RESISTING STATE ICONOCLASM
AMONG THE LOMA OF GUINEA
Resisting State Iconoclasm
Among the Loma of Guinea

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For Anne-Sophie
Contents

Illustrations xi
Series Editors' Preface: Ritual, Secrecy, and Continuity xiii
  Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern
Acknowledgments xxv

Introduction 3
  Things Do Not Always Fall Apart 3
  Suppression of Tradition and Politicisation of Religion in the Postcolony 6
  Religious Symbolism 15
  The Sale Ritual System 22
  Transmission of Tradition 24
  The Anthropology of Religious Ritual Continuity 30
  Loma Religious Continuity: A Composite Approach 36
  Ethical Considerations in the Study of Secrecy 38

Chapter 1 The One and the Many: Guinean Policies of Iconoclasm 43
  Antecedents of Iconoclasm and Revelation of Secrecy Among the Loma 46
  Disclosing Local Communities and Creating National Unity 50
  The Demystification Campaign 57
  The Limits of Iconoclasm 63

Chapter 2 The Loma 69
  A People of the Hinterlands of Liberia and Guinea 69
  Living on the Margins 73
  Loma History 78
  Loma Social and Political Organisation 89
  A Changing World 98
  Loma Religion 100
Table of Contents

Loma Sacrifice 103
Sacrificial Gifts 108

Chapter 3  The Art of Loma Masking 117
Analytical Approach 117
Mask Terminology 120
Origin and Illusion 124
Inversion and Allusion: The Use of Metaphorical Language 132
Mask Appearance and Person-Divinity Relationships 136
Mask Appearance and Periodical Rituals 139
Mask Appearance as a Social Control Mechanism 144
Mask Appearance as Public Entertainment and a Means of Relating to Outsiders 147
The Work of Masks 149

Chapter 4  Belief-Fixation: The Transmission and Acquisition of Religious Knowledge 153
Inconsistent Representations of a Religious Concept 153
Encounters with the Extraordinary 156
Dreams (The Stuff Spirits are Made of) 160
Cognitive Schemas and Causal Judgement 162
Divination: The Role of Religious Experts in Belief-Fixation 164
Cult Associations and the Transmission of Sale Knowledge and Ritual Practice 167
Creative Imagination and Reproductive Religious Imagination 172

Chapter 5  Ritual Speech in Sale Sacrifice 175
Emergent Ritual Symbolism and Cult Organisation 175
Loma Ritual Language 179
The Sacrificial System 181
The Sacrificial Scheme: Relational Aspects of Sale Sacrifice 184
Ritual Contextualisation: Sale Sacrifice as Negotiation of Power and Social Relationships 190
Ritual Recontextualisation: Ancestor Categories and Objects of Transmission 192
Ritual Self-Referentiality 194

Chapter 6  Inner Iconoclasm 197
The Immunity of Loma Religion to Political Suppression 197
CONTENTS ix

Modes of Thought 198
The Distinctiveness of Ritual Knowledge 204
Inner Iconoclasm 212
Self-Reflexivity: The Acquisition and Development of Religious Ideas 214
Conceptual Reflexivity: Sacrifice and the Crossing of Conceptual Boundaries 218
Mask Fabrication 220
Reflexivity and the Social Organisation of Knowledge: Secrecy and Ritual Simulation 223
Oppression, Reflexivity, and Belief 227

Chapter 7 Loma Male Initiation 231
Prologue to an Understanding of Poro Politics 231
Cult Distribution and the Sociopolitical Context of the Poro 233
Pölögi 240
Naming the Pölögi and Preparation of the Initiation Camp 243
The Opening Ceremony 245
Scenes from Inside the Belly of the Beast 247
The ‘Bush-School’ 249
The Coming-Out Ceremony 251
Memory and Revelatory Knowledge 252
A Cognitive Perspective on the Sociopolitical Dynamics of the Poro 255

Chapter 8 Democratisation, Violence and Secret Society Politics 257
Secret Society Laws 257
A Changing Political Context 260
Civil War and the Politics of Tradition 262
Masked Violence 266
The Semantics of Violence 269
A Recapitulation of Loma Masking Performance 273
The Transformation of a Masking Tradition 276

Chapter 9 Identity Politics 279
The Objectification of Culture 279
Difference and Identity: The Symbolic Value of a Religious Category 283
The Dual Logic of Loma Political Culture 286
Presentist Accounts of the Poro as an Ethnic Marker 291
The Revival of Tradition 294
Invented and Inherited Tradition 298
The Sociopolitical Dynamics of the Poro 300

Chapter 10 Religious Reflexivity: Steps to an Epidemiology of Loma Religion 303
Determinants of Religious Resilience 303
Modes of Reflexivity 306
Culture and Cognition 309

Bibliography 313

Index 351
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. The Loma and their neighbours in Guinea and Liberia p. 5
Figure 2. Ancestors’ grave (wazi) and zalaghai p. 105
Figure 3. Mountain sacrifice (gizevoyi) p. 111
Figure 4. Water sacrifice (zievoyi) p. 113
Figure 5. Angbaï mask performing accompanied by harp player p. 122
Figure 6. The bird mask onilégagi with an apprentice p. 123
Figure 7. The stilt mask laniböï p. 127
Figure 8. A facial and several angbaï miniature masks lined up for sacrifice p. 128
Figure 9. The girls’ mask digibai p. 142
Figure 10. The boys’ mask anibhélékoï p. 143
Figure 11. Divination (ashes) p. 165
Figure 12. The sacred grove (savei) entrance marked by ‘ten-heads’ (umpougii) p. 246
Ritual Studies Monograph Series Editors’ Preface for Resisting State Iconoclasm Among the Loma of Guinea

Ritual, Secrecy, and Continuity

—Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern

The retention of “tradition” in the face of “change” is a long running discussion in anthropology, especially in relation to the influence of new religious practices and economic and political transformations. Christian Kordt Højbjerg’s Resisting State Iconoclasm is a valuable contribution to this forum as well as to the literature on the Anthropology of Religion in West Africa. We are delighted to include the work in our Ritual Studies Monograph Series (1).

Publications from the South-West Pacific (also referred to as Melanesia) on similar topics to those raised by Dr. Højbjerg can be usefully compared in a number of instances. In terms of religious change and alteration of “traditional” ritual / religious practices our work in the Hagen, Pangia, and Duna areas of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (see Stewart and Strathern 2002a; Strathern and Stewart 1999a, 2000a, 2000b, 2004a), as well as the work of Bashkow (2006), Biersack (1999), Clark (2000), Engelke and Tomlinson (2006), Gibbs (1994), Jacka (2001), Jebens (2005), Knauf (2002), Lattas (1998), Reithofer (2005), Robbins (2004), and others, can serve as an ethnographic set for comparative analysis with the African materials.

Significant ritual cycles centering on Female Spirits in the Hagen and Pangia areas of Papua New Guinea were introduced into the areas through transmission in which outside ritual experts brought the knowledge of the related practices to the important leaders of the communities, who wished to hold per-
formances to secure the establishment of economic and political ties as well as to invoke cosmological links with the Female Spirits in relation to the local ecological environment of the groups involved in the performances. The Amb Kor (Female Spirit) ritual cycle in Hagen was held to renew the fertility of the cosmos and bring health to the community (Stewart and Strathern 1999; Strathern and Stewart 1998, 1999b, 2000c, 2003). Likewise, the Laiyeroa (Female Spirit) ritual cycle in Pangia formed a part of a set of indigenous practices dealing with fertility, health, and prosperity (see Stewart and Strathern 2002b; Strathern and Stewart 2000c). The influences of the Christian churches, Lutheran, Catholic, and Pentecostal, have brought new ritual practices into these areas, dramatically transforming the previous ways of imagining the relationship of the people to their cosmos and their land (see Stewart and Strathern 2000a, 2001a, 2001b; Strathern and Stewart 1997, 2000a). In the Duna area of Papua New Guinea we found that the Female Spirit (Payame Ima) remains a vital, albeit transformed, aspect of the landscape, which is nowadays heavily imbued with Christian ritual cycles and cosmological referents (Stewart 1998; Stewart and Strathern 2000b, 2002a). The Payame Ima has been invoked in issues to do with compensation payments from companies, e.g., mining concerns, in terms of environmental pollution and impact, since the Payame Ima is said to protect the eco-system as well as the people living within it. The Payame Ima is also remembered in expressive genres, such as the popular sung ballads, pikono, of the Duna (Stewart and Strathern 2002c, 2005a) where she is depicted as assisting young men in their heroic challenges against cannibal spirits and other feats. In the past she was also held to be the presiding entity over the bachelors’ growth houses (palena anda) where boys matured into young men, learning practices such as how to decorate themselves and help their hair to grow and how to interact with their environment and cosmos in a “proper” manner (see Stewart and Strathern 2002a).

Ritual cycles held to honor male spirit beings were also a part of the complex of cosmologically directed activities in the past. In Hagen, the Kor Wöp (Male Spirit) ritual cycle expressed in the widest sense the regeneration of the power of spring water, fertility, and health (Stewart and Strathern 2002d; Strathern and Stewart 2004b).

In our examples here we note the articulation of reactions to outside forces by local populations in relation to ritual practices. All of these examples of ritual practices from our field areas in Papua New Guinea raise issues parallel to those explored by Dr. Højbjerg. First, what is the meaning of secrecy? Second how have practices changed and how do people view these changes? And third, how are people’s memories of previous practices constituted? Dr. Højbjerg discusses numerous theoretical and comparative approaches to such problems,
from the cognitive to the sociological. He also provides an in-depth investigation into how secrecy actually operates among the Loma. He finds that many aspects of ritual knowledge are “personal possessions”, linked to bodily experiences and in that sense kept private. Secrets may also be transmitted only gradually to apprentices over time. (Initiation grades everywhere practically mandate such a circumstance: an extreme example is given by Fredrik Barth on the Baktaman people of Papua New Guinea, Barth 1975.) Some secrets, Dr. Højbjerg, suggests, should be seen as “public secrets”, since they differentiate and segregate whole categories of people in terms of their supposed ritual knowledge. He applies this point to gender relations. Women are excluded from participation in many rituals; but, by the same token, their presence “behind closed doors” was highly relevant to these occasions and contributed to their meanings in a gendered field of social relations.

Many parallels—as well as some contrasts—appear here when we compare these findings on the Loma with the Highlands Papua New Guinea contexts. There, too, women were formally “excluded” from many ritual events in the sense that they were not permitted to take part in secluded areas fenced off from public ceremonial grounds; this in spite of the fact that in numbers of cases the male participants in rituals directed their actions to putative Female Spirit figures (see Strathern and Stewart 2004b). Indeed the Female Spirit in Mount Hagen was said to be jealous of and hostile to the men’s human wives should they intrude on her domain and would turn their bodies the wrong way round if they did so. Ritual cosmology itself therefore explained their “exclusion”. Yet women were positive participants in and beneficiaries of the rituals. They raised pigs and assisted in their slaughter for these occasions, and their own fertility was held to be enhanced by the rituals practiced. The men acted as specialists on behalf of the whole community, according to the logic employed here. And the knowledge of this was reflexively available to the people themselves, making everyone willing to put work and effort into the preparations for the events (see Stewart and Strathern 1999). In the case of the Loma, Dr. Højbjerg also observes that the respectful silence of the women and children in the face of Poro celebrations strongly contributed to the sense of the significance of the overall event. In other words, women were not just “excluded”; or, if they were, this was on the basis of their collaborative performance of respect for the occasion. We ourselves have previously made arguments of this kind central to our construction of the model of collaboration rather than gendered antagonism in the Hagen Female Spirit complex (see Stewart and Strathern 1999; 2002b).

Secrecy itself may be contextual and varying. And it may be destroyed, only to be reconstituted later. Among the Loma government iconoclastic forces had
enforced the display of ritual paraphenalia considered secret in the early 1960s; yet these secrets were re-instituted in 1991. This historical reversal undoubtedly was a product of Loma resistance and resilience, played out in dramatic performance modes. We may compare, and contrast, this dramatic revival of practices with two phases of historical change in the Hagen area of Papua New Guinea. Catholic and Lutheran missionaries, and their indigenous evangelists alike, from the 1930s onward, discouraged people from holding their large-scale spirit performances. In the 1960s, however, a number of revivals of these performances took place, sponsored by local leaders who were keen both to extend their reputations in all of the historical domains of prestigeful activity, and also to reclaim control over aspects of fertility and prosperity which had lain in abeyance during the initial time of the missionary prohibitions. Some leaders rationalized the revival in terms of an additive logic. As one leader, a very famous man of the Ulka tribe in the Nebilyer Valley, explained the matter to Andrew Strathern in 1965, in his view the sacred stones and site of the Kor Wöp (Male Spirit) enclosure had been laid down originally by God (Göte-nt etepa pinditim). Others recognized the conflict between the old religion and the new and were concerned to mediate it. On one occasion, among the Ukini Oyambo people in the far western corner of the Baiyer Valley, leaders themselves first completed the appropriate rituals for the Female Spirit (Amb Kor) and then, in an apparent renunciation of ritual secrecy, displayed the hitherto hidden stones emblematic of the Spirit on the high trestles (ropoklama) from which pieces of pork steamed inside the enclosure were customarily distributed onto the upturned spears of eager visitors. On other occasions, where the Christian presence was not so strong, leaders simply held the Christian opposition at bay for the duration of the ritual. One local performance tended to stimulate another in a neighboring group, in a chain-like fashion reminiscent of how chains of ceremonial exchange occasions known as moka emerged over short runs of time between allied groups (see, e.g. Strathern and Stewart 2000a; Stewart and Strathern 2005b). In a given tribe (political unit) its member clans might perform the Amb Kor rituals in turn, none wishing to be left out of the cycle designed ritually to ensure prosperity and fertility. Among one group, the Kawelka, by the time each clan or sub-clan had finished the whole ritual sequence (which spanned in each case a number of years), Christian influence in the wider Hagen area had become so entrenched that it was unlikely the sequence would ever be repeated. Revival thus ran its historical course, ending when Christianity, especially its charismatic and Pentecostalist versions with their own promises of fertility and salvation, finally took over. The state as such at no time intervened either to support or to denounce the “traditional” rituals. But the enshrinement, after 1975, in the Con-
stitution of the Independent nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG), of the notion that PNG is a “Christian nation” certainly paved the way for the new religion’s success.

In many cases, among the various groups, the power of sacred stones was considered to have been destroyed by their exposure to the eyes of the public, including women. But the matter is not quite so clear cut. There were many secret procedures that were not revealed, whose power could still be held to have been emplaced in the earth and to be continuously at work. In the case of at least two Kawelka sub-groups, the sacred stones were buried in places shown only to eldest sons of the leaders, so their location to this day would not be known to more than a few people. While the ritual practices have been overtly suspended, if not repudiated or superseded, not all secrets have been revealed. People’s memories of these earlier practices, then, are likely to be a compound of historical displacement accompanied by an ambiguous sense of continuing presence. Such a presence is obviously much attenuated by comparison with the Loma situation analyzed by Dr. Højbjerg; but it shows how secrecy is a matter of degree and context and lends itself to historical variability and ambiguity. In Papua New Guinea generally, the assault on indigenous ritual was certainly mounted at least in part in the name of the ideology of “modernity”, with which Christianity was also associated, but there was no revolutionary state iconoclasm. Indeed PNG’s first leaders of the nation after Independence were keen supporters of indigenous culture and some remain so today, combining adherence to “tradition” with allegiance also to one or another Christian denomination. Perhaps we should note here that in PNG at these times there has been no element of Islamic iconoclasm led by reformist prophets such as Dr. Højbjerg reports among the Loma. Nor was there any sense in PNG that the promotion of local solidarity precluded or impeded the growth of national consciousness. “Tradition”, actually, has been co-opted into the cause of “modernity” as often as it has been excluded from it; all depending on the political convenience of the day. Tradition thus becomes a strategic resource, to be deployed at will. In this way it is like secrecy. As Dr. Højbjerg points out for the Loma, partial revelation goes along with secrecy. Revelation points to secrecy, and vice-versa. In PNG, published versions of rituals may contribute to this process; and politicians’ use of such knowledge or their allusion to it may help to enhance their own prestige or power over others. PNG leaders may well encourage researchers to make certain practices known, while also promising not to reveal others. Andrew Strathern was once encouraged to give a tape-recording of chants performed for the Amb Kor to the local radio station so that people in the wider area would know the performing group had conducted
the ritual. These chants, unlike the spells and acts performed and witnessed only by the immediate participants, are heard widely beyond the sacred enclosures in which the ritual takes place, and this is an important part of the ritual performance itself.

Dr. Højbjerg’s overall purpose is to rehabilitate the idea of continuity outside of imputations of “Orientalism”. In this he succeeds admirably. Indeed, it is time overall to reject the fictional dichotomization of “tradition” and “modernity”, since these elements of social life and ideology intertwine and coexist (for a review of issues see Strathern and Stewart 2004a and see also Strathern and Stewart 2000d). One of the prime reasons for this situation is also fundamental in theoretical terms: the play of imagination as a powerful force in many social and cultural activities (see for example Stewart and Strathern 2004a; Strathern and Stewart 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b). Imagination creatively comes into play in other arenas such as in the new uses of performative elements as a part of “cultural revival movements”. We have noted this in our work over the years in Taiwan (see for example Stewart and Strathern 2005c; and Strathern and Stewart 2005c) as well as in Ireland among the Ulster-Scots (see for example Strathern and Stewart 2005d). Many of these elements are transferred from prior ritual contexts and placed into new ones where they both retain elements of previous meaning and create new meanings in altered political and social environments. “Cultural revival movements” are dependent on specific forms of indigenous knowledge which is important in a variety of applications (see for example Stewart and Strathern 2004b).

Christian Højbjerg’s study of the social and historical dynamics of secrecy, resistance, and continuity among the Loma, who span an area between Guinea and Liberia, takes its place among a generation of interpretive case studies on African contexts of life which bring together analysis of politics and economics with an understanding of culture and history. A parallel to Dr. Højbjerg’s work can be found in that of Mariane Ferme on the Mende of Sierra Leone to the west of the Loma (Ferme 2001; see also the earlier work of Kenneth Little 1951). The Poro and Sande secret societies are transnational phenomena in this part of Africa, and among the Mende, as with the Loma, they depend not just on secrecy, but on its performance in social contexts, with multiple plays on hidden linguistic meanings and the ambiguities of ritual displays of masks. Ferme notes for example (2001: 161, citing Simmel 1950) that secrecy and power “are both predicated on the relationship between the subject’s concealed aims and their visible manifestations in the external world”. The same applies to the Loma, with the added force that attacks on these secret societies among them have served, rather than obliterating them, to increase the layerings of ambiguity and secrecy that surround them and lend to them more power. Dr.
SERIES EDITORS’ PREFACE

Højbjerg’s in-depth study makes a fresh and distinguished contribution to this and many other themes in contemporary anthropological theory and analysis, while solidly grounding itself in ethnographic exposition.

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Endnotes

(1) Other titles in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series include:

References

xx    SERIES EDITORS’ PREFACE


xxii SERIES EDITORS’ PREFACE


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I began my field research in southeast Guinea in 1990-1 and returned again in 1993 as a consultant on a local development project. From 1993-5 I lived intermittently in the town of Macenta and managed to carry out ethnographic fieldwork parallel to my official function as development ‘sociologist’. In 1998 and 1999 I returned twice for periods of three months to study issues related to the natural environment and ended up learning more about settlement history and ethnic relationships in a politically tense climate. There is only little report in this book on findings from my most recent visits to the border area between Liberia and Guinea in 2005 and 2006. I thank the Guinean authorities for granting me the permission to carry out fieldwork and archival studies in Guinea and colleagues at the history department, University of Conakry, for facilitating my research. On a number of occasions the personnel at Mission Philafricaine in Macenta have cured me of malaria. My family and I are most grateful for their generous help and hospitality.

I first got the idea to this book in 1995. Obviously, many colleagues, friends and family members have never really understood why a book can be in the making for so long. Apart from the fact that the present study of Loma religious and political life builds on data gathered during more than a decade, the book would probably have been even more difficult and time-consuming to write had I not benefited from the encouragement of a number of colleagues. I thank Michel Izard for suggesting back in 1989 a region in West Africa and a topic of which little knowledge existed. Over an unforgettable Guinean-style rice and fish lunch served in her home, the late Denise Paulme sustained the
relevance of my choice of field and topic. I would also like to thank Michel Cartry who taught me a lot about rituals and introduced me to the research unit *Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire* at CNRS where I first presented parts of the ethnography included in this book. I am grateful to Kirsten Hastrup, who directed my initial work among the West African Loma and their neighbours. A non-regional specialist, she has always pushed me to consider my ethnographic findings in the light of current anthropological themes and theory. Comments on parts of the book by a number of colleagues have been most valuable and helped me endure the task of writing the entire book. In particular, I would like to thank Brian Patrick McGuire, Georg Ulrich, Harvey Whitehouse, James Fairhead, John Peel, Jonathan Schwartz, Martin Gaenszle, Michael Houseman, Michael Jackson, Niels Kastfelt, Ramon Sarro, Tim Geysbeek, the members of the Copenhagen Culture and Cognition Circle, the anonymous reviewers of previously published material, and my father-in-law Peter Helger. I am most grateful to Michael Harbsmeier for having taken the time to read the entire manuscript and encouraging me to publish it. The series editors Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern also provided me with valuable comments on the complete manuscript. I thank them for their decision to publish it. The SAXO-Institute, University of Copenhagen, generously provided the means for a final proof-reading of the manuscript. Finally, I would like to thank for permission to use previously published material from the journals Africa, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Social Anthropology, and from edited books published by AltaMira Press, Aarhus University Press, Hurst and Co.

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My wife Anne-Sophie Helger joined me for a short period of fieldwork in 1990-1 and again in 1995. Much to my embarrassment she managed to pick up local language at an amazing speed. Fortunately, she also took some of the best photographs we possess of Loma masquerade and everyday life. Despite several long periods of separation she has always sustained my ethnographic research in Guinea and Liberia. I dedicate this book to her.