

Sande society and the sowei mask



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Political, Educational, and Gender Aspects of the Women's Society of the Mende

The Soweï Mask of the Sande Society is a symbol for the Mende people of Sierra Leone representing the ideals of feminine beauty, but the Sande Society also plays a key role in the nurturing, livelihood, and induction of young women into adults. This mask defines a goal for young women as well as symbolizes their transition from children to adults and, the Sande are the tools behind the Soweï which shape and mold the initiates of their society into women capable of managing marriage, political power, and even spiritual secrets.

The Soweï Mask itself is carved from wood carefully with close attention to detail. Each mark is made with a greater picture in mind and at the end of the process the mask will epitomize the Mende's idealities of grace, beauty, and serenity. After the carving, the mask is painted and polished to a black, glossy shine. There are many Soweï Masks, all of which possess the black, glossy shine, but each mask can differ in many areas. The Soweï Masks can possess rolls of fat on the neck, scarification patterns on the face, elaborate hairstyles, raffia around neck, and many other qualities which give it the elegance that it possesses. (Cosentino 17) The particular mask on display in the Stanley Collection has two small scarification patterns in low relief on either cheek of the mask, a beautiful hairstyle with a small bird perched on top. The mask is full of curves and the light catches off the surface to accent the slight cuts made along the hair of the figure give it a life like quality which complements the serenity of the mask's expression. Not only does the mask represent outer beauty, but also references the beauty of a woman's inner strength and character. (Becker 82)

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The encircling ridges of a Soweï Mask which represent rolls of fat also are part of the origin of the mask. When a Sande society member who is particularly renowned for her choreography and dancing skill she is said to dream of diving into a pool, which is the dwelling place for female spirits. As she rises from the water, the ripples of the water on the surface form the rings around the base of the mask. The often complex and always elegant hairstyles of Soweï Masks are said to have come from Sande officials falling into water and emerges with a beautiful hairstyle. (Textbook 180)

In performance, the Soweï is danced by the ndoli jowui alongside a second mask, the gondei, which is the antithesis of the Soweï. The gondei is sometimes a discarded Soweï Mask which has been worn down or broken. Occasionally pieces of trash such as tin cans or shells are attached to the gondei, further separating it from the Soweï. It is only when we see both masks that we separate the beauty and grace of the Soweï further from that of the grotesque and hideous form of the gondei. By having the two masks juxtaposed, we can see the grace and elegance in which the Soweï is danced in comparison with the ugly, stumbling dance of the gondei. The performance itself occurs in the weeks before the public portion of the Sande initiation. When the Soweï emerges from the bush to dance, she is admired and greeted by the entire town. (Cosentino 16-7) When the initiates themselves are present at the dance, they wear braclets of palm leaf fibers and body nets with small iron plates. Their faces are smeared with animal fat giving them a more youthful appearance. (Newland 125)

To the Sande the Soweï Mask as a manifest of power from the spirit world. It is for this reason that while the Soweï Mask is the integral piece to bring the

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power needed to invest the initiates with everything they will need to marry, the mask also can appear in other places. Smaller versions can appear on the staffs and other objects used by higher ranking members of the Sande and small figures also are common. These objects represent the ‘medicine’ of the Sande and their connection with the spirits. (Textbook 180)

The Sande society itself is enormous; each village usually has its own Sande society governed by a council of elders. (Ellis 200) These elders are not only in charge of initiation rites into the Sande society, and thusly into adulthood, but also the birthing, education, circumcision, political aspects, and spiritual aspects of the initiates underneath them. Once puberty is reached, the initiates are taken into the bush and taught the things they need to know to become adult women. Topics such as sex, dancing, fishing, cooking, and secrete ‘medicines’ are discussed and generally a clitoridectomy, a female circumcision, is performed. After the initiates complete their training, they are eligible to marry and ‘invested’ with fertility (Leach 58), but are taught that jealousy for one’s co-wives is greatly discouraged. Initiates are also called and described by sex-specific terms from the moment they graduate into full genderhood. Men are forbidden from the Sande bush just as the women are from the Poro, the men’s secrete society, bush. It is the responsibility of the Sande elders to punish any man who takes an initiate from the bush severely. The Soweï’s ‘medicine’ is feared and when a man is pointed out as having broken a Sande law there is a fine or some other penalty which an elder determines. (Newland 125) Elder Sande officials are still susceptible to ‘medicines’ which can affect their ability to deliver

children, circumcise the initiates, and other tasks which are key to their position.

The Poro and Sande societies together govern Mende ideas about gender and men and women's lives. Both genders have gender-specific tasks that are used to define a person's masculinity or femininity. Each group gives access to specific male and female medicines and social and political support. Both groups also give elders of the societies access to a higher status position in the villages. This status is known as a 'big man' or 'big woman'. The title comes with the responsibility of caring for the political or financial assistance of others. In Mende society both men and women can become a big person or numu wa. While the Sande will protect women from exploitation, abuse, and give them political and social support, the society also produces asymmetry. The high-ranking members usually gain their position from descent, and by controlling the important knowledge of the Sande, they are able to elicit loyalty or even material goods from the initiates and their families. In this way, the Sande society acts as a driving force in socio-political structures in what would otherwise be a male dominated society. With the polarized and parallel powers of the Poro and Sande societies, women are not considered inferior to men, they are only considered 'different'. (Leach 59-60)

The Sande serve as mentors for young girls becoming women, but they also serve as friends and colleagues. Every woman who is considered an adult in Mende culture has been initiated and graduated from the Sande society. The initiates they graduate with become their social system of support and the

society leaders are there to protect them as well. It is in this way that we see that all Mende women are connected.

In summary, the Soweï Mask demonstrates the inner and outer beauty of the perfect woman, which every initiate of the Sande society and thus every woman considered an adult, strives to attain. Not only do the Sande teach young women about life, but also provide them with a network of support for the rest of their lives. In this way, the Soweï Mask represents not only the Sande, but all adult Mende women and their unavoidable connection to each other.