Occult Discourses in the Liberian Press Under Sam Doe: 1988-1989

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Part I: Introduction

With peace threatening to spread over Liberia in the wake of recent elections, it seems an excellent time to attempt to disentangle some of the causes of the horror of the past seven years. Indeed, many an observer has commented on the state of deep spiritual crisis which has pervaded Liberia throughout the 1990s[1]. This research examines press witchcraft discourses in 1988-1989, the period leading up to the Liberian civil war which began on Christmas eve 1989 and lasted almost until the election of War Lord Charles Taylor in July 1997.

Interest in this research, however, actually predates the civil war. The author has long held a desire to explore discourses in the African press, an aspect of African media studies which has been sorely neglected in the literature (Bourgault 1995:202-205). Her specific interest in this context is occult discourses, whetted largely by the remarkable prevalence of witchcraft stories in the Liberian press during 1988-1989[2]. Indeed, even the most cursory of glances at the press of this period reveals a decided preoccupation, some would say an obsession with the paranormal. An understanding of this predilection would surely shed light on the nature of Liberian culture and possibly help in understanding the civil war which was soon to follow.

A A Look at Liberian History

Liberia's 'modern' culture began with the establishment of the first colony of freed American slaves in 1822 at the mouth of the Mesurado River in what is today Liberia. In 1847, the Monrovia settlers issued a 'Declaration of Independence' from the Colo-

[1] See Enoanyi, especially Preface pp. xi-xv; Ellis (1995:165f); Kpatindé (1990:16-23); Diallo (1990:24f).

[2] The author served as Chief of Party for the USAID supported Liberian Rural Communications Network from April 1988 to March 1989. For a discussion of that project, see Bourgault (1994). The project was provided with all weekday editions of the daily press published during that time. This study was derived from the author's personal collection of the week-day newspapers which she judiciously collected from that period.

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nization Society and putatively became Black Africa's first independent and sovereign republic (Liebnow 1987:16). The early settlers, who generally settled in coastal areas of Liberia were joined by other groups: freed slaves from Barbados and human cargo from slaving ships captured on the high seas. Settler penetration into the interior of the country was piecemeal during the nineteenth century. And it would not be until the twentieth century that the tribes of the hinterland would be officially incorporated into the nation[3].

The 150 year story of the relationship between the 'settlers' and the native tribesmen is a rather sorry and exploitative one in which the Americo-Liberians meted out to their African brothers treatment not dissimilar to that which they had received in America. It is a story of detribalized persons of African ancestry assuming overlordship of natives. The story includes the forced labor of ethnic Liberians, expropriation of their tribal lands, and the denial of their rights. The story of Liberia is also one of the gradual 'enfranchisement' the Liberian 'natives' or 'country people' of the interior by American-Liberians. Since the 1980 coup, this process has taken on terrible violent overtones.

B The Creation of a Liberian Politico-Religious Symbol System

A study of witchcraft discourses in Liberia must begin with an overview of Liberian cosmology. Liberian popular cosmology is a pastiche of traditional African religio-cultural elements, bits of popularized Islam, and liberal doses of nineteenth and twentieth Christianity filtered through waves of returning ex-slaves, and European and American missionaries.

Traditional Secret Societies

The sixteen or so ethnic groups native to Liberia (Liebnow 1987:35) were organized spiritually and temporally into a variety of societies, most of them secret, whose task was the maintenance of spiritual and temporal order. Probably the best known of these were the Poro and Sande complexes of the west and central Liberia. The Poro and Sande traditions are believed to have come south and west along with Mande speaking peoples during the 1700s from what is now Sierra Leone and Guinea. The Poro (male) and its female counterpart (the Sande) are viewed by scholars as being particularly

[3] The twentieth century saw a rapprochement between the Americo-Liberian settlers and the peoples of the interior. President Arthur Barclay, during his term (1904-1912) extended citizenship to the Liberian 'tribes', though they were not granted the privilege of suffrage until the Tubman era which began in 1944.

significant institutions because their spiritual authority (authority governing ritual matters) is pan tribal or pan ethnic, stretching across easily half of Liberia and into parts of Guinea and Sierra Leone as well[4].

The Poro and Sande complexes functioned to socialize members, to maintain relations with the spirit world, and to maintain political and social order. Socialization of members involved complex rituals, in which terror, ingestion by spirits, and death were important metaphors[5]. The ritual metaphors taught important lessons, among them the gravity of authority, the moral ambivalence of power, the clarity of social boundaries, and the exigencies of secrecy[6]. The terror which these rituals inspired demonstrated viscerally the depth of awe the society required of adherents, adherents who were sworn to secrecy under pain of severe punishment or death.

Bellman's much quoted work on the Poro, *The Language of Secrecy* (1984) informs us that the content of secrets actually was less important than the demonstration of their form. The maintenance of secrets (ifa mo 'you must not talk it') was largely a matter of shifting context. When and with whom secrets could be shared was all part of the mystery of the Poro. It could take a lifetime of learning to know how to sort out one situational context from the next. This is why the leaders of the Poro were perforce old men. Members of the Poro were not to trifle with the society's powers; and they were not to trifle with its leadership.

According to Tefft (1992:37), ten of the sixteen Liberian ethnic groups embraced the Poro. Those that did not represented the more fragmentary forest groups (the Kruan-speaking peoples) of the east and southeast[7]. They were thought to each have their own parallel politico-spiritual institutions (Ellis 1995:187). Significantly, the Krahn, the group to which Samuel K. Doe belonged, also lacked the Poro organization. So did the Islamicized Mandingo group, whose people have been coming south from Guinea for the last few hundred years.

Of course the Poro and Sande together with the entire edifice of traditional religion in Liberia, if not to say all of Africa, has been poorly understood. Colonial self-justification and missionary myopia combined with nineteenth century social darwinism to relegate African religion to the realm of savagery. This is an assignment

[4] A number of authors have discussed the Poro and Sande societies in some detail. See especially Bellman (1984). See also Tefft (1992:26-47) and Liebnow (1987:43-45).

[5] See Gay's 1973 novel *Red Dust on the Green Leaves*, which contains an account of the Poro initial ritual. See also Bellman (1984:Chapter 6).

[6] For a further discussion of the power of secrecy in Africa, see Cotter (1993:5).

[7] See Liebnow (1987:36-38), for a linguistically driven account of Liberia's ethnic groups.

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from which African religion is finally emerging in the hazy sunset of modernism in the twilight of the twentieth century.

The Settlers, not unlike European colonialists elsewhere on the continent, were little interested in the people or the culture of the Liberian 'tribes' or 'country people' as they became known. Only in the early twentieth century was citizenship granted to the indigenous groups, and not until Tubman's Presidency (1944-1971) was the Poro recognized as an important politico-religious institution.

A politician of considerable acumen, William Tubman sought in the wake of World War II, to acquire foreign investment (to globalize) for the Liberian economy. To do so, he needed the cooperation (perhaps the coopatation) of powerful inland chiefs. Through shrewd negotiations of patronage, Tubman began to bring the Poro under the power structure of the Liberian government. His vaunted Open Door policy was a two pronged effort which delivered talented 'country people' into the government while bringing the Poro under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Tubman further charged the ministry with the licensing of Zoes (ritual officers in the Poro), and he declared the Liberian president the head of all Poros (Liebnow 1987:84). He also initiated the process of appointing a Chief Zoe, ultimately responsible at the federal level for all matters pertaining to traditional ritual[8].

Secret societies not incorporated in the Poro, societies such as the Leopard and the Baboon, societies which were/are said to engage in murder and cannibalism, have long been banned in Liberia (Liebnow 1987:84). These were greatly feared by both indigenes and settlers alike.

Settler Cults

But the Americo-Liberians were not content to ban secret societies which they feared. Mindful, no doubt of the terrifying power of the unknown, the ruling settler classes developed their own: the secret Worshipful Grand Masters of the Masonic Order; the UBF, the United Brotherhood of Friendship; and the SMT, the Sisters of the Mysterious Ten. Shrouded in mysterious rituals and secret oaths, these societies were feared and hated by ordinary Liberian 'tribesmen', though successful indigenous Liberians were allowed to apply for membership in these groups.

In a presidential display of society power, Tubman commissioned the construction of a splendid Masonic temple on Mamba Point in Monrovia. The hated temple, a symbol of settler hegemony was sacked in the days following the coup of Samuel Doe and the People's Redemption Council (PRC) in 1980. Nevertheless throughout the

[8] See Bellman (1984:25-28) for a more detailed account of the powers and the manner of organisation of the *Zoes*.

1980s rumor and fear abounded about the power of the secrets hovering over the ransacked remains of the Masonic edifice. Historian Gus Liebnow's remarks are telling in this context.

> Another institution with distinct political overtones was also dealt a mortal blow at the time of the coup—the Masonic Order, which served as a semi-religious, semi-political guardian of Whig privilege. One experienced a strange feeling in the weeks following the coup in passing the Masonic Temple high above Mamba Point in Monrovia. The now sacked edifice stood silent, its windows and door half ajar, the wrought iron gate around the courtyard standing half open, and not a soul was in sight on what had once been its well manicured grounds. The temple appeared to be totally irrelevant to the new Liberian society. Yet at the same time, the vacated building seemed to pose the lingering menace to future trespassers that might be attributable by a Gola or a Mende tribesmen to the wounded spirit protecting a desecrated grave of the Poro secret society. The Masonic Order's power may have been diminished, but few would risk fate by further abusing it (Liebnow 1987:202).

Liebnow's passage clearly sheds light on the sensitivity of Liberians to signs and metaphors within their culture.

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Christianity

Throughout the 1800s, meanwhile, a Christian symbol system had been rooted into the political stylistics of the nation of Liberia.

Within a very short time after settlement in 1822, missionaries from Europe and America had begun coming to Liberia. By 1838, there were ten schools founded by church groups and staffed in most cases by Black settlers. Drawing from the rhetoric which emboldened U.S. settlers, the Liberian Republic's first President, President Joseph Jenkins Roberts talked of the 'manifest destiny' of the settlers to bring civilization to what were believed to be tribal heathens (Liebnow 1987:24). And not surprisingly, 'manifest destiny' came to have an important if unseemly economic underbelly. Missionary activity in the interior was encouraged by the settlers who charged the missionaries fees or taxes on their missionary 'concessions'. In this way, missionaries to the Liberian interior participated in the settlers' colonial project in ways analogous to Christian missionaries elsewhere on the African continent. The latter, operating at the pleasure if not the behest of colonial powers, often provided for natives and colonials alike, an important ideological undergrid to economic exploitation of virgin territories.

It is noteworthy in this context that missionaries in the country established printing presses in Liberia and published religious tracts and newspapers from the

1820s. Thus, early on, the Christian churches were involved in disseminating a Christian religious discourse that would help to create and to sustain a generalized Liberian culture, while promoting English literacy[9].

With a symbol system which privileged Christian culture came the native inferiority complex. In popular parlance and popular iconography, what was of Americo-Liberian origin or Kwii (i.e. 'civilized' in the Kpelle- the largest ethno-linguistic group in the country with about 20% of the population) was good; what was from the 'country people' (Liberian English for ethnic Liberians) was bad[10]. Thus the generalized Liberian cultural formation, was a Christian one skewed toward the more elitist Episcopal, Baptist, and Methodist creeds. Indeed the identification of members of the True Whig Party, which dominated Liberian politics from 1877 to 1980, with certain establishment churches was clear. Tubman (1944-1971) was himself a Methodist minister, and his political speeches drew heavily from the Bible. Tolbert (1971-1980), Tubman's vice president and his successor, was the pastor of a Zion Baptist Church and also served as head of the Baptist World Alliance.

Syncretistic churches, of which there have long been a great number in Africa[11] also developed rapidly in Liberia. These were tolerated as long as they did not pose a threat the Whig hegemony.

Islam

Over the 150 years of Americo-Liberian rule, efforts were made to control the incursions of Islam into the Liberian territory. Missionaries were particularly encouraged to establish Christian beachheads in towns in the northwest in the path of the Mande diaspora (Liebnow 1987:81). Islam, as part of its own sweep downwards, nevertheless, trickled in with Mandingo traders. They became known for their esoteric brands of magic, (Bourgault 1988/1989; Ellis 1995:188), popularized 'folk' variants of Islam, all quite distanced from middle eastern orthodoxy.

All of these beliefs fused into a generalized Liberian culture, one which was sustained in the popular press. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the many

[9] For a history of the Liberian press, see Rogers (1988).

[10] See M. Sonia David's 1992 article 'To Be Kwii is Good: Personal Account of Research in a Kpelle Village'. See also Twe's (1997:91) article 'The *Asili* of Liberian Psychology' which argues that Liberian culture internalised negative self-images from 'American stereotypes of Africans and violent and uncivilized'.

[11] See Turner (1977) and also Turner's Forward in Hackett (1987:v-xi), and Hackett's (1987:237-241) Conclusion.

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religious discourses which appeared in the Liberian press during the period covered by this investigation. This paper limits itself only to those discourses which make mention of the paranormal.

C Newspapers Surveyed

From a privately held collection of nearly a year's worth of week-day Liberian daily newspapers, the author randomly selected the month of June 1988 as a source of stories on the occult which would serve to supply material for a more focused analytical read[12]. From this process, the following papers were included in the survey: *The Daily Observer*, the *Spectator*, the *Liberian Mirror*, the *Liberian Herald* (Catholic), and the *Standard*. All of the papers surveyed in this research were private or quasi-private, as the state-run *New Liberian* had ceased publication or came out only infrequently during the 1988-1989 period when this author was collecting newspapers.

A careful examination of these papers revealed that accounts of the paranormal, stories concerning the paranormal or mentioning the paranormal occurred in at least one of the five published papers nearly every day. The *Liberian Herald*, the paper of the Catholic Church was the exception, as no stories of this type were found within its pages during the period of time studied.

A central assumption of the subsequent discussion is the existence of an integral link between the narratives appearing in the Liberian press and the social arrangements and preoccupations of readers. Such assumptions have become commonplace in post-modern journalistic analyses which are sensitive to the rift between accounts in newspapers and the 'reality' they purport to depict. Post-modernism recognizes the role of audience as consumer in the shaping of newspaper articles which are more story-like, more humanized, and more self-referential (Luthar 1997:49). Such approaches have long been seen by the present author as inherently more reasonable than the (vain) modernist search in so much of the African press for such chimera as objectivity and an abstracted, distanced perspective. Drawing from Obeichina, Okpewho, and others, this author has described the role of the oral narrative in shaping the mass media including the written press in Africa (Bourgault 1987:211-236; Bourgault 1995:180-205).

The arguments presented herein are also enriched by those of Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe. Mbembe uses the African novel and the African press interchangeably to support and inform his work on political symbolism in what he calls the 'post colony' (Mbembe 1992a:1-30). Mbembe defends this practice by noting the close kinship between the two, 'the sort of functional reciprocity between narrativity and

[12] See Note 2 above.

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temporality'. He adds that 'all human experience has a temporal quality and there is a direct link between lived temporality and the narrative act' (Mbembe 1992b:134). Mbembe argues that a generation of African politicians have continued to censor novels because the leadership clearly recognizes the informative power of these genres, together with the closeness with which they approximate the actual reality of political situations. Echoing Bellman's treatise on secrecy, moreover, Mbembe (1992b:134) discusses censorship and refers in this context to a post-colonial culture 'of servitude which privileges "acts of telling" (actes de raconter, de faire recit)'.

Emmanuel Obeichina (1972:19-27) notes the similarity in style of newspapers and market literature in Nigeria, both of which are said to construct narratives constituting a 'bricolage' of stories derived from many sources: the Bible and Christian Catechisms, English literature, international news media, the popular cinema, but first and foremost, African folk tales.

Drawing from the above specialists of the text including many the Africanists among them, the author treats the sample of the Liberian press studied herein as a text which promotes and sustains a discursive vision of Liberian society. She is not concerned with efforts to look behind the articles in a search for the 'accuracy' of the reporting or the 'real' account of events being described[13].

For the purposes of this discussion articles have been grouped in a two-fold classification: A) stories of the occult involving no criminal proceedings, and B) stories of criminality and the occult.

Part II of the paper will describe and discuss the stories, informing the reader to the extent possible as to the emic meaning of the stories in the Liberian context. Where appropriate, it will venture tentatively into the realm of etic interpretation.

Part III will once again take up the question of Liberian politico- religious symbology in conjunction with the view of the press as social text. It will combine these ideas with additional aspects of Liberian history and politics together with anthropological study of witchcraft. Through post-modern distancing, the study thus proposes to offer a tentative interpretation of Liberian press discourse on the occult.

To facilitate the discussion of the newspaper stories, the articles discussed below have been arbitrarily numbered 1-16.

Part II: The Stories

A The Occult in Non-Criminal Cases

The following six stories have been grouped together because all seem to share a relatively benign view of the occult or to narrate a somewhat amusing account of

[13] See Geschiere's (1997:19-25) important and enlightening discussion on the phenomenology of witchcraft in anthropological writing.

human/occult interaction. A description of these articles follows.

Story 1, 'Barolle to Upset Cornerstone' appeared in the *Spectator* (June 3 1988:7), the typical sports page of most papers. The non-bylined article speculates on the Liberian soccer team's (Barolle's) ability to beat its Ghanaian (Cornerstone) opponents.

> Mighty Barolle which was reported to have been in *secret camp* (e.a.) is expected to put up a hard fight against Corners as the Ghanaian side is affectionately called.

This story implies that team members have traveled to a sacred/powerful venue to obtain important 'medicines' (figuratively 'powers', literally 'potions') which will enable them to win the match. This is a typical practice in competitive sports[14].

This author is surprised to not have uncovered more references to 'medicine in sports' within the period examined as the practice is said to be very common.

Stories 2 and 3 both ran on page 8, the back pages of the *Daily Observer* (June 2 and June 7 1988). Story 2 is entitled 'Man Gives Birth to Twins'; while Story 3 features the headline 'Yekapa Hospital Denies Twins Story'. Both were written by C.Y. Kwanue. In the first account, a man has allegedly given birth to twins, a male and a female, the first of whom, the boy, has died. According to 'eyewitnesses', so the story would have readers believe, the man and his spouse went to a healer because she failed to conceive a child. The healer reportedly gave the wife some medicine which the man seems to have taken by mistake. After he gave birth, the story continues, the man admitted to hospital officials, that he used witchcraft to transform himself into a woman, and to have sexual intercourse with men. Another hospital official is alleged to have told the reporter that an operation was performed in order to make it possible for the man to give birth.

Clearly this story contains several different discourses on occult phenomena: the medicine potion, the man's initial sexual transformation through witchcraft, the hospital's alleged performance of an emergency 'sex change' surgery, the birth of twins[15], and finally the death of the boy twin. Almost one week later, the *Daily Observer* ran the follow-up story (Story 3), rare in the case of occult stories. 'Yekapa Hospital Denies Twins Story', Story 3, carries a photo of a European physician, Dr.

[14] A number of Liberian friends and specialists have remarked on the typicality of seeking 'powerful medicine' in order to gain an advantage in competitive sports. See also Allen's (1992:124-142) novel, for a fictionalised account of this practice.

[15] The birth of twins is often considered portentous in a number of traditional African cultures, including many Liberian ones. See Bourgault (1988/1989). See Also Gay's 1973 novel, *Red Dust on the Green Leaves: A Kpelle Twins' Childhood.*

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Lennert Reitner, who purportedly is responsible for the denial. Reitner, moreover, is reported to castigate hospital nurses for spreading stories. The article documents Dr. Reitner as also urging reporters to verify facts and to seek clarification before publishing. Clearly dissatisfied with Reitner's account, the reporter has solicited the opinion of a Liberian physician at a different hospital to inquire if such a birth were possible. The answer provided by this second physician clearly straddles two phenomenologies and is quite representative of the views of many educated Liberians:

> Dr. I.F. Jalloh explained that biologically it was not possible for a man to give birth to a child. But he said 'when witchcraft is implied in African Science, it is indisputable that such may happen'.

By seeking a quote from a Liberian doctor, the reporter is clearly trying to extricate himself from a charge of unprofessionalism. Journalist Kwanue goes on to note that he has been called to the Observer headquarters to defend himself.

Story 4 is entitled 'Lightening Kills 65 year old Woman', by Miaway Gruah. Run on page 1 of the Mirror, Story 4 served as the paper's lead story on June 7, 1988. The story details the death by electrocution of a woman in Nimba county. An account from her brother describes how he failed to rescue her. 'The whole body was filled with electricity and each time I tried to save her I received powerful shocks'. The story goes on to narrate that the old woman's home was subsequently burned in the fire. The brother describes the 'whole episode' as 'very mysterious'.

Death by lightening is one of the many causes of death regarded in Liberian cosmology as a 'bad luck death'. This belief is widespread among many of the Liberian tribes. 'Bad luck' or inauspicious deaths are believed to be the result of witchcraft, 'society business', i.e. the occult (Bourgault 1992:22f). But in a curious circularity of logic, victims are often blamed for their fate. The logic employed herein is that those who delve in black magic will ultimately become its targets. So when a 'bad luck' death befalls a person, the person is seen as having dabbled in the occult. Victims of such inauspicious deaths do not receive proper funerals, for a proper funeral assures the continued participation of the deceased in the affairs of his or her living kinsmen. It is hoped that without a proper send off into the spirit world, the victim's spirit will travel far away and find other living beings to trouble. An alternative explanation of the woman's death could be that a relative of the victim has 'witched' her. The comments of the woman's brother, particularly the account of his attempted rescue, may be interpreted as a means of deflecting potential accusations of his compliance or participation in his sister's 'bad luck' death.

A similar story, Story 5, 'Mysterious Death Hits Duala' by John Adams, tells of a sixty-six year old man who collapsed and died while reading a letter to his relatives.

The article, which appeared in the *Standard* (June 21 1988:8), reports that the relatives were panic stricken. We can assume they believe as the Liberian adage says, that 'No one dies for nothing', a reference to the belief that death occurs because of causative human agents. Indeed the term 'mysterious death' is clearly code for allegations of witchcraft. Like the brother in Story 4, the relatives undoubtedly fear oncoming accusations of witchcraft. Alternatively, they may also fear becoming its next victims.

Story 6, bylined 'our reporter', tells of an encounter by a human with a water spirit. Entitled 'Woman Dies After Speaking with Crawfish in Grand Bassa County', it appeared in the *Spectator* (June 14 1988:8). This story tells of a fisherwoman who died soon after meeting 'a black fat ten-footed crawfish from the Mechlin River'. The women is alleged to have narrated this event to her husband, shortly before her death, as the content of a recent dream. In the dream the crawfish accused her of having caught all of his relatives and he has warned her that this would be the last time.

The black fat crawfish is undoubtedly some variant of a water spirit (in Kpelle, *kakalee*) which promises men or women success in their waking lives in exchange for a human life, sometimes that of a relative, sometimes their own. This spirit, like the more well known mammy water, eventually extracts its 'pound of flesh' for the pact made with it.

Mammy water myths have been explained as powerful warnings against excessive accumulation (Bastian 1993:129-166). Story 6 appears to recapture the same theme. For the article goes on to say that the 'lady' in question had become a successful trader, one who had built a large home from the proceeds of the sale of crawfish caught with hand-made baskets. But fish trapping in this manner is clearly a female role-ascribed subsistence occupation. Such work is thought unlikely to amass serious capital particularly by women. If at all, it could have become accumulative only in the wake of the spread of the money economy to the 'country people' in the post World War II era.

What can these stories mean? And what is their function? The sports story is little more than a gossipy speculation on the Liberian teams chances. This mention of the occult is a mere harmless aside. The twins story is a concatenated lot of contradictory rumors. Its open- ended style invite comment and discussion, engaging readers to start their own discourses. Clearly the European doctor in Story 3 felt compelled to respond in a subsequent story. But his action only opened up the floor to more discussion, a response by a Liberian medical doctor. The twins' story seems to also be giving a moral lesson, castigating the father for his careless sexual practices and possibly warning against the dangers of homosexuality. Certainly the crawfish story provides a moral lesson. The lightening and the letter stories provide cautionary messages. They remind the reader that danger abounds, that powerful forces are on the loose that can strike at any moment. They are accounts by reporters who obtained them from the persons directly implicated.

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Stories 1-6 stylistically resemble tabloid stories in the western press. They operate to amuse the audience and to sustain a belief in popular witchcraft discourse. These stories are essentially open-ended — with many unanswered questions, many unresolved details, and often with contradictory reports. Such articles make ideal pieces for group reading, where more literate members of African villages or neighborhoods read newspapers to the unschooled. The missing details will then be filled in by the listeners and will continue to circulate in the medium of 'pavement radio', or as it is known in the francophone nations, *Radio Trottoir*. Eventually, they may resurface in the press again, transformed into new articles, new folktales for urban masses[16].

The above stories also stand out because they make no mention of perpetrators, i.e. they contain neither direct nor veiled accusations of witchcraft. But a far greater number of press accounts treating the occult include accusations or allusions to criminal occult behavior on the part of the perpetrators. A number of these are detailed below.

B Criminality and the Occult

Stories 7 through 15 have been grouped together in this section because they share in common accounts of victimization, and an apparent or at least possible level of criminality. In all but one of these accounts, the perpetrators potentially face arrest or are actually being held pending trial. The vast majority appear to derive from 'beat reports' from the police, from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or from unnamed 'security forces'.

The beginning of Story 7, '"I Killed Seven Persons": Witch Confesses in a Church', sets the tone and mood of the articles which appear in this section.

> In the wake of the rising rate of witchcraft activities in the country, a man identified as Junior MacCarthy has revealed his involvement in the killing of several persons in the Logan town area.

Story 7, written by E. Frederick Baye, appeared in the *Mirror* on (June 28 1988:1). The article provides an account of a young man, Junior MacCarthy, who during an alleged religious conversion, confesses to participating in the killing, among six others, of a two year old baby. In the course of his confession, MacCarthy has named two conspirators, one of whom is the baby's mother. MacCarthy claims to have given up the pact when his colleagues asked him to give over his mother to the witches.

[16] For discussions of 'pavement radio' or *Radio Trottoir*, see Ellis (1989); Nkanga (1992); and Bourgault (1995:201-205).

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The story, with its sensational headline, is accompanied by a dramatic news photo of a pastor brandishing a large cross at the church where MacCarthy confessed.

Though the legal implications of the story are not treated in the article, those accused by MacCarthy will undoubtedly face investigation by officers from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

A non bylined Story 8 involves an accusation of murder whose motive appears to stem from the threat of witchcraft. 'John Early Charged with Murder', appeared in the bilingual *Spectator* (June 7 1988:8). This story deals with a father, John Early, who has recently been charged with the murder of his 25 year old son, Samuel. The story goes on to provide an account from witnesses saying the two had quarreled after the father had refused to give the son money to support the younger man's girlfriend. The son threatened to 'fuck with him (sic.)' if his Dad did not give him the money. The son said he would kill his father and that 'nothing would come out of it'. The threat sounds very much as if the son had planned to use occult powers against his father, and thereby has caused his own death.

Story 9 by Victoria Nyumah reports on the death of a man 'in the prime of life' and the subsequent arrest of his ex-wife/girlfriend in connection with his death. The article entitled 'Death in Girlfriend's Room', appeared in the *Daily Observer* (the premier paper) June 21, 1988, on the back page, page 8. The deceased apparently died in Monrovia with his ex-wife, Miss Borbor, who is also the mother of two of his children. His current wife and additional children (number unspecified) are reported to live in Buchanen. Another girlfriend, a neighbor of the ex-wife in Monrovia is also reported to be among the mourners, for she too, notes the article, has a child by the deceased. The article reports that the girl friend, Miss Borbor, in whose room the man died, has been 'arrested on suspicion', even through a later paragraph indicates that the pathologist who examined the body 'suspected no foul play'. One can only speculate that Miss Borbor has been accused of 'foul play' within the framework of 'African Science'. Indeed, as noted above, many Liberians believe that most deaths (except for death by 'old age') are caused by human agents. Once again the Liberian expression, 'no one dies for nothing' comes to mind in this context.

Both Story 8 and Story 9 contain decided elements of terror as they clearly implicate the occult in the commission of murder. Indeed tradition dictates that to kill one's kin is an abomination. Both of these stories also contain elements of the moral tale, warning that acquisitive lovers can cause rifts between kin. In Story 8 the girlfriend's financial needs led to deadly violence between Samuel Early and his father John. In Story 9 the victim seems to have run afoul of a life which included too many different love interests.

Story 10 is entitled 'Alleged Witchcraft Girl Reveal Human Feast Palaver: Int. Affairs Probes'. Written by Edmond A. Sakpa, Story 10 appeared in the *Standard*

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(Wednesday June 8 1988:1) with a continuation on page 6. It reports the investigation of a nine year old girl, Betty Darpoh, accused of involvement in witchcraft. The story alleges she is accused by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of being a witch, and that in the course of the proceedings against her she has accused two Internal Affairs Ministry workers, Cecilia Washington and Sarah Richards of being witches themselves. The accused, Miss Darpoh, is said to have admitted being involved in witchcraft against 'some hardworking Liberians'. But she has named conspirators Washington and Richards because they allegedly demanded that she deliver her mother to the witches coven for murder. Betsy, having no relative other than her mother, is said to have resisted the witches, Cecilia and Sarah who in turn, 'beat her'. Cecilia and Sarah have denied the allegations. They have asked to prove their innocence through a sassywood ordeal[17].

In Liberian English, those who do harm to others in their dreams are called witches, or in Kpelle, stick people or *wulu nuu* (Bellman 1984:56). Liberians believe that when individuals go to sleep at night, their dream spirit may take over. In dreams, they may fly (travel) from place to place and cause harm. Witches are particularly keen to eat new victims. Participants in witchcraft covens secure their membership and the illicit power which comes with membership by delivering up their loved ones.

A variant on witch covens is the secret society (mentioned above) named after a given animal, i.e. leopard society, baboon society, or crocodile society, for example. Here the activity appears to be similar. Participants meet one another in the world of dream, deliver up victims which the group may harm, kill, and sometimes 'eat' (actually or metaphorically).

Story 11, 'Leopards Invade Town', appeared with no byline in the *Daily Observer* (June 27 1988:8). Here the occult is heavily implied though not directly stated. Leopards, especially in a group, are extremely rare in Liberia, so this story seems to be an account of an attack by members of the leopard society. The description of the leopard invasion moreover, belies the 'other worldly' origin of the animals.

The elders [in Duanpea Town where the attack is alleged to have taken place] explained that around the time of the incident, there was a heavy downpour of rain, and while the people were asleep, the 'leopards' began chasing domestic animals. The elders said there was nothing much they could do but run for their lives. They said that they heard what appeared to be the sound of a wild animal pounding on the door with

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[17] A sassywood ordeal is a form of 'truth test' which involves the administration of a poisonous potion, sassywood, by a qualified zoe. The innocent or truthful are said to be only mildly affected or unaffected by the poison whereas the guilty are said to become violently ill or to die from the test. Many a forced confession has no doubt been extracted from terrified victims of ordeals. Another method of administering an ordeal is to touch the skin (sometimes the tongue) of the accused with a red hot cutlass.

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its claw. No one was reported injured or physically attacked by the 'wild animals'.

The use of quotation marks by the *Observer* in this account makes it clear that the intruders are not to be seen as real animals. Moreover, anthropological descriptions of Leopard Society attacks describe 'leopard' behavior as curiously human (Bourgault 1988/1989). Clearly the villagers of Duanpea Town are terrified.

Most of the elders who spoke to our correspondent said they had a sleepless night on June 15; and that in the morning, they saw footprints of what looked like the ones made by leopards. When they traced the footprints, they were led to a valley where skull of a sheep was found. The inhabitants there have appealed to authorities in Zoe-Geh to provide some protection for them against strange wild animals because they believe that the animals may one day come back.

The response of government officials to a reported incident of an illegal secret society in instructive in its inactivity.

There has been no official statement from the office of Nimba Superintendent, but an executive in the office of the superintendent confirmed the report of the incident. However, the executive said no official position had been taken because 'our Zoe-Geh Commissioner Karnue has not written us in particular'.

The above stories 10 and 11 are different from those detailed below. In the above stories, there is no mention of body parts. The assumption is that the victims of witchcraft or Leopard Societies are killed and 'eaten' whole by the witches or 'leopards'. The following stories, which seem about equally common in the Liberian press of the period under study, treat the subject of 'heartmen'. 'Heartmen' in the popular Liberian cosmology refers to individuals who are said to trade in human body parts useful in the concocting of potions used to cause harm to others. An individual who seeks power over others or who would cause them harm may seek out the aid of a 'heartman'. This author has uncovered no mention of 'heartmen' in the anthropological literature. There is however, mention of secret societies falling outside the Poro which do trade in body parts. One such society is the Crocodile Society which drowns victims, sometimes leaving their bodies on the riverbanks often with parts removed (Bourgault 1988/1989). The author suspects the cultural formation of heartmen to be a modern transposition of beliefs from older secret societies.

The first 'heartman' story, Story 12 is entitled 'Father Arrested for Attempting to Sell Son for $2000'. The article is written by A. Boakai and appeared in Liberia's best paper of the era, the *Daily Observer* (June 16 1988:8). This article describes the arrest of a man from Guinea who is alleged to have come to Liberia to trade his son to a 'heartman' for the latter's use of the son's body parts. According to the report, security forces have arrested this man. How this individual came to be suspected of this heinous crime is not given; nor is any information provided on the man's response to the charges.

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Yet another 'heartman' story, Story 13, '"Ritual Killing" in Bassa: - 7 Under Probe', describes the arrest by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of seven persons alleged to be involved in 'ritualistic killing'. Story 13, written by James K. Forkpa, appeared in the *Daily Observer* (June 22 1988:8). One victim's body, that of a three year old, is alleged to have been found along the banks of the Timbo River with these parts missing: penis, eyes, ears, tongue, nose, fingers, and front upper teeth. The story, which could equally be referring to a Crocodile Society murder, reports that 'the seven were apprehended last Friday when a traditional ordeal (see below and see Note 17) incriminated them in the killing'. Information as to how or why this ordeal was held is not provided to the readers.

The next ritual murder story, Story 14, is entitled 'Mysterious Murder Hits Bensonville'. The story, written by Samuel H. Lavalie, appeared in the *Standard* (June 3 1988:1). The story provides an account of the discovery of the body of an elderly man with several parts missing, found wrapped in a sheet, hanging from a tree. The story written in an incomprehensive purple prose, contains a thick nest of accusations of poor police work against the local police by a government official. These are followed by a set of protestations and counter claims from the decidedly defensive newly appointed local police chief. This story clearly raises the specter of police (and other official) compliance in the murder of the old man. It suggests political disagreement surrounding the murder at high government levels.

Yet another 'heartman' story, one with no byline is Story 15, which appeared in the *Daily Observer* (June 9 1988:1). '11 Under Probe in Rivercess-In Connection with Man's Death' reports that eleven persons are being investigated in connection with a ritual murder. The circularity of the discourse seems particularly evident in the text of this story.

> Confirming these reports, Rivercess County Attorney, Mr. Morris Kaba, said that the arrest of the 11 persons followed a ritual performed [an unnamed exercise in the divination] by a cultural inspector (name not given). He said that the ritual performance stemmed from mounting concern and pleas from some citizens who called on county officials to probe the death of their colleague.

A closer read suggests that powerful individuals are trying to frame certain officials for ritual murders and have engineered a divination to obtain information from the spirit world. The article continues in this vein.

> It [interrogation of 11 suspects] was based on citizen cries that the county invited the cultural inspector to perform the ritual, he said. Mr. Kaba added that it was during the performance of the ritual that the 11 persons, including a ***senior district officer*** (e.a.), were implicated.

A few paragraphs later, the article is more revealing of the apparent political nature of the story.

> In another development, Internal Affairs Minister Edward Sackor has appointed Mr. Wallace Joe as Acting Superintendent of Rivercess County. An Internal Affairs release issued yesterday said Minister Sackor made the appointment to ensure an uninterrupted and smooth administration of the County in the wake of the dismissal of Mr. Franco B.S. Grimes by Dr. Samuel Kanyon Doe recently.

This report appears to link Doe and his patronage machine in accusations of ritual murder and closed sessions of divination.

It is noteworthy that none of the witchcraft, 'heartmen', or ritual murder stories specifically mentions dreams, so it is unclear whether the alleged perpetrators are believed to have committed these atrocities while asleep or awake. Indeed, oral discourses on witchcraft or 'society business' typically fail to mention the dream aspect of the activity unless it is specifically prompted by the researcher (Bourgault 1988/1989).

Of course, from the point of view of witchcraft theory as social control, it matters little whether the perpetrators were awake or asleep. For being asleep is no excuse. Liberians generally believe that individuals make a choice to tap into the occult powers deep within them (Bourgault 1988/1989). Those who do fly around in their dreams have made a decision to do so. But there is also great circularity and contradiction to this discourse. Believers also allow that it is possible to get 'trapped' into witchcraft inadvertently, i.e. by making a pact with a stranger who turns out to be 'otherworldly'. Witchcraft discourse is thus inherently conservative. It operates to encourage people not to be greedy lest others become jealous and resort to occult powers to get even. And witchcraft discourse also discourages jealousy lest envious feelings lead to 'bad dreams' wherein the jealous dreamer veers into illicit or immoral dream behavior (Geschiere 1997).

The witchcraft, heartmen, and ritual murder stories also appear to follow the classic witchcraft pattern of using powerless persons to entrap them into naming names (Truzzi 1974:663). They therefore have considerable political significance. Like Stories 4, 5, and 6 discussed in the first subsection, these stories are also cautionary tales. They inform readers that no one is safe. But they do more than that. By the sheer horror of their accounts, some of which are accompanied by gruesome photographs, they invite terror. Those, like Story 14 which castigate police or those which implicate other officials (Stories 11, 13, and 15) have a double function. They teach readers that authorities have proven themselves either powerless to aid victims or compliant in the

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system of victimization. And most significantly the stories described in this subsection bear the mark of officialdom. They update readers on the day to day business of victimization, the latest targets of such practices, and the futility of fighting the occult. In so doing, these stories inform readers about who has power to regulate death, to operate in secret, and to use terror tactics.

It is noteworthy that the Doe regime was known for its recruitment of thugs to the ranks of the military and the police. The so-called Youth Wing of Doe's political party, the National Patriotic Front or NDPL, largely made up of unemployed youths, were particularly active after a 1985 coup attempt against the Doe regime (Liebnow 1987:289). Doe was also known for his appointment of barely literate members of his Krahn ethnic group to high government offices. Secrecy no doubt helped to cover up their inability to function professionally. And fear of unfathomable punishment no doubt helped to quell government critics.

Peter Geshiere notes, 'Power in Africa is at once suspect and indispensable'. And as Geshiere (1997:43) states, the central question about power is the myth of witchcraft itself! Who kills rightly and who kills wrongly? The reader of the Liberian press was left to ponder the answer.

One additional story in the sample touched on the occult in some fashion but was difficult to classify. Story 16, 'Soldier Flogs Mask Man' is included here because it supplies a fitting footnote on the relationship of the Doe regime to the spirit world. Written by Moses L. Langar Sr., Story 16 appeared in the *Standard* (June 3 1988:back page, p. 8). The story describes how a masked performer, a member of a cultural troop, was flogged by one of Doe's soldiers, after the mask [masked dancer] broke a window on the soldier's vehicle.

This particular story cries out for some explanation. Liberians typically believe that spirits (usually ancestral) reside in a mask which is usually performed or 'danced'. Such masks are often referred to as 'devils' in Liberian English, though these spirits are not at all considered to represent an evil principle. Devils, (like ancestors) however, are to be respected as well as feared because they are capable of both good and evil. Masks are considered particularly sacred (and living) when they appear in Liberian villages or towns in conjunction with the enactment of a ritual. Because the mask in question was part of a cultural troop performing in Monrovia, the soldier who struck it probably did not consider it 'living'. The action nevertheless represented enough of an abomination so as to warrant the soldier's arrest. This is documented in the story. Such an event may be seen to be indicative of the arrogance and indiscipline of Doe's soldiers by the late 1980's. It is a testimony of the failure of that administration to fulfill its putative mandate to serve the 'country people' and to deliver them from the hated hegemony of the Americo- Liberian settlers.

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Part III: Discussion

What can we make of the above collection of witchcraft discourses? A present observer of the African scene, *Washington Post* reporter Blaine Harden supplies a commentary on witchcraft in modern Africa, which provides a useful starting point.

> Juju murders afflict modern Africa in a way that shopping mall and workplace murders affect the United States. Abhorrent, unpredictable, and atypical though the violence may be, it happens enough to be a symptom, in Africa as in America, of how tradition, myth, and modern stress, can twist behavior. Nursing a grudge and infected with the gun-toting American spirit, a self-styled Rambo goes shopping for nameless enemies with an AK 47 assault rifle. In need of a spiritual edge over his competition, a tradition-steeped, profit-crazed African businessman goes shopping for a juju merchant and a fresh head (Harden 1990:81).

Harden's comments, though relevant, must be particularized for Liberia. Witchcraft discourse in Liberia was undoubtedly far more than a business practice, however much enmeshed with government as business generally has been in Africa. In Liberia, witchcraft was even incorporated into the highest levels of government! And when Samuel Doe toppled the Americo-Liberian power structure, he severed the rather tenuous and albeit artificial politico-religious edifice. For a populace steeped in myth and magic, this had important consequences. Doe's actions created a vacuum in the politico-religious order.

As noted above, Tubman had recognized the enormous politico-religious power of the Poro. He had attempted to regulate this power by putting it under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The ministry (under the close guidance of these patronage-ridden presidencies) had appointed a Chief Zoe. And serious accusations of witchcraft ultimately had come under federal level jurisdiction. Thus the federal government had become (at least in theory) the ultimate arbiter of matters of customary law. In terms of Liberian politico-religious symbolism, the power over good and evil resided within the Americo-Liberian ideo-religious symbologies: mainline Christianity, especially Baptist and Methodist conventions, and secret Masonic brotherhoods.

Doe's coup, complete with the smashing of the Masonic Temple, symbolically broke the politico-religious power structure. In the months that followed, it was as if bottled up spirit forces had begun to circulate. Doe himself was in need of 'spiritual power' both for protection and for political demonstration. And having broken the symbols of the past, according to Stephen Ellis, Doe had to improvise. Doe had the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier erected to the memory of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), and some say he sacrificed a hapless soldier and buried him below it (Ellis 1995:191).

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Doe was known to search endlessly for 'strong (traditional) medicine' and to be continually looking for supernatural advisors (Ellis 1995:190). In bids to consolidate his earthly as well as his spiritual powers, he came to attend both Church and Mosque (Ellis 1995:190). In politics, he courted the Mandingo, a Muslim ethnic group. He reapproached the Poro and took the title of tarnue (Liebnow 1987:269). But since Doe's Krahn tribe is not part of the Poro edifice, his title-taking was seen by Poro elders as nothing more than dabbling. And after 1985, Doe reauthorized the Freemasons.

As tensions increased throughout the 1980s, Liberia saw a great deal of religious foment in Liberia. Islam made significant inroads. So did the ethnic based syncretistic churches such as the Loma Church, the Bassa Community Church, together with fundamentalist sects of all stripes. The Jimmy Swaggert Crusade came (even while Swaggert was enmeshed in troubles in the U.S. for having been caught with Louisiana call-girls) and preached a revival. Swaggert even left his tents behind. These quickly became makeshift churches for itinerant Christian fundamentalist preachers who followed in Swaggert's wake. They gathered huge crowds with promises to 'bind the power of Satan' and to 'deliver adherents from the evils of witchcraft'. At that point, Satan did indeed need binding!

Eventually, of course, the mainline churches rebounded in the 1980s and recovered from their taint of settler elitism. But when they did, their umbrella organization, the Liberian Council of Churches began to preach a social gospel. And mainline churches themselves began to agitate for political change as Doe's rule got more arbitrary, more capricious, and more bloodthirsty.

All the while, Doe failed in his attempts to reorder Liberia's socio-moral order. S. Byron Tarr's analysis of Doe is telling in this context.

> Doe controlled none of the auxiliary sources of power which enabled his predecessors to manipulate the authority relationships which both personalized and concentrated power in their hands. He was perceived a usurper whose hands were stained with blood. For example, unlike Tolbert, who was a Baptist pastor, or Tubman, a lay leader of the Methodists, Doe's efforts to join Tolbert's former church ostracized him and the admitting pastor. Doe could not mesmerize persons awed by the formalism and bombastic expressions that had sustained the illusion of a Liberia central to African redemption and rejuvenation (Tarr 1993:76).

Ellis (1995:192) remarks that Doe himself was never able to commit to a spiritual order. Though he tried them all, none, it seems, would have him. And in the end they all turned against him.

There is nothing particularly unusual about an African Head of State, (or any other) wrapping himself in powerful symbolism or even resorting to extra-temporal

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aids. This is common political practice. What was different in Liberia however, was the structural position of the occult, i.e. its institutionalization at the federal level. Unlike the neighboring countries whose policies had been to outlaw witchcraft (Guinea for example[18]), or to treat it as a local matter (Nigeria and Cameroon)[19], the domain of the occult actually formed part of the official government. This gave any Liberian head of state the power to directly manipulate the occult. Doe's predecessors, Tubman and Tolbert, of course, had also enjoyed this power. But in keeping with the maintenance of an aura of ante-Bellum southern Protestant gentility, they had tended to de-emphasize this aspect of their 'True Whig' one-party states (Ellis 1995:189). And what had been an exceptional story of witchcraft terror before 1980, became almost a ritual daily occurrence afterwards.

Doe played his symbolic cards with a vengeance, using 'mysterious disappearances' to rid himself of his enemies. He also used arbitrary arrests and extra-legal trials (Liebnow 1987:262). That the Doe regime should cleave so ably to witchcraft discourse only shows the extent to which he was a man of the people.

Surely not all of the stories provided in this paper emanated from Doe's craving for power or his bid to control forces. Some of them clearly came from the people or from the reporters. For Doe and the Liberian people shared a common epistemology and a common symbol system.

According to Mbembe (1992a:4), who draws from Michael Bahktin, 'the grotesque and the obscene are, above all, a matter of plebian life'. Mbembe's discussion of political symbolism in the post-colonial Francophone African politics, moreover, is applicable to the Liberian situation. Mbembe argues, for example, that the political symbolism of eating, dominates Francophone Africa's Big Men. Mbembe notes that in contexts of scarcity, the politics of eating, especially immoderate eating, takes on important signification. Africa's Big Men, notably Eyadema of Togo; Mobutu of former Zaire; and Biya of Cameroon; are not only metaphorically large, they are big in physique. To become that way, they are seen by their subjects as literally and metaphorically 'eating the state'. Indeed, former strongman of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seke was fond of saying, *'L'état, c'est moi!'* ('I am the state!'). All three of these leaders had regular recourse to occult power (see Bourgault 1993:88).

[18] The Poro was outlawed in Guinea by President Sekou Toure after the country's independence from France. Toure regarded the Poro as a rival and a threat to his power. See Bellman (1984:14f).

[19] Geschiere (1997:173) writes that many African judicial experts are of the opinion that colonial legal structures which they inherited, particularly in the Anglophone countries, ignored the phenomenon of witchcraft and thus left serious holes in their legal systems. Geschiere's 1997 volume on witchcraft documents, among other issues, the beginnings in the 1990s, in Cameroon, of governmental level prosecutions of witchcraft.

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Mbembe reminds us that African notions of witchcraft are related to immoderate eating, i.e. that witches and other creatures of the occult eat their victims. (Liberian rumor held that Doe ate Tolbert's heart after slaying him!) One needs only to examine photos of staff sergeant Samuel Doe from 1980 with those of a decade later to see just how much eating Doe did. By 1988 Doe's scrawny soldier's body had ballooned into corpulence, straining the vest buttons of his three-piece suit. And Doe's menacing angular sergeant's jaw had filled into a bureaucrat's flaccid double chin!

Achille Mbembe's (1992a:23) very controversial work notes that

> the populace have internalized authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life[20].

He writes that authoritarian symbolism trickles down to the common folk who repeat these plays for grandeur in their own intimate circles: 'in cults, secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, and modes of consumption, dress styles, rhetorical devices, and the political economy of the body' (Mbembe 1992a:23).

Mbembe's work stresses the peasant's interest in the grotesque. He also notes that the subject of the post-colony displays a 'talent for play and a sense of fun which makes him *homo ludens*, par excellence' (Mbembe 1992a:5). For Mbembe, the subject of the post-colony, ever oppressed, is ready at any instance, to turn officialdom into a joke. He is ready to parody and ready to mock at any moment. Mbembe adds further that it is this capacity as *homo ludens* (this capacity for play) that enables the colonized subject to switch identities quickly. And Victor Turner (1992:115) adds that African life is taken up in constant role playing, facilitating a phenomenology which certainly eases the quick shifting of loyalties following a change of government. Elsewhere this author has argued that the nature of oral culture is also helpful in this regard (Bourgault 1995:198).

The peasant as *homo ludens*, par excellence, explains, according to Mbembe (1992a:15), why

> dictators can go to sleep at night lulled by roars of adulation and support only to wake up the next morning to find their golden calves smashed and their tablets of law overturned. The applauding crowds of yesterday have become a cursing, abusive mob.

Perhaps Mbembe's remarks can serve as some sort of answer to the question Enoanyi asked about mobs jeering Doe in the early period of this decade's Liberian civil war.

[20] A July 1997 feature on Zairian music aired on National Public Radio recounted how members of musical troupes in Kinshasa, especially managers, had borrowed from the bombast of Mobutu in claiming important titles for themselves.

> Who are these people marching and asking the man to step down? Are they not the same ones who, in 1980 when he toppled the Americo-Liberian regime, danced and marched for days and weeks and months, singing praises to his heroism? .... Are they not the same people you and I have seen in solidarity marches pledging support to the man whenever he has crushed a coup? (Enoanyi 1991:19f).

It should be recalled that the ruler of the post-colony is in the pay of the greater powers. This fact is well known among subjects. The ruler's pretensions to grandeur and invincibility are a kind of comic opera orchestrated by the 'Big Man', his henchmen, and his public relations operatives. Peasants, all too familiar with the spinning of yarns, recognize to varying degrees, that the post-colony is government by (to use Mbembe's Gallic terminology) 'simularum' (Mbembe 1992a:14). But to openly contest the image of the state is to attack the government itself.

These facts explain why insults or criticisms of people in power, especially the head of state, are treated so harshly in the post- colony. Like the secrets of the Poro which many people know but cannot discuss, the 'simulacrum' is *ifa mo*—'you must not talk it'. The real power the government has, then, is like that of the Zoes. The government has the power to enforce the 'doing of secrets'.

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* The author is grateful for receiving a '1996 Faculty Mini-Grant' which supplied funds useful in the completion of the Liberian press project and a '1997 Special Projects Grant' which made possible her participation in the Second CSSALL Conference in Durban, Natal. Both grants were awarded by Northern Michigan University.

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