



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

Sierra Leone - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 11 February 2010.

Whether there is a cult called Bondo Codes in Sierra Leone. Information on its activities, objectives, faith, rituals, leadership, membership, history and current situation in Sierra Leone.

Information on the treatment of those who are members or are perceived to be members of Bondo Codes by the government and/or society. Is there free movement within Sierra Leone?

Would a Bondo Code member experience any legal or practical problems moving within the country? Would police provide protection/services to a Bondo Code member experiencing problems due to his/her membership of the cult?

What is the legal status of Bondo Codes? If illegal, penalties for membership?

A section titled "Attitudes and Beliefs" of a *US Department of State* report on the practice of FGM in Sierra Leone refers to membership of secret societies as follows:

"The customary power bases of women in Sierra Leone lie in the secret societies. Women who administer puberty rites are revered, feared and believed to hold supernatural powers. Membership in these secret societies, including Sande and Bundo, lasts a lifetime. Groups of girls of approximately the same age are initiated into these societies. Part of the ritual is the cutting. Girls initiated together form a bond and this sisterhood lasts throughout their lives. The girls take an oath that they will not reveal anything that happened during the puberty rite. It is believed that once initiated into the society, the girl has passed into womanhood. She now has adult status and can participate in society as a woman. The secret societies are supported by some members of the influential elite who are also members of the societies or have relatives who are." (US Department of State (1 June 2001) *Sierra Leone: Report on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting (FGC)*)

The Executive Summary of a *Writenet* report, in a paragraph headed "Secret Societies" states:

"Secret societies are ancient cultural institutions in the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa and their primary purpose is to regulate sexual identity and social conduct. The women's society, known as Sande in the south and Bondo in the north and Freetown, is general to Sierra Leone." (Writenet (August 2007) *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*)

In a section titled "Secret Societies in Sierra Leone" (sub-section titled "Organization and Purpose") this report refers to initiation into a Bondo society as follows:

“During their initiation period, girls work cooperatively on a variety of tasks for female elders, e.g. weeding farms, washing clothes, cooking and repairing mud and wattle houses. While these tasks are familiar to the girls from early childhood, initiation teaches them to view them anew as indexes of female identity. Cooperative tasking also serves as preparation for the girls’ future roles as wives and co-wives living and working together in their husbands’ compounds. When Sande/Bondo initiates complete their secluded instruction and return to the village, they usually emerge as a group, their feminine allure emphasized by cosmetics, jewellery and fine clothes. Accompanied by drumming and singing, they take turns to greet the village patriarchy, their studied deference announcing their moral as well as physical preparedness for marriage. On these occasions, some of the younger members of the society, initiated in previous years, will dress as men and brandish imitation wooden guns. These women lead the initiates back to the village, elbowing aside onlookers to make way for the procession.” (ibid, p.3)

In a sub-section titled “Political Role” this section of the report also states:

“Bondo/Sande leaders organize girls’ initiations and also tend to be drawn from local high-status families. Initiates and their families remain beholden to these patrons, since initiation guarantees community membership and its attendant social and property rights. Elders may use that moral indebtedness to secure compliance with their decision making or claim resources from lower status families.” (ibid)

An *IRIN News* report on FGM in Sierra Leone states:

“A crudely performed operation to remove the clitoris from adolescent girls forms a key part of the initiation ceremonies held by powerful, women-only secret societies that prepare young girls for adult life, marriage and motherhood in the West African country. Koso-Thomas, who came to Sierra Leone from Nigeria, sees nothing wrong with such ‘bundu’ societies and their initiation ceremonies but, on medical grounds, she and a handful of other women’s rights campaigners want the circumcision ritual replaced by something less brutal and hazardous. ‘People got me wrong at first. When I was going to the communities and sensitising them, they thought I was against their society,’ Koso-Thomas told IRIN. ‘But it is as a doctor that I started campaigning and sensitising people about the health hazards, because I saw all the complications.’ ‘The real meaning of the bundu society is very good,’ she said. ‘It is where they train young girls to become women: they teach them how to sing, dance and cook ... girls who don’t go to school learn how to use herbs and treat illnesses; they are taught to respect others.’” (IRIN News (17 March 2005) *Sierra Leone: Female circumcision is a vote winner*)

In a section titled “Children” the 2009 *US Department of State* country report for Sierra Leone states:

“No law specifically prohibits FGM, and it was practiced widely and supported by politicians and community members. UNICEF and other groups estimated that 80 to 90 percent of women and girls had been victims of the practice; however, some local groups believed that this figure was overstated. FGM was practiced on girls as young as five years old, and UNIOSIL reported

cases in which one and two-year-old children underwent FGM because their young age made it cheaper for parents. Although police occasionally detained practitioners on accusations of forced mutilation or manslaughter, human rights workers reported that police remained hesitant to interfere in cultural practices.” (US Department of State (25 February 2009) *2008 Human Rights Report: Sierra Leone*)

An *Inter Press Service* report which refers to Sierra Leonean politicians seeking the support of the Bondo societies states:

“Female genital mutilation (FGM) can make sex painful, complicate childbirth, lead to urinary tract infections, enable the transmission of HIV -- and induce a host of other ills. So, promising to fight this practice should be a winning strategy for someone hoping to be elected to parliament this Saturday in Sierra Leone -- where about 90 percent of girls and women undergo FGM, according to rights watchdog Amnesty International. Should be. But, isn't. In an inescapable irony, the issue is off limits even to aspiring women legislators who might have an unhappy experience of FGM, and who could lead the fight against the practice at the highest levels. The reason? FGM still enjoys support in large sections of the community, notably among members of secret 'Bondo' societies, made up exclusively of women, which use the practice to initiate girls into womanhood -- alongside teaching them various domestic skills. 'I cannot say a word now (against FGM) because I need their support,' Tinah Greene, a candidate for the Convention People's Party, told IPS. While the 2002 polls were held under a system of proportional representation, seen as conducive to helping women enter parliament, this year's general elections are being fought in the tougher world of constituency politics -- and women need to ensure they have the Bondo societies' votes in hand. 'You won't get a candidate to go out and say "We're against this (FGM)"', Rodney Lowe, a volunteer for Amnesty International in Sierra Leone's capital -- Freetown -- told IPS. 'It can be political suicide.' (Inter Press Service (9 August 2007) *Sierra Leone: A Women's Issue That Women Are Wary of Campaigning About*)

See also article from the online magazine *Womens eNews* which states:

“Politicians routinely try to win the support of these societies, says Laurel Bangura, another anti-FGM campaigner based in Freetown, by offering to pay for the mutilation of girls and to win the votes and support of their parents. Bangura said it can cost up to \$200 to mutilate a girl, depending on her family's wealth. Bangura and Koso-Thomas both said politicians' fear of the influence of the practitioners and supporters of FGM were widely suspected last June when a clause outlawing female circumcision was removed at the last minute from a child protection bill in parliament. Bangura said votes to outlaw the procedure could have meant the end of political careers and possible influence over the FGM practitioners who wield power in their communities. Bangura said politicians feared being voted out if they were to have supported illegalization of FGM during an election year.” (Womens eNews (7 September 2007) *FGM Practitioners Sway Elections in Sierra Leone*)

An article from the Sierra Leonean newspaper *Concord Times* states:

"Groups of female organizations including elderly women in Kenema are planning to protest against what they described as the continuous demoralization of traditional and cultural practices such as Bondo. Coordinator of the Women's Coalition in Kenema, Doris Kali disclosed to Concord Times that they have developed serious interest in the various discussion programmes on radio stations across the country condemning Bondo initiation and its connection with female genital mutilation (FGM). 'We are going to demonstrate for the government and the international community to know that we are against their denouncement of FGM and that we will continue with the practice because we inherited it,' she said. Kali opines that the denouncement of Bondo is an abuse on traditional leaders and their women because a large number of them, especially those in the provinces, are members of the society. 'The denouncement of Bondo in Sierra Leone is an abuse to us as Sierra Leoneans.'" (Concord Times (27 February 2008) *Sierra Leone: Women Plan Protest for Bondo*)

A *Reporters Without Borders* report on the alleged treatment of four women journalists by Bondo members states:

"The four reporters - Manjama Balama-Samba of the United Nations radio and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS), Henrietta Kpaka of the SLBS, Isha Jalloh of Eastern Radio and Jenneh Brima, also of Eastern Radio - were kidnapped on 6 February by members of Bondo, a secret society that practices FGM. The next day, their abductors forcibly undressed Balama-Samba and made her walk naked through the streets. The journalists had been conducting a series of interviews jointly with the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices in order to mark International Day of Zero Tolerance of Female Genital Mutilation, which was celebrated on 6 February for the 5th year running. The Bondo group regarded their questions and comments as a sign of disrespect for their traditions." (Reporters Without Borders (10 February 2010) *Four women journalists kidnapped, one subjected to public humiliation, by supporters of female genital mutilation*)

References:

Concord Times (27 February 2008) *Sierra Leone: Women Plan Protest for Bondo*

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources Consulted:

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IRIN News
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Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database
UK Home Office
UNHCR Refworld