

## Traditions and Customary Practices: A Panacea for Peaceful Coexistence among the Kpelle Tribe of Liberia

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### **Abstract**

*This study interrogates traditions and customary practices among the Kpelle tribe of Liberia. The paper observed that, Kpelle people are part of the highly pluralistic ethnic-cultural area in Liberia West Africa and the way traditional Kpelle people maintained peaceful coexistence; deal with conflict and achieved resolutions that is satisfactorily enough is influenced by their cultural beliefs and value system that is strongly grounded in the teachings and practices of their culture. The Kpelle people had been adjudged to be the most peaceful people among Liberian societies. The paper concludes that, borrowing a leaf from the sacredness of Kpelle people's tradition could go a long way in peacebuilding in any society of the world.*

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**Keywords:** *conflict resolution, culture and traditions, peacebuilding.*

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### **Introduction**

Conflict though part of human life and existence; but if not arrested as it arises tends to escalate and become violent with several awful consequences. Ajayi & Buhari, (2014) in their paper titled: *Peace Traditions and Conflict Resolution: Changing Paradigms* quote and said it is out of place to affirm that the system, tools, tradition, and ideas associated with dispute settlement, and conflict management for harmonious relationships never existed with the African people (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014:143).

Traditional African societies is a bunch of heterogeneous societies with diverse nature but similar culture have over the time developed various traditions and customary practices to settle dispute, maintain peace and thus to create a peaceful coexistence between themselves long before the incursion of the colonial masters in the eighteenth century. Traditional Kpelle people of Liberia deals with conflict by their cultural beliefs and value system which is strongly grounded in the teachings and practices of the *Poro* and *Sande*, which are the traditional institutions of education. This paper therefore sets out to look at the *Poro Society* as the major traditional and customary practices of the Kpelle people of Liberia being the major instrument that creates and maintains peaceful coexistence among the people.

### **Liberia Poro Society: An Overview of Liberia and the Kpelle Ethnic Group**

Liberia is a country in West Africa, bordering with the Sierra Leone to its northwest, Guinea to its north, Cote d'Ivoire to its east and Atlantic south-southwest; the country's capital city is Monrovia. Liberia has a population of 4,967,661 people (Worldometers, 2019). There are

fifteen counties comprising of sixteen ethnic groups in Liberia; the largest of the ethnic group is the Kpelle.

The Kpelle are a part of the highly pluralistic ethnic-cultural area formed in the forests of West Africa by the dynamics of historic migration. Significant trade shifts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the breakup of the Songhai state system forced migrant waves of Mande and West Atlantic speaking peoples from the north and northwest into the forest of Sierra Leone, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, and Liberia (Liebenow 1969:34-36). The Mande speaking Kpelle emerged in central Liberia roughly between the St. Paul and St. Johns Rivers. They have been variously referred to as Kpwesi, Kpessi, Gerse, Mpessi, Berlu, Gbelle, Bere, Gbalin, Gizima, or Buni (Johnston 1905-06, Vol. 2: 866).

The Kpelle people are an important ethnic group because of their peaceful nature, rich culture and agricultural practices. Kpelle people are also in Southern Guinea where they are known as Guerze and in North Western Ivory Coast. Most Kpelle in Liberia inhabit Bong, Bomi, Gbarpolu, and Lofa Counties. They however, speak Kpelle language and Kpelle language belongs to the Mande language family. The predominant religions among the Kpelle people are the Kpelle Traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. This ethnic group is organized under several paramount chiefs who serve as mediators for the public, preserve order and settle disputes.

### **An overview of the *Poro* Society: History and Practices**

According to Fyfe (1994) *Poro* society was part of the culture introduced by Mande people, migrants to the region as early as 1000 AD. The Society is found among the Bassa, Gola, Kissi, Kpelle Loma and Vai people of Liberia; the Male version is known as *Poro* while the female equivalent is called *Sande*. The *Poro Society* is the predominant traditional conflict-prevention mechanism among the aboriginal Kpele people of Liberia.

*Poro* society is by far the most important among all other societies in Liberia. The entire native population of the Kpelle ethnic group is governed by its code of laws. It represents a type form of fraternal society where infants are even temporarily admitted. The ceremonies for them consists of carrying them into the *Poro* bush (UN Dec. 2015, para. 46; VOA 13 Oct. 2016) for some period of time ranging from two years to four years though sometimes maybe shorter and later are return to the populace again. During initiation process, they teach to learn "secret (s)" that are not allowed to be shared (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 20).

Returnees from the *Poro* bush are clothe in white apparel wrapped around their neck and are covered with white chalk; in such manner walk in procession to the town and are settled under a local kitchen where they would be received by their family members.

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

"The *Sande* and *Poro* societies are the trusted custodians of "culture" in much of Liberia and have been present in the region for centuries. These societies are traditionally believed to inculcate values and teach skills conducive to communal harmony and to prepare children for the rigors of

adulthood. They do have a spiritual dimension too, and they are not however considered to be religious institutions as such, and most *Sande* and *Poro* members are also adherents of Christianity or Islam. (UN Dec. 2015, para. 14).

## **The Relationship between the State and the *Poro* Society**

### **The Power of the Societies**

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

The societies hold power over the communities, resolving disputes (International Crisis Group 6 Apr. 2006, i; Australia 5 Aug. 2009, 1) and condemning members who have defied established social norms (ibid.). In addition, the village's important political decisions are made by these societies (International Crisis Group 8 Dec. 2004, 26; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012). A non-member is not appointed, supported or allowed to take or represent the people in a public position; an example is when Charles Taylor the then President of Liberia and the leader of the defunct NPFL joined the political race in 1997 for the position of the President; he had to submit himself to be initiated into the *Poro* Society and had "*Dapkana*" included in his name as one of the symbols of his membership. *Dapkana* in Kpele means 'strong man'.

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

An account of when I became the Commissioner of Dinnita Clan with the headquarters in Yanwuellie in 1998 which never lasted for three months before I was frustrated out of office as the result of my being alien to their custom was a clear prove of the people's compulsory membership ideology; even my girl friend who is a member of the female version (*Sande*) often told me in her soft but strict voice as follow: "*Ken, you must leave the people's office before they forced you to join them*". The essence of the compulsory membership for political office-holder is that there is a mutual working relationship between the government and the *Poro* Society and that the appointee must be vast in the teachings and doctrines of the *Poro*. This is also one of the criteria to be appointed into the Customary courts in Nigeria (the appointee must be vast in the custom and practices of the people). See S.266(3a-b) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

## **Conflict Analysis among the Kpelle Ethnic Group of Liberia**

More often as it is a common phenomenon in every traditional African society; sources of conflicts among the Kpelle Ethnic group of Liberia are conflicts arising from inheritance, land, commerce, family, tenancy and many others. Old-man Kpannah an adherent of *Poro* Society

who is also the Yanwuellie town chief narrated how conflicts arising from inheritance are often settled at the *Poro* bush without recourse to court; procedures at the *Poro* bush are kept secret between disputed parties and parties would return home harmoniously.

Land, as well as all other disputes is resolved by the town chiefs who would summon elders to sit with him and adjudicate over it, where the dispute cannot be resolved by the town chiefs' courts, aggrieved parties have the options to either proceed to the Commissioner's Court, take appeal to the Paramount Chiefs' court for final determination. However, there is an option of reporting such dispute to the *Poro* bush at the early stage or at any time of the stages for a permanent settlement. There are rare reports of violent conflict among the Kpelle ethnic group of Liberia because of their involvement in the *Poro* Society.

The *Poro* society has its own special rituals and language, tattooing, and symbols and ways of conflict resolution. Details are scarce, due to an oath of secrecy (Alldridge, 1901). One of the social functions of secret societies like the *Poro* and *Sande* is to deter antisocial behavior or beliefs. *Poro* elders will determine cases of alleged witchcraft in the community (Olukoju, 2006). Shedding of blood, and vulgar languages are strictly prohibited among the Kpelle people, since majority of the people are members, therefore, every member is a secret police with the role of reporting violators to the *Poro* bush and such violators are dealt with decisively to forestall further breach and as a deterrence to future violators.

### **Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Mechanism of the Poro Society**

The primary sources of conflict among the Kpelle people are women, land, and commerce. Traditional peacemakers within the Kpelle society are nephews, nieces, elders and Zoes. Zoes are the traditional practitioners and leaders of *Sande* (the female equivalent of the *Poro*) A chief Zoe always in charge of authority over the *Sande* societies at a national level (UN Dec. 2015, para. 19). While *Ngamu*, is the heads the *Poro* society.

The way traditional Kpelle people deal with conflict is influenced by their cultural beliefs and value system strongly grounded in the teachings and practices of the *Poro* and *Sande*, which are traditional institutions of education. The *Ngamu* being the head of the *Poro* is responsible for handling serious conflicts, particularly those that result to physical violence, war and destruction of lives and properties. It is a trite law among the Kpelles that conflicts erupting into violence are strictly avoided, prevented and discarded immediately; whether or not a person is an adherent of the *Poro* or *Sande*. It is forbidden to use vulgar language when conflict ensues, blood must not be shed either in small or large quantity and rice-kitchen must not be set on fire. Violators or breach of these orders are taken to the *Poro* bush for trials; a decision made by *Ngamu* in any conflict is respected and cannot be challenged (Varpilah and Tornorlah (2003).

Conflict ensued between member and non-members without the breach of the traditional rules of the *Poro* Society are most often reported to the town Chief, a traditional leader of every community who will in turn mediate and adjudicate over such dispute with the assistance of some selected and unbiased elders who are versatile in traditional knowledge of the people's culture. Where there is a breach of any of the *Poro* rules, both parties are instantly reported to *Ngamu* or Zoe; the erring member would be severely punished with heavy imposition of fine

which is binding on him, while the non-member would be made to join the society even when he or she desires not to become one. The deterrence principle in this method of conflict resolution and peacebuilding is that members strive hard to maintain peace with others at all time while non-members who do not want to be coerced into initiation live peacefully with others.

### **Sustenance of *Poro* Society amidst Civilization**

The people of Kpelle ethnic group willingly subject themselves to the rules of the *Poro* Society; the tradition is jealously guarded and embraced by the people. The society is hierarchically organized (Lavenda et al. 16 Feb. 2007 in Australia 6 Apr. 2009, sect. 1; Bledsoe 1980 in Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 6). Their hierarchy is always based on secrecy and mystery: the higher a person's status, the greater the secret knowledge that is revealed to them (ibid. Lavenda, Robert et al. 16 Feb. 2007 in Australia 6 Apr. 2009, sect. 1). It is also tied to age: Young initiates are lowest in status, but have more prestige than the few people in their tribal group who are not members of the society (secret), and to many people the non-initiates are ignorant of important cultural secrets. In general, the older people are, the more status they have in secret society, even if they do not hold office. (Bledsoe 1980 in Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 6) and finally, the tradition is passed from generation to generation.

### **Conclusion**

Though practices of *Poro* and *Sande* among the indigenous Kpelle people of Liberia are treated sacredly with utmost secrecy, however, it has helped in keeping the largest ethnic group in Liberia together as one indivisible people. In the role of *Sande*, they prepare girls for womanhood (Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 3; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). According to the sources, the initiation teaches them how to become wives and take care of their husbands (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7; VOA 13 Oct. 2016); how to manage their homes (ibid.; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012); how to become mothers (IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7); correct sexual behaviour (VOA 13 Oct. 2016); social etiquette (ibid.; IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7); how to hold societal positions (Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). While *Poro* emphasizes on peaceful coexistence among the people, holding society norms and values, and also, subject to authority.

While observing their initiation process, they learn "secret(s)" that are not to be shared (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 20). I strongly believe if such practices are made open, it would have been eroded away by civilization. Modern age would have abhorred the act of going to *Poro* bush; the value and sacredness of the society would have no longer be in place and Kpelle towns and villages would not have be as peaceful as it is today.

### **Recommendation**

Borrowing a leaf from the sacredness of the *Poro* society, maintenance of standard, been firm and not willing to shift position no matter how highly placed a violator of societal norms would help every indigenous people of African states particularly Nigeria. Traditional rulers and Chiefs were known as the representatives of the "*Orisa*" (God) on earth as it were in the olden days. These rulers and Chiefs should maintain this standard and resuscitate some traditional rules and practices for an effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives in our society so as to make our societies a save place to live.



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**Oral Source:**

Old-man Kpanah (1998); Yanwuellie Town Chief, Dinita Clan, Margibi Country, Republic of Liberia