishes two broad categories of oral literature in terms of traditional narrative and fictional tales. Of the latter the most common are animal trickster stories centering on the Spider and the Royal Antelope. The Spider is always selfish, ruthless and callous, apparently devoid of all fine feelings. The Royal Antelope is likeable, gentle and yet shrewd. There is a very rich store of these and other folktales which frequently reflect, as Mr. Innes shows, the

<sup>1</sup> 'The Rationale of Mende "Swears"', *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> 'Therapeutic Functions of Social Groups in Sierra Leone', *Bulletin of British Psychological Society*, 17, 56, 1964.

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tensions and conflicts within Mende society. Jealousy between co-wives, for example, is a frequent theme. He also illustrates the different ways in which songs are used within the narrative. Sometimes they serve as magical formulae, giving power over wild animals or spirits of the bush. Sometimes, songs comprise mostly the utterances of spirits (usually of the dead) and of birds. Such utterances are in nearly all cases messages. The main point of the song, however, is at climactic points or at crises in the narrative. It is most often uttered by a character in a tale who is under severe stress, either physical or mental.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Marion D. de B. Kilson, too, has analysed social interactions through the stories related by Mende people, mainly by men. Her hypotheses are that the relationships reflected will be those about which there is the greatest anxiety in daily life, and that the sex of the narrator will be a significant variable in determining the types of the relationships projected. A major anxiety reflected was the impermanence of friendship between men. Nearly all the stories about the relationship between spouses reflected a general lack of trust of the wife. On the other hand, the consanguineal tie between parents and children appeared to be less fraught with anxiety than those between non-consanguinially related persons. The ideal for affective harmony in interaction between co-wives was also stressed in the stories. In summing up, Mrs. Kilson found that men tend to be concerned about the harmonies of extra-familial relationships as well as those within the family, while women emphasize solely intra-familial ones.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing with social organization, we have an account of the growth of Moyamba to its present position as one of the largest urban centres in the provinces,<sup>3</sup> and a short description of a nearby village.<sup>4</sup> Another important Mende town recently studied is Kenema where the effects of urbanization on family life and structure have been analysed and compared with social changes

<sup>1</sup> 'Some Features of Theme and Style in Mende Folktales', *Sierra Leone Language Review*, No. 3, 1964, and 'The Function of the Song in Mende Folktales', *Sierra Leone Language Review*, No. 4, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> 'Social Relationships in Mende Domaisia', *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Series, No. 15, 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Ranson, 'The Growth of Moyamba', *The Bulletin (Journal of the Sierra Leone Geographical Association)*, No. 9, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Fitzjohn, 'A Village in Sierra Leone', *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Series, No. 7, 1956.

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of a similar kind in Temne country.<sup>1</sup> The role of the Mende as town dwellers has also been reviewed outside Mendeland itself. According to Professor Michael Banton's report the Mende who move to Freetown make a more individual kind of adaptation to city-life than other tribal migrants who rely extensively on voluntary associations for mutual benefit as well as recreation.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, there are recent publications which deal with political institutions, modern as well as ancient. For example, in *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*,<sup>3</sup> Dr. Martin Kilson has considered and analysed the part played by Mende politicians and their supporters in the formation of national political parties. His article shows that a particularly significant factor of the Sierra Leone People's Party's recruitment has been the prominent role of traditional leaders. Paramount and other chiefs are important at various levels of the party organization. He also traces the part played by kinship and points out that the pre-eminence of the S.L.P.P. in post-war politics stems partly from the educational advantages enjoyed by the Mende.

On the traditional side, using mainly historical data, a recent article of my own has attempted to reconstruct the relation of the Poro to indigenous government in pre-colonial times. I have tried to show similarities with methods of administration found in other regions of West Africa.<sup>4</sup>

The above list does not include everything that has been written about the Mende since the 1940's. It is large enough, however, to indicate that the hope expressed in the first edition of this book is gradually being realized. Research has gone on and there is no doubt that extra stimulus will come from such important events as the recent establishment of a University College (Njala) in Mendeland itself, as well as the creation at Fourah Bay College (now the University College of Sierra Leone) of an Institute of African Studies.

There is, indeed, need for haste before the traditional way of life is lost and before modern development and change have bitten too

<sup>1</sup> David Gamble, 'Family Organization in New Towns in Sierra Leone', in *Urbanization in African Social Change*, Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh University, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Banton, *West African City*, 1957. London.

<sup>3</sup> (eds.) James S. Colman and Carl G. Rosberg, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Little, 'The Political Function of the Poro', *Africa*, XXXV, No. 4, 1965, and XXXVI, No. 1, 1966.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

deeply into the cake of custom. Moreover, the fact that Sierra Leone is now one country makes it all the more essential that adequate records should be made not only of the Mende but of the other peoples and cultures. All of them have their own special characteristics and traits which in several respects are the unique social heritage of the Guinea coast. Here, therefore, is a challenge, particularly to Sierra Leonean scholars and researchers themselves.

Whatever the quest, it will be amply repaid in personal experience alone. No doubt every anthropologist gains a regard and affection for the people he studies. In connection with my own fieldwork, there comes to mind the hot humid air, which oppressed one almost as soon as the sun had arisen; the delays and the seemingly endless 'palavers'. But one also recalls the bush pathways, the gleaming rivers, the tiny forest-hidden villages, the red laterite and myriad colours. Above all, I remember the general laughter and friendliness, and the almost daylight clear nights when the drums beat, and all of us—chiefs, elders, men, women and children—went dancing under the shining moon.

*Edinburgh, June 1966.*

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## CHAPTER I

# TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND WARFARE

### *1. Some Nineteenth-Century Ideas of the Mende*

**T**HE term 'indigenous culture' is conventionally taken to denote native institutions before a tribe has had significant contact with Western civilization. This omits consideration, for the sake of convenience, of prior changes in the organization of native society.

Any re-construction of Mende culture, as it existed before the impact of European and British influence, must necessarily be based very largely upon traditional accounts handed down to the present generation. In addition, there is a certain amount of information recorded by European missionaries and travellers who lived in, or visited, Mende country before the British took over. Most of these writings concern the latter years of the nineteenth century and they indicated that the main institutional features of 'indigenous' Mende life, such as the secret societies, domestic slavery, warfare, etc., were still in full swing. Perhaps the earliest account of any significance is that of an American missionary, George Thompson, who paid several visits in the middle of the century to the Mendi Mission, recently extended up country in the neighbourhood of Tikonko, from its original foundation in Sherbro. Thompson describes a number of customary etiquettes and provides an interesting account of his efforts to secure peace between the people of Bumpe and Tikonko.<sup>1</sup>

By the latter part of the century, a Mende population of several thousands was resident in the Colony. It consisted very largely of

<sup>1</sup> *Thompson in Africa*, New York, 1852. *An Account of the Missionary Labours, etc., of George Thompson in Western Africa at the Mendi Mission.*

## TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND WARFARE

refugees from the 'tribal' wars, of former domestic slaves and their descendants, and of petty traders. Most of the two former categories found employment as agricultural labourers, hammock-bearers, boatmen, etc. Few of them rose above manual and menial occupations. Mende traders appear to have been attracted by the market in Freetown relatively early in the history of the Colony. The standard of life, however, of this immigrant Mende community was very low by European and the best Creole<sup>1</sup> criteria and created a very unfavourable impression of their tribal compatriots. The general conception gained of the up-country Mende was of an entirely 'barbarous' people, lacking in morals and 'civilized' qualities.

Though a similar attitude colours contemporary accounts of Mende life as actually observed in the hinterland, it was by no means exclusive or unqualified. This is evident from the remarks of Travelling Commissioner Alldridge, who concluded a large number of treaties with the up-country chiefs prior to the proclamation of the Protectorate.<sup>2</sup> The first comprehensive description is contained in a communication by the Reverend William Vivian, one time Superintendent of the Methodist Free Church Missions. While condemning certain features as repulsive, he admits that there is also another side to the picture, and that amongst the Mende are 'many things that are quite idyllic and patriarchal in simplicity and attractiveness'. He also takes Governor Cardew to task for characterizing the Mende as 'lazy'.

'The moral temper and character of these Mendes combines various elements. They have long been known as fierce, brutal, and war-loving people; and would, in all probability, quickly return to the exercise of these qualities if British influence were withdrawn from their country. But they are not simply a brutal people by any means. . . . I met people in the country who were repulsive in their condition, and despicable in themselves; but I met others who in demeanour, presence, and character called up to my mind pictures I have seen of the Old Testament times.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Creole' was applied originally to the children, born in the Colony, of the original settlers of Sierra Leone. It came at a later date to refer to all persons born in the Colony. See later sections and, in particular, Chapter XIII.

<sup>2</sup> T. J. Alldridge, *The Sherbro and its Hinterland*.

<sup>3</sup> William Vivian, 'A Visit to Mendeland', *Journ. Man. Geog. Soc.*, 1896.

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Another writer, Colonel Trotter, was a member of the topographical expedition which marked out the boundary between French Guinea and the British Protectorate. His experience of the Mende was confined to employing them as carriers, and he did not visit Mendeland itself.

‘The Mende . . . are all pagans, intensely ignorant and superstitious and very low in the scale of civilization. They are strong powerful men, hard workers, willing, and capable of severe exertion under great privations. Their good qualities are most apparent when circumstances are most adverse; prosperity only brings out their vices. When half starved they will work without complaint till they drop, and they have no notion of giving in. . . .

‘At the same time, though valuable and courageous workers, the Mende are no value for fighting purposes, nor are they to be dreaded as enemies. There is amongst them no discipline, cohesion, or binding motive to give them power of carrying out a common purpose. They have the greatest dread of white men, and are ready to obey them like slaves do their masters’.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. *Early Mende Origins*

There are indications that by the 1890's, European influence was affecting Mende country, with the result that more attention was given to agricultural than to war-like pursuits. Though the disturbed nature of the hinterland was apparent from the earliest date of British contact, a traditional view is that the original settlement of Mendeland was on peaceful lines.<sup>2</sup> It is said that the arts of war were either brought to, or forced on, previous settlers by invaders from the north during a period relatively recent in history. Such a suggestion is not incompatible with what is known of the historical movement of peoples in the region of the western Sudan. One factor was the establishment and expansion of powerful kingdoms, such as Mali and Songhay, in the late Middle Ages. There was also the westward drive of the conquering Fulani towards their present habitat in northern Nigeria and the neighbourhood of Lake Chad. It is assumed that this had the effect of

<sup>1</sup> Lt.-Col. J. K. Trotter, *The Niger Sources*, 1896.

<sup>2</sup> If this view is correct, it is probable that the original settlement was on rather sparse and temporary lines (as would probably be the case with hunters), since most present-day Mende towns claim foundation by a warrior (see also later paragraphs).

## TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND WARFARE

forcing the indigenous peoples, who lay in their way, further into the coastal rain-forests. The latter areas were covered so densely that resettlement in large groups was impossible. A living had to be gained mainly by hunting the wild animals, such as the elephant, bush cow, etc., which were in plentiful supply.

A further suggestion, which would be in keeping with the idea of a forced migration of peoples, is that the ancestors of the present-day Mende emanated from the same ancestral stock as Mandé-speaking people of French Guinea. Possibly, they arrived in what is now Sierra Leone at least four hundred years ago, as small bands of hunters, little larger in size than the immediate family. These initial settlers set a pattern of life which was suited to the natural environment and which is still followed in various parts of the Protectorate, including Mendeland, where trapping game and wild animals, and fishing in the inland swamps and rivers, is a less laborious way of getting a living than cultivation. The almost impenetrable forest made outside communication impossible even over short distances, except by river; while the continual movement of the chase militated further against permanent habitation on the part of large groups of people. On the other hand, larger animals, like the elephant, once killed could not be moved from the spot, so at least a temporary shelter had to be erected.

### 3. *Methods of Settlement*

This helps to explain why one particular locality rather than another gradually developed into a permanent site. It is significant that very many accounts relating to the founding of present towns describe how they originated out of the killing of an elephant by a hunter and his party.<sup>1</sup> There, whilst skinning the animal and consuming its flesh, they would erect a few temporary huts<sup>2</sup> and clear

<sup>1</sup> Elephants figure quite often in Mende folk-lore and particularly in the founding of early towns and villages. It is possible that they were looked upon, in a sense, as the original owners of the country. The traditional account of the foundation of Serabu in the Bumpe chiefdom, relates how its founder, a Mandingo 'mori-man', was out prospecting in new country one day, when he met a Banta hunter. The latter gave him charge of the new country, after they had made friends, and it turned out that this Banta man was an elephant, 'because in those days, elephants had the power of changing themselves into human beings'.

<sup>2</sup> A common place name, 'Mattru', is derived from the Mende term for 'buffalo', which is *taewui*.

## TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND WARFARE

enough, perhaps, of the surrounding virgin forest to grow a few grains of supplementary food. The reputation of the kill would attract outsiders, more huts would be set up, and the settlement grew into a large village under the leadership of the original pioneer and his kin. As the size of the habitation increased, so did the need for fresh sources of food, and expansion was favoured by the occupational circumstances of hunting. The younger and more active men would venture off on their own and find fresh sites within the vicinity. But they retained their connection with the parent village, visiting it from time to time to pay homage.

Thus, the picture emerges of a number of villages, each with its out-lying hamlets, subsisting on a combination of hunting and primitive agriculture. On the river banks, the situation was repeated. Fishermen seeking fresh and more profitable grounds would naturally settle where they found the fish most plentiful, and in the same way, the more skilful and successful communities would attract other settlers to them. Grains found growing wild on the banks, or in marshy places, provided them with a staple food.

If we can trust traditional accounts further, this process of gradual settlement and opening out of the country not only preceded, but made possible the secondary and more militant phase of Mende culture. To the north of present-day Mendeland, the movement of people from the western Sudan towards the coast was less impeded by forests and a number of rivers facilitated communication with it. This fact accounts, possibly, for the eventual arrival of the Temne who, according to Butt-Thompson, were originally a fighting legion<sup>1</sup> of the Baiga in Futa-Jallon, French Guinea.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that, settling and moving down the Sierra Leone River, they reached the coast itself in the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> He also thinks that the Temne consolidated themselves in the area north and north-west of Mendeland in the face of opposition from the Mende. If this is correct, the Mende themselves must have already become a warlike people. It is just possible, therefore, that

<sup>1</sup> The Mende term for Temne is *Tei-la-lei-mui*—'one who opens the town', i.e. generally a warrior.

<sup>2</sup> F. W. Butt-Thompson, *Sierra Leone in History and Tradition and Secret Societies of West Africa*.

<sup>3</sup> According to F. A. J. Utting, *The Story of Sierra Leone*, a Portuguese religious settlement, established at what is now Kroo Bay in the Sierra Leone Colony, was in touch with the Temne at the beginning of the sixteenth century.