

Main Article

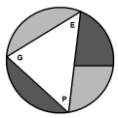
Ritual violence in Liberia: 3. Ritual violence in Liberia prior to the Civil Wars of 1989-2003—Types, causes, dynamics and consequences

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Ritual violence in Liberia series—Abstract

Ritual violence—violence characterised and justified by rituals i.e. observable ceremonial and sequenced acts, often involving human sacrifice and the removal of organs to attain magical power—still is rife in many places and regions across the globe, including West Africa. This Ritual violence in Liberia series analyses lethal and non-lethal ritual violence in Liberia during its known history, but eventually focuses on the period from the Liberian Civil Wars of 1989-1997 and 1999-2003 to the time of brittle-and-violent ‘peace’ of today.

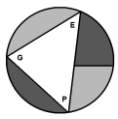
This series especially investigates the role of combatants in ritual violence during times of (major) internal war in Liberia. These combatants include child soldiers, their leaders and their victims—though forcibly recruited and indoctrinated child soldiers could be seen as victims as well. These may also include any other actors perpetrating such violence during times of (relative) peace in Liberia against any non-combatants and former combatants among families, larger kin groups and ethnicities—including former child soldiers.



Generally, the series seeks to uncover the saliency, prevalence and nature of ritual violence in Liberia, and the causes and consequences of such violence for both perpetrators and victims (opposing sides may be both perpetrators and victims vis-à-vis each other), for indigenous peoples, other citizens and foreign residents in the country. For this it makes use of the author's theory and empirical research on brutalisation i.e. increasing violation of local and/or international norms of violence.

Even though few systematic, comparative studies on ritual violence have been done to this day, a fair number of anecdotal reports and in-depth case studies on particular tribes, peoples and societies show that this phenomenon is widespread, endemic and ingrained in many parts of the world—including Liberia, as this series confirms.

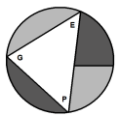
Indeed, especially magic-ritual violence in both the private i.e. domestic and public i.e. political spheres is rife in Liberia to this day. There, perpetrators not just target individuals as perceived and actual (former) enemies in vendettas often originating from the civil wars—including Liberian migrants and asylum seekers living abroad or (in danger of) being deported back. They also frequently target peoples and entire communities at random, whereby they immediately attack victims or abduct them and torture, mutilate and murder them afterwards in rituals believed to bring magical, supernatural, otherworldly powers to the direct perpetrators and/or their benefactors who ordered these killings in the first place. Even Liberian migrants, deported asylum seekers and visitors could easily fall victim to this 'random' violence.



Introduction—On the history of ritual violence in Liberia and beyond

As I have indicated in Part 1 of this Ritual violence in Liberia series, ritual or ‘ritualistic’¹ violence—i.e. “violence characterised or justified by rituals based on religious, spiritual and other ideological beliefs (or quite opportunistic, self-gratifying motives masquerading with those beliefs)” —is “often ghastly brutal, perhaps even more so than many other forms of extreme violence” (Ten Dam 2023: 27). Indeed, ritual violence in both the public and private spheres appears to be widespread in West Africa, many other parts of the African continent and the wider world (Ibid: 27-29). This first part of the series has presented my “analyses on adopted circumscriptions of ritual violence and its empirical variants vis-à-vis other concepts and theories of violence” (Ibid: 27)—and compared these to my own circumscriptions of ritual violence, other forms of often brutal violence, violence per se and closely related phenomena ranging from rituals and types of magic to tribes, clans and other social (kinship) groups (Ibid: esp. 37-54). In the second part of this series, I have provided an overview of the relative lack of historical research, insights and consequent knowledge on ritual violence in Liberia, West Africa and other parts of the world (Ten Dam 2024).

Here, in the third part of this series, I describe and analyse the most significant manifestations, patterns and types of ritual violence in Liberia during its earlier history—also going back to the known history of the native peoples who lived there in the wider region without fixed borders, so prior to the foundation of Liberia as an independent state with demarcated border in 1847—up to the 1980 coup and the first years leading towards the Civil Wars of 1989-1997 and 1999-2003. The



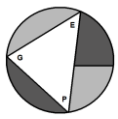
subsequent parts of the series will present my (preliminary) research findings on ritual violence in Liberia's more recent past and the present, with a final concluding part summarising the main findings; these will appear in future bi-annual issues a/o annual volumes of this journal.²

Though this part III of the series makes use of a considerable number of sources, it relies heavily on the analyses and works of West Africa specialists Fred van der Kraaij and Stephen Ellis (Ten Dam 2023: esp. 40).³

As already touched upon in Part 1 of this Ritual Violence in Liberia series, the Americo-Liberian elite dominated Liberia's state and society for well over a century, despite early and recurrent resistance against encroachments on their lands, livelihoods, cultures and 'stateless-society' autonomies from especially the Vai, Gola and Loma tribes in the country's north-west, the Dei, Bassa and Kpelle in its central region, and the Kru and Grebo in its south-east (Ten Dam 2023: 31-35).⁴

The Americo-Liberians remained numerically a minority, constituting just a few percentages of Liberia's population even when counting mixed families and distant descendants of the original settlers. Their attempts to assert administrative control over hardly identifiable native 'tribes' and their secret societies was "like trying to eat soup with a fork" (Ellis 2007: 206); I have tried to offer a clear concept of the 'tribe' to bring more clarity on this phenomenon, by circumscribing it as a "residentially and geographically spread group in a certain region with actual and/or perceived primordial kinship bonds and ancestries" (Ten Dam 2023: 39 (quote)-40).

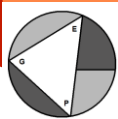
Be that as it may, the Americo-Liberians were able to dominate Liberia as an effective tribe of their own due to their education, technical prowess



and continuing ties with the American ‘homeland’—and their savvy, rather devious divide-and-rule policies toward the often fractious natives, assigning local chiefs from them to establish a form of indirect rule. However, intertribal differences often were so virulent, violent and dangerous to stability, that the Americo-Liberian elite sought to curtail and repress rather than enhance and manipulate these. Crucially and tragically, the hostilities between Liberia’s native tribes would turn out to be even more salient than their common hostility toward the Americo-Liberian tribe, as became evident in the trajectories of the disturbances, civil wars and other forms of violence in Liberia during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—including the trajectories of distinctly ritual violence.

Americo-Liberian dominance and (counter-)violence

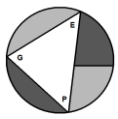
A few dozen rivalling extended-families or sub-clans among the Americo-Liberians alternately led the True Whig Party (TWP, est. 1869) after the demise of the once-dominant Republican Party (est. 1848) and thereby ruled the country through an elected single-party government from 1870 to 1980, with just an interruption of six years in 1871-1877 after the mysterious overthrow and death of TWP’s first president Edward James Roye apparently due to his unpopular British loan policies. The other instruments of Americo-Liberian control were the “Masonic lodges and the secret societies as mechanisms of social exclusion and preservation of the oligarchic power; and the army as a tool for repression” (Renda 1999: 63)—particularly the Masonic Lodge of Liberia founded in 1867. Close historical, political and economic ties with the United States, and those with (foreign investors) from the Netherlands,



Germany and other Western countries, helped to keep Liberia independent and relatively stable, and the TWP in power, almost continuously for well over a century. TWP rule did not heavily repress all indigenous Liberians in equal measure all the time however. They finally gained citizenship and other formal basic rights at the start of twentieth century. Ever since the discovery and foreign exploitation of the country's vast natural resources a few decades later—mainly iron ore, gold, diamonds, rubber, palm oil and timber from its rainforests (still one of the most extensive ones in West Africa), and more recently oil and gas—gave many of them employment (however meagre), education and other opportunities of advancement (esp. Van der Kraaij 2015: xix-xxiv, 19-27, 143-160; Ellis 2007: 43-54).

Particularly the so-called Unification and Open Door policies towards the natives and foreign investors respectively during the 1944-1971 presidency of the Americo-Liberian William V.S. Tubman (1895-1971) and the early years of the 1971-1980 presidency of Americo-Liberian William R. Tolbert Jr. (1913-1980), stimulated education, rural and urban development and economic growth and thereby diminished some absolute and relative deprivations and grievances among many if not all indigenous Liberians (see esp. Kraaij 1983; Kraaij apud Kappel et al 1986).⁵

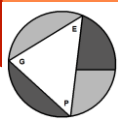
Both Tubman and Tolbert—only the second president since Liberia's second president Stephen Allen Benson (1816-1865; in office 1856-1864) to speak a tribal language, in this case Kpelle—sensed the fundamental “weakness of their apparently monolithic rule” reliant on a dominant yet small minority (Ellis 1995: 175); both sincerely applied these policies to broaden their patronage systems and overall opportunities to those not of Americo-Liberian stock; other politicians followed suit in their



attempts to “extend their personal clientelist networks to the rural areas” (Ellis 2001a: 232). After finally gaining citizenship and some other basic rights since the early twentieth century however, most indigenous Liberians remained marginalised in both absolute and relative terms despite the reforms.

Thus economic wealth remained heavily ill-distributed and fragile, despite the economic boom during the 1950s and 1960s: nearly “90% of national income went to less than 3% [“Americo-Liberian community”] of the population, then consisting of one and half million inhabitants”; moreover, excessive foreign loans by both Tubman and Tolbert to finance their governments and state-owned companies—including pet projects, their own perks and governing positions for their relatives and allies—structurally “exceeded government revenues from concessions to foreign companies” (Kraaij 2015: 25 (incl. quotes); Kraaij apud Kappel et al 1986; Kappel apud Kappel et al 1986a).

More fundamentally the ‘unification’ and ‘open door’ reforms ultimately “failed to elevate significantly the status of African-Liberians, as it was meant to integrate African-Liberians as citizens, but no to increase their access to political power”; moreover, particularly the native “workers, students and soldiers” who benefited most from the limited opportunities offered to them through employment and education, became acutely “aware of the socioeconomic gap between themselves and the Americo-Liberians” (Renda 1999: 63 (quotes)). Only a few of them—and even relatively few Americo-Liberians—benefited immensely by making themselves sycophantically dependent on Tubman’s personalised presidency, being “the ultimate source of

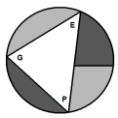


individual livelihood” beyond TWP’s already heavily clientelist single-party rule (Ellis 1995: 175; Sawyer 1992: 285 (quote)).

Even Tolbert’s “strategy of extending his patronage machine to the ‘country’ people” by especially opening the ranks of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL; est. 1962) to the “urban unemployed”—as well as to the rural poor beyond those recruited to the rank and file in preceding decades among the Gola, Mende, Loma, Kpelle and other “supposedly warlike ‘tribes’ of Lofa County” and the north-west more generally—ultimately proved to be insufficient: not just historic grievances due to the anti-native repressions and brutalities perpetrated by AFL’s predecessor the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF; est. 1908) hampered integration, but also the limited career opportunities offered to the natives; “soldiers of ‘country’ origin still found their advancement blocked by an American-Liberian officer corps” with just a few of them becoming junior, non-commissioned officers (Ellis 1995: 175-176 (quotes); see esp. Akpan apud Kappel et al 1986).

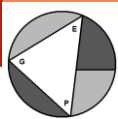
Thus most or nearly all of the highly educated and well-employed natives became aggrieved and frustrated due to *relative deprivations* i.e. heightened-yet-disappointed-expectations when comparing their own modestly improved positions vis-à-vis the far better ones occupied by the privileged few i.e. Americo-Liberians (see Ten Dam 2023: 65-74; esp. 68-69).

The economic decline during the late 1970s (mainly due to the international recession, which hit Liberia’s export of its natural resources hard), worsened the socio-economic positions of most native Liberians, just adding to their grievances. Ironically and tragically, president Tolbert—who has long since ceased to be reformer due to resistance from



conservative Americo-Liberian families to his policies and his consequent nepotist reliance on his own family members in government—was unable or unwilling to respond constructively to increasing native protests against poverty, discrimination and corruption. Instead his army, security and police forces put down both peaceful and violent protests with brute force—and increasingly clamped down on independent journalists, civil society workers, students, dissidents and others including progressive Americo-Liberians who supported the native demands for equality and redistribution of wealth, through political opposition groups like the radical-intellectual pan-Africanist Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA; est. 1973) and the militant-Marxist pan-Africanist Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL; est. 1975), later transformed into the Progressive People's Party (PPP; est. 1980), and civil society groups like the Citizens of Liberia in Defense of Albert Porte (COLIDAP; prob. est. 1974) at home and the US-based Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA; est. 1974) abroad. These groups became increasingly emboldened, being able to “tap a rich vein of grievances” while every time Tolbert gave in to their demands and continued his “efforts at reform” these “produced only more strident demands for equality” (Ellis 2007: 50)—a typical heightened-expectations-and-demands cycle according to relative deprivation theorists (Ten Dam 2023: 65-74; esp. 68-69).

At the same time the occasionally harsh government response (especially if Tolbert felt compelled to do so by the conservative wing of the TWP) to demands to remedy old grievances like perceived (and factual) inequalities led to beatings, killings and other sufferings among opposition leaders and their supporters—which in turn constituted new grievances. The rising anger about both ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ deprivations among the marginalised and their supporters from



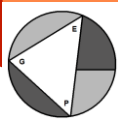
religious, social, and political movements plausibly made any coup, civil war or other form of massive violence in Liberia between and among the marginalised and the privileged highly likely by the end of the 1970s (Korte apud Kappel et al 1986; Sawyer 2005: 28-29; Ellis 2007: 50-52; Kraaij 2015: 25-36, 41-42).

One could, both at the time and in hindsight, regard the riots and looting (started) on 14 April 1979 in especially the country's capital Monrovia against the announced price hike of rice—resulting in around 400 fatalities and 1,000 injuries (according to reliable estimates), mainly due to police bullets but also violent looting and, sadly, attacks on Americo-Liberians—as the harbinger of even worse violence to come. Indeed, during Liberia's 1979 Rice Riots “protesters would stop passers-by in the street and ask them to speak a tribal language. This had never happened before and it was clearly an attempt to identify Americo-Liberians, who hardly ever spoke a tribal language” (Kraaij 2015: 33).

But before we come to the often worse violence in Liberia after 1979, we must ask the obvious, given the overall theme of the Ritual Violence in Liberia series: did any or even most of the Rice Riots include *ritual* violence? And was there any such violence in Liberia in a significant degree even during times of relative peace and prosperity before the downturn in the 1970s?

Ritual violence in Liberia before the 1980 coup

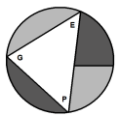
Rituals in both their peaceful and violent forms have been prevalent for centuries if not longer in the areas and among the peoples of what is



now known as Liberia, just as in other parts of Africa and the world. Van der Kraaij, who takes a blunt normative view on the “revolting practices” of “ritual killings and cannibalism for ritual purposes” across Africa and other continents, contends that Liberia is one of the few countries in which such practices are not considered a “taboo subject”.⁶ By implication this makes researching this phenomenon in Liberia a bit easier, as ‘local secretiveness’ on this topic does not appear to be as pervasive as elsewhere in Africa and beyond (Ten Dam 2024: 46-53).

However, Stephen Ellis suggests that the term ‘cannibalism’ typically contains a biased negative meaning or connotation reflecting Western (violence-)values. Thus the “consumption of human flesh by [native] priests or [so-called] human leopards was dubbed ‘cannibalism’ ” from that vantagepoint (Ellis 2001a: 228). Even so, one could consider the application of this term valid, if one defines cannibalism as the act of consuming human flesh for any conceivable purpose—not just for the purpose of ‘food’ sustenance mainly or only—while reserving judgment on the morality of such an act and practice of it.

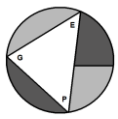
Be that as it may, the apparent openness among the natives about their own violent practices in the Grain, Pepper or Malagueta Coast eventually known as Liberia, made it possible for European explorers and travellers from the seventeenth to the (early) twentieth centuries to observe, study, interpret and often condemn these in their accounts (e.g. Dapper 1676 (1668); Bosman 1709 (1703); Des Marchais 1731 / Labat 1731; see Johnston 1906; Strong 1930; Junge 1950, 1952; Van den Heuvel 1983; Kraaij 2015; esp. 33, note 8). Most of these explorers and travellers were Christian missionaries and missionary or secular doctors, particularly during Liberia’s ‘Closed Door’ economic policies from the late



nineteenth till early twentieth centuries, which “prevented the presence of foreign traders and investors” until the 1930s.⁷

Even so, the relative openness of Liberian society had and has its clear limits. Thus even the most voluble Liberians often clam up if the topic concerns the customs and practices of their own or other secret societies, fearful that any revelations like the initiation rituals on their part would ‘oblige’ these societies to punish such transgressions with lethal (magic-)ritual violence. Also in neighbouring countries such “violations of the pledge of secrecy are punishable by death. All initiates, as well as non-initiates, in these countries know that” (Kraaij 2015: 33-34).

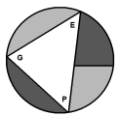
At most, Liberians and other Africans gossip about these societies in oral *radio-trottoir* settings amongst themselves, without divulging too much the precise provenance of the rumours even amongst themselves, let alone their own involvement in them (see also Ten Dam 2024: 46-53). Moreover, the mentioned and other written and audiovisual accounts by mainly foreigners about ritual customs and practices in Liberia and elsewhere have been few and far in between and often prejudicial from Christian and other Western perspectives to boot (Ibid: 39-53). On top of this, the less informed or uninformed “views of the many missionaries or American-Liberian army officers and administrators who tended to regard all indigenous Liberian beliefs as diabolic” (Ellis 2001a: 228) without any nuances, have tended to dominate Liberia’s public discourse until fairly recently. To reiterate, these accounts and those by contemporary researchers are essentially anecdotal even if unbiased, just offering glimpses of ritual violence in the distant and recent past and present in Liberia (as elsewhere).



Secret societies and ritual brutalities of old

Secret societies like the male-only *Poro* and female-only *Sande* societies already existed among the tribes in the coastal areas and hinterlands of the Grain Coast—and across the forest regions of West Africa—well before the arrival of the first Americo-Liberians in the early nineteenth century. The Americo-Liberian governments in Monrovia, intent on securing their monopolies of violence and (Christian) faith by military, educational, legal or any other means, were somewhat successful in suppressing ‘barbaric’ practices like seasonal raiding and vendettas between kinship and other communal groups. Yet they were remarkably *unsuccessful* in eradicating, ‘civilising’, or outlawing from 1912 onwards the Leopard, Snake, Crocodile, Alligator, Devil and other native societies in Liberia—which, just like secret societies and elder councils among the Chechens and Albanians until at least the early twentieth century, helped to curtail excessive intercommunal raiding and vendettas to begin with.

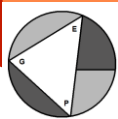
Liberia’s “more secretive (and deadly)” societies—whose very *raison d’être* were to prevent, curtail and regulate intra- and intercommunal strife and establish post-communal identities and perspectives—persevered in their (quasi-)traditional forms well into the mid-twentieth century if not longer, given their decentralised, flexible and thereby resilient self-ruling capabilities: these are “quite well described” as *stateless societies* in anthropology, whereby even secretive religious societies could become part of temporary pan-lineage and pan-ethnic confederations or even institutions for “common offence or defence” (Ellis 2001a: 229 (2nd quote), 231 (1st quote); Ellis 2007: 199 (3rd quote); esp. Horton, apud Ajayi & Crowder 1971, 1985). At any rate, these societies manifested—occasionally observed by outsiders (e.g. Mills



1926: esp. 118-121)—an ‘amazingly strong’, ‘wilful’ and widespread belief that people could, by spirit-possession or other magical means, “transform themselves into animals, or conversely that the essence of some animals could enter into people, producing human leopards, human crocodiles and so on” (Ellis 2001a: 226) thereby utilising a/o becoming these powerful spirits.

Perhaps most notorious was the Leopard Society, which the international scientific Harvard African Expedition during the late 1920s noted to be particularly active among the Gio, Mano and Kru tribes, but was actually present and quite prevalent across Liberia—and parts of Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and elsewhere in West and even central Africa. This expedition, led by Dr. Richard P. Strong, gave an “interesting account of the “leopardmen,” who kill and eat their victims after ambushing them in the guise of a leopard” (M. 1932: 336) in the belief that such consumption of the heart or any other organ gives them special spiritual powers to strengthen themselves and/or their tribal communities. American missionary doctor and ethnographer George Way Harley found a kindred belief among the people of Ganta in northern Liberia nowadays regarded as part of the Mano tribe during his stay there between 1926 and 1960: “the use of nye to produce evil effects” (Harley 1970 (1941b): 21) i.e. acquirement of spiritual powers through (the consumption of) human body parts or spilling of human blood or fat of either adult or infant victims on animated ‘witch’ objects so as to “maintain their strength, exactly like any living organism” receiving nutrition (Ellis 2001a: 227 (quote)-228; Ellis 2007: 78, 234-235).

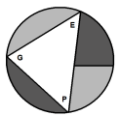
During the (mid-)1930s German missionary doctor Dr. Werner Junge came across the same kind of attempted and actual ritual killings by



'Leopards' and 'Crocodiles' particularly among the Vai and Bassa tribes in western and central Liberia (Strong 1930: esp.100-102; Junge 1952 esp. 176-187; Kraaij 2005).⁸ After much popular pressure the local authorities arrested the perpetrators of these brutalities in particularly Bassaland and Cape Mount i.e. present-day Grand Cape Mount and Grand Bassa counties; yet one of the leading perpetrators, a (former) head of a missionary school, was tried yet eventually released without being sentenced—a worrying sign of the lacklustre attitude and consequent lack of success by the Liberian government, the Church and even tribal chiefs in stamping out or fundamentally reforming the Leopard and other secret societies and/or their ritual violence *to this day*.

Junge scathingly remarked that it was this missionary priest “who had brought this ancient and blood-thirsty religious order of the leopards from his native Bassaland, south of Monrovia, and revived it in Cape Mount, where this kind of human sacrifice had for long been extinct” (Junge 1952: 185). One must keep in mind that Junge clearly distinguished the excesses by particularly the secret societies from the beneficial, typically heterodox animist beliefs and practices among the natives generally (often including Christian or Muslim family members): contrary to the religious differences and wars between and among Christians and Muslims in the West and Middle East, Liberians and Africans generally “would consider it foolish to persecute, mock or curse someone for his beliefs, ideas or his magic” (Junge 1950: 19 (own transl. from Dutch)).

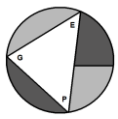
Yet another missionary, Abe Guenter from the First Baptist Church—who witnessed kindred ritual violence by Crocodile, Alligator, Devil and other secret societies since the mid-1940s among particularly the Bassa, Kru and Krahn in the hinterlands and coastal areas of present-day Grand Bassa,



River Cess, Sinoe and Grand Gedeh counties (Guenter 1992: esp. 55-59)—never lost his “zeal to christianize ‘the heathens’ ” during his 35-year-stay until 1980.⁹ Significantly, Guenter himself witnessed attempts by some tribal chiefs to counter and punish ‘black-magical’ societies by employing ‘white-magical’ witch doctors against them. Thus in the mid-1940s Chief Dabapa sought to stamp out disappearances and ritual killings by the ‘leopard people’ around the village of Suakoko, who left a trail of mutilated bodies after killing their victims by stabbing them and cutting their hearts out by steel claws to gain spiritual power:

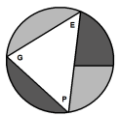
Finally the chief called the big witch doctor to find out which men in his village were the leopard people. The big man came, mixed up some brew and made the suspected people drink his concoction. Then they had to stand in a long line in the hot sun. After about ten minutes, two of the men began to weave around and then fell straight down on their faces. The witch doctor said, “There you have your men” ” (Guenter 1992: 55-56).¹⁰

However, Guenter—and other observers—witnessed or heard as many stories about tribal chiefs using black magic through human sacrifice and other means to counter harmful “spirits, sicknesses, war and other people’s witchcraft” to the point of sacrificing children and spilling their blood on bulbous brass-rings known as *dwin*, *tien* or *nitien* (‘water spirits’, ‘Gods of water’)—ironically meant to be magically healing, benefiting and empowering the perpetrators and other recipients, by turning ‘black’ magic on the (murdered) victims into ‘white’ magic for themselves. These currently ill-known and rare brass-rings were also known as ‘Kru money’ according to those who believed these objects were also or instead used as traditional ‘coins’.¹¹



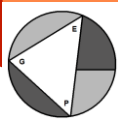
Even the much larger and ancient male-only *Poros* and female-only *Sande* societies—formed well before the seventeenth century, having spread across especially northern and western Mande-speaking Liberia¹², Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast and other parts of West Africa during subsequent centuries—practiced violent, harmful magic alongside their peaceful rituals well into the mid-twentieth century and arguably well beyond, believing that all these magic rituals would appease, curb or even channel and acquire the pervasive powers of the spirit world. Given their ubiquity, scholars have been able to “study them in some detail” (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 78)—like G. W. Harley, who lived for around thirty-four years in Nimba County (Ellis 2007: 202-203; Harley 1941a,b,c; Harley apud Little 1965: 355; Harley 1970 (1941b,c)).

Incidentally, Stephen Ellis suggests that primarily or even exclusively Mande-speaking tribes and peoples in Liberia are members or followers of *Poros* and *Sande* societies (Ellis 1995: esp. 188-189)—even though he claims elsewhere that the Mande-speaking Gio had a “rich masking tradition but without the *Poros*” (Ellis 2007: 202) and both “Mande- and Mel-speakers are characterised by hierarchical chiefdoms and .. universal initiation societies, *Poros* for men and *Sande* for women” (Ibid: 203). Yet J. Gus Liebenow claims that the *Poros* is “most highly developed among” the Mel-speaking Gola, holds (Gola-led) authority among the Mande-speaking Vai and Kru-speaking Dei and has spread to other parts and ethnicities of Liberia: “in the past the only indigenous Liberian people without the *Poros* in any form were the Bassa, Kru and Mandingo”—suggesting that the *Poros* is nowadays present among these ethnic groups as well (Liebenow 1987: 43 (incl. quotes); here Liebenow does not specify the languages spoken by these tribes).



Central to especially the Poro—according to most scholars—was the initiation death-ritual for youngsters reaching puberty to attain true manhood, being ‘eaten’ by and ‘reborn’ through one or more wild bush-spirits into adults with ‘post-lineage’ identities and loyalties—under the supervision of Poro elders wearing masks representing, containing and taming the ‘invisible’ power(s)¹³ of these or kindred spirits—misleadingly called the ‘Bush Devil’ by Christian missionaries, a term which eventually stuck (Ellis 1995: 187-189, 2001a: 226-230, 2007: 198-206; Kraaij 2015: 33-34; see Little 1965, 1966; Bellman 1975, 1984; Horton, apud Ajayi & Crowder 1971, 1985; Siegmann 1980; Bledsoe 1980, 1984 (on Sande); Holsoe 1980 (ibid); Schröder 1988).

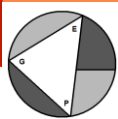
Sadly and reprehensibly—at least to those holding violence-values that involve no innocent victims—one could ‘only’ achieve this spirit-possession and concurrent rebirth by “sacrifice and the eating of human flesh and blood, represented symbolically by animal sacrifice and often by the ritual scarifying of an initiate, symbolizing his spiritual death and resurrection” (Ellis 1995: 188). Crucially, wearing a spirit-mask absconded any elder, priest or (other) executioner from moral responsibility of the ritual killing, as the spirit inhabiting the mask bore responsibility for the act. Consequently, there could be “no claims for compensation filed by the kinsmen of the victim; the mask, or the spirits presumed to reside in the mask, belonged to no kinship group, and its actions thus were ritually sanctioned” (Liebenow 1987: 44). Thus a “priest of the Poro may next day reappear in his ‘normal’ human form as a local blacksmith or farmer, but his ordinary personality is considered unconnected with the events of the previous night” (Ellis 2007: 204)—and thus dissolved from any responsibility for the perhaps lethal rituals that took place typically in nighttime.



Some scholars, like William C. Siegmann, argue that the “distribution of the Poro is more limited” across Liberia and beyond than supposed: especially in south-eastern Liberia mostly non-Poro societies masks are worn in warrior age-grading ceremonies among the coastal Kru and Grebo tribes in particular (atop the head rather in front of the face), and in public spectacles elsewhere by Poro priests to dramatise their power—while masks manifest “social control by spirit forces” mainly in northern Liberia only; oddly, Siegmann does not appear to consider the Poro adulthood initiation rituals of youngsters as a secretive variant of warriorhood age-grading or age-setting ceremonies (Siegmann 1980: 89(quote)-90, 94 (initiation rituals)).¹⁴ For now, I join the majority view that the Poro and their use of masks are widespread—also in their social control functions, including secret rituals of human sacrifice.

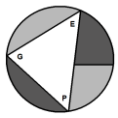
Be that as it may, the spirit-mask, like the oracle and the medium him- or herself as means of spirit communication and possession, was and is central to many other secret societies as well, in especially north and west Liberia—like among the Gio (Dan) in present-day Nimba county (Fischer 1980: 82).¹⁵ More generally “spirits were believed to become visible .. through the use of masks” (Ellis 2007: 199)—which one could use for non-violent, benevolent purposes if one were so inclined, like just being a symbol of authority or a sign of reverence to one’s ancestors; though quite often one wears masks to terrify and punish ‘illegitimate’ witches and other ‘evildoers’, and perhaps kill them just as brutally as innocent victims, whereby the masks were “rouged with the blood of human sacrifice” (Harley apud Welch 1990: 170-171).

William C. Siegmann is one of the few scholars to argue convincingly that mask forms (wooden, woven etc.) and uses are quite diverse among both



Poro and non-Poro societies, and are hardly seen in public as graver dispute resolutions and punishments of “violations of sacred law and public morals” require “involvement of spirits” in masks and in secret (Siegmann 1980: 93). Yet he argues unconvincingly that masks are “not central to the functioning of the Poro” (Ibid: 94) simply because not all Poro use these or use these uniformly; more importantly, he hardly mentions if at all the (secret) use of masks among both Poro and non-Poro societies in lethal rituals—at best his expression ‘social control by spirit forces’ euphemistically refers to such rituals as well. True, ritual killings are not necessarily part and parcel of punitive judgments by (masked) priests—unless the sacrificed victims are deliberately targeted for their supposed transgressions, or unless such victims are randomly selected to act as magical spells and thus punishments against enemies and (other) transgressors in the eyes of the priests and their flock.

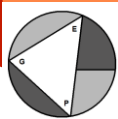
One could argue that the Poro (and Sande) societies and their adulthood initiation and other rituals were less brutal than the Leopard, Crocodile, Alligator, Devil and other ‘animal-spirit’ societies in the sense that the former only occasionally murdered a few initiates among them while the latter habitually murdered especially randomly selected victims from both their own communities and those of their enemies. The Poro and Sande elders were (seen as) responsible for taming the ‘wild’ spirit world through communication, mediumship and especially possession so as to further social control, safety and prosperity of their communities. They traditionally curtailed and sanctioned “such anti-social behavior as incest, murder, arson, and looting” (Liebenow 1987: 44) among their members and within their communities beyond the confines of ritual initiations and sacrifices approved by Poro and Sande (chief-)priests themselves. Such ritual violence unsanctioned and



unregulated by the latter was considered “wrong and improper” as well (Ellis 2001a: 227), which made these priests both “healers and potential killers” (Ibid: 228; see Bellman 1975). The latter also regulated and curtailed—yet were unable or unwilling to eradicate—“incessant small-scale feuds and raiding” (Ibid: 230), irrespective of whether these involved unsanctioned (magical) rituals. Still, even the Leopard and other animal-spirit societies at times ritually killed people for their alleged transgressions, like escalating intercommunal “petty wars and raids” toward spiralling, uncontrollable feuds (Ellis 2007: 204 (incl. quote); Junge 1952: 176-187).

More to the point, one could question whether Poro elders exclusively ‘abducted’ future *voluntary* initiates “from their house at the beginning of the period of ritual confinement” (Ellis 1995: 188) or whether they occasionally or even frequently abducted involuntary ‘initiates’ as well—particularly those earmarked for sacrificial killing to the benefit of other initiates (and themselves) whereby the criteria of selection remain murky or even incomprehensible to outsiders. Moreover, any “cults of ritual murder” (Ibid: 189) ¹⁶ reportedly operating more exclusively within the Poro societies, or directly Poro priests, elders and junior members themselves, may certainly have targeted ‘random’ victims rather than selected initiates much like the animal-spirit and demon-spirit societies mentioned earlier—either from the very beginning in their misty past, or more recently during and because of the brutalisations of (civil) wars in Liberia and elsewhere in West Africa.

Ellis himself acknowledges that throughout their known history the “most powerful [Poro] priests are reported to have been required, upon initiation, to offer the life of a close relative, even one of their own

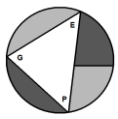


children” (Ellis 2001a: 228 (quote); 2007: 231-232). He effectively affirms Harley’s more general findings that “very senior priests” of many secret societies performed “ritual killing of human beings in pre-republican times” on a regular basis (Ibid: 232)—and that well into the mid-twentieth century “witchcraft cults” (apparently meaning Leopard societies in particular) still “required the sacrifice of a child as initiation fee” (Harley 1970/1941b: 23).

However, Ellis insists that overall, given the restrictions they imposed on ritual violence, the Poro and even Leopard societies were “redoubtable rather than wicked” (even) before the “republican government and Christian education” introduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Ellis 2001:228).¹⁷ Yet even regulated human sacrifice is wicked if one regards—from a truly universalist rather than biased Western standpoint (though the two tend to be mistakenly regarded as identical)—human sacrifice per se as wicked, whomever sanctions and practices it.

Secret societies and ritual brutalities of new

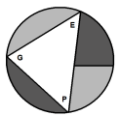
Many secret societies expounding animist-spiritual beliefs exist to this day and often continue human-sacrificial, cannibalistic and other (magic-)ritual violent practices, even if most of Liberia’s elite society ranging from government officials to tribal chiefs continue to proscribe, censure and shun these (see upcoming part IV and subsequent parts of this series). Their lack of success in ending or at least constraining these societies and their ritual violence from the start was not just due to practical constraints like the long and arduous process of gaining control over the hinterlands of present-day Liberia. It was also due to the fact that many Americo-Liberians themselves gave a ‘bad example’



by nurturing traditional or self-established secret societies—and freelance footsoldiers called ‘leopardmen’, ‘heartmen’ etc. to carry out ritual killings or at least trade in body parts of victims killed by others¹⁸—to maintain power, privilege and status. They not just brought their own masonic lodges, Rosicrucian chapters and other secretive Christian organisations with them from America, but also created their own ‘traditional’ secret societies like the United Brothers of Friendship, thereby adopting many native customs and practices by either acculturation or design—a typical sign of cultural amalgamation or *assimilation réciproque* (Bayart 1989: esp. 193-226).

During Tubman’s presidency there were “increasing [investigative] reports or [radio-trottoir] rumours that national politicians were joining quasi-traditional secret societies” (Ellis 2001a: 232)—and performed or ordered ritual killings through these societies or even the once staunchly masonic lodges (Kraaij 2015: 34). Many Americo-Liberians particularly joined the preexisting male-only Poro and female-only Sande societies spread across (especially northern and western) Liberia and West Africa. The True Whig Party regime based in Monrovia effectively encouraged if not formally approved them joining the Poro and Sande, as early on it came to see these societies as “valuable cultural institutions ... which could buttress the power of chiefs” (Ellis 2001a: 231) in the hinterlands who already had joined or collaborated with the regime. Moreover, Americo-Liberian directives and memberships helped to ‘moderate’ these powerful societies into *ostensibly* non-violent and non-criminal associations “stripped of the power to take human life” (Ibid).¹⁹

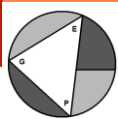
For these reasons Pora and Sande were tolerated and exempted from the 1912 secret-societies ban, became fully legal in Liberia soon after and



came to enjoy a status comparable to the local masonic lodges and powerful Masonic Lodge of Liberia (Kraaij 2015: 27, 33-34; Liebenow 1987: 43-45; Ellis 1995: 187-189; Ellis 2001a: 230-231).²⁰ This shift in policy reflected a wider trend among African states under colonial rule to either vacillate between outlawing secret societies or ‘domesticating’ these as depoliticised, “harmless folklore associations”, or definitely shift toward the latter approach (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 79).

At any rate, in Liberia presidents William Tubman and William Tolbert even proclaimed themselves supreme Poro elders during their presidencies, hardly an unique thing to do in Africa: it is “remarkable how many African heads of state are members of closed or even secret organisations with a spiritual flavour” (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 75)—though they rarely declare these to the outside world. After all, such admissions would easily lead to negative judgements and consequent sanctions by outsiders, in other words lead to “incomprehension, controversy, disgust and even hostility by the latter” (Ten Dam 2024: 51).²¹

One must keep in mind however that during the Tubman (1944-1971) and Tolbert (1971-1980) presidencies, little if any systematic research was done on lethal and non-lethal (magic-)ritual violence by secret societies and other actors—even though the “many individual references to the occurrence of these practices” in oral *radio-trottoir* ‘gossip’ and written and audiovisual media could have made such research possible given advances in access, technology and facilities since the 1940s.²² Fear among potential investigators of becoming the target of retributory ritual violence themselves may have played a role in this dearth of research, as well as the omerta(like) obligation by

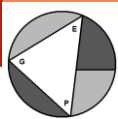


members of secret societies and (other) practitioners of magic to keep *stumm* about their activities and knowledge.

Be that as it may, the few present-day investigators like Van der Kraaij (see Ten Dam 2024: 39-45) stress repeatedly that it will “never be known” exactly, fully or even approximately which and how many people fell victim to ritual violence in Liberia—killed, maimed or at least assaulted and intimidated—and which and how many people perpetrated this violence and got away with it (Ibid: 53-55).²³ Apart from secrecy, difficulty to prove that killed or wounded people are victims of ritual violence, makes it practically impossible to gather precise figures of such violence. Thus human leopards wield multi-bladed knives shaped like leopard’s claws in ritual murders, “making it very difficult to know whether a death was the result of an attack by a real leopard or by a person dressed as an animal” (Elsie 2007: 204 (quote); Junge 1952: 176-187).

Still, investigators have done their best to detect trends and deduce traits of violent ritualism from specific cases. Van der Kraaij himself has analysed an impressive amount of anecdotal evidence on ritual killings in Liberia, mainly from dozens if not hundreds of local media reports from especially the 1970s onwards.²⁴

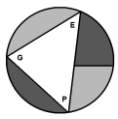
Thus soon after Van der Kraaij started his economics lectureship at the University of Liberia in the mid-1970s, he started observing and probing Liberian society in all its facets, not just economic ones—including its ritual beliefs, customs and practices. Thus in 1976 he interviewed a Dutch doctor in Robertsport, regional capital of Grand Cape Mount County—at the same hospital where Dr. Werner Junge had worked forty years earlier—about his autopsy on a murdered young girl with several



organs missing, an obvious case of ritual killing. In a disheartening *déjà vu* of the ‘missionary killer’ case that Junge witnessed in the (mid-)1930s, a man and a woman had been arrested who “confessed having committed the ritual killing at the request of a member of parliament representing Cape Mount County” in Monrovia (!)—yet both effectively disappeared after being transferred to Monrovia (released, murdered?) in an apparent coverup (Kraaij 2015: 34-35 (incl. quote)).²⁵ This case was far from unique: national newspapers and other ‘relatively free’ media ²⁶ reported numerous apparent, obvious and fully corroborated ritual killings at the time which “occurred all over the country”, though Maryland County “seemed to be worst affected”—yet all these reports constituted “probably only the tip of the iceberg” of hundreds, perhaps thousands, such killings each year (Ibid: 36).

Perhaps the local media responded to an upsurge or wave of ritual killings as well—though further quantitative analysis of any reliable data (if doable) is required to verify such a trend in the late 1970s. If true, such a trend may reflect a brutalisation in Liberian society among both the elite and the general population due to growing grievances and self-interested drives to advance one’s position through dark i.e. harmful magic at the expense of the lives and even souls of others—as the increasing autocracy and decreasing reforms offered by Tolbert’s regime appeared to offer ever fewer avenues to satisfy one’s securities, needs and ambitions otherwise.

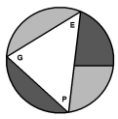
Be that as it may, one of the commonalities of these reported cases of ritual violence was the saddening fact that “alleged perpetrators were hardly ever arrested, and trials were even rarer” (Kraaij 2015: 36). Yet in at least one “selection of newspaper reports” from the late 1970s, Van der



Kraaij notes quite a number of generally inconsequential suspensions, firings and arrests and a few trials of suspected perpetrators—including some teachers, judges, attorneys, chiefs and mayors. These perpetrators sometimes dressed as ‘leopards’, other animals or entities of known secret societies—and were accused of either ordering or committing proven ritual killings with mutilated bodies of adult and even infant victims found, or were suspected of probable ritual killings of victims who disappeared after (sometimes proven) kidnappings yet whose bodies were never found.²⁷

At any rate, arrests and trials were relatively rare probably because, as some media and *radio-trottoir* talks rumoured with some credence, politicians and other leading figures ordered these killings for selfish, communal or *juju* i.e. magical-power purposes (see Ten Dam 2023: 79, note 16). Often, the latter (also) sought to protect the direct perpetrators, as the latter belonged to their support bases, secret societies or wider (tribal) communities—irrespective of whether they initiated these killings on their own accord or did this on orders of other people than those who decided to shield them from justice. However sometimes such leading figures ritually murdered people themselves, without bothering to order underlings to do this because they liked to do it themselves for pathological (e.g. thrill-seeking, sadist), magical and/or political reasons—like directly gaining *juju* by cutting and eating body parts oneself, and/or instilling fear, awe and submission among one’s followers, community members and enemies alike.

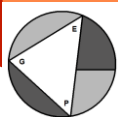
Two notorious cases in the late 1970s were exceptional, however: the so-called Maryland Murders of fourteen people in Maryland County including fisherman Moses Tweh found dead and mutilated on the



beach of the county's capital Harper, and the so-called Sinoe Murder of Princelett (Princelet) Hilton Teah (Tiah)²⁸ in Sinoe County found dead and mutilated on the beach of the county's capital Greenville.

These cases were exceptional for a) the high number of victims with body parts missing within short periods of time since late 1976; b) the consequent, actual arrest of the suspected perpetrators for some of these acts apparently done for political purposes (gaining spiritual power at the expense of enemies and a fearful reputation among supporters and wider communities, etc.)—including high True Whig Party (TWP) politicians who either allegedly ordered or participated in these killings; and c) the eventual execution of half a dozen i.e. most suspects of the Maryland Murders after trial—including Allen Yancy and James Anderson (Maryland's former Superintendent, fired for his failure to report and prosecute these very killings), and sons of leading TWP officials whose families in Maryland were opposed to Tolbert's reforms. Never before “in the country's history had such big shots been accused of ritual killings, arrested and tried” (Kraaij 2015: 38 (quote); see Ellis 2007: 254-255).²⁹ Van der Kraaij himself witnessed the execution of the so-called Harper Seven in the early morning of 16 February 1979:

At 5 o'clock that morning, together with more than 15,000 people from Harper and the surrounding area, I stood in front of the gallows which had been erected a few days earlier. The crowd was excited and was making a lot of noise, despite the early hour. Next to me stood an Irish priest who commented without prompting on what was about to happen. 'They deserved it,' he said, with a fixed expression. ... When the bus with the prisoners arrived, the chattering crowd fell silent, as if by magic. Shivers ran down my spine and I had goose pimples.



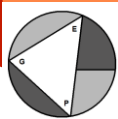
Exactly on the stroke of six, the hang man performed his duty and the seven bodies dropped down with a jolt as the hatch under their feet was pulled away. The crowd remained dead silent for at least another ten minutes, then people started talking again They walked over to the gallows where the seven lifeless bodies hung. The hoods that had covered their heads had been removed so that everyone could see who they were. People started dancing in the streets and shouting slogans. 'When you kill, the law will kill you,' my neighbour said, and he walked away (Kraaij 2015: 38, 40).

The "unreal and absolute" silence of the crowd and the subsequent executions were some the most unforgettable experiences Van der Kraaij had during "all my years in Africa" (Kraaij 2015: 38).

Illustration 1 Execution of the 'Harper Seven', February 1979



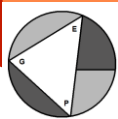
Van der Kraaij, *From the Love of Liberty to Paradise Lost* (2015), p.40.



Arguably, the executions and the preceding exceptional steps occurred because President Tolbert had had enough: he sought to curb the ‘epidemy’ of ritual violence in Maryland County (his old fief) and elsewhere, and punish those responsible by deterrence—first by firing officials who failed to timely report or counter these killings and pursue the perpetrators, and second by installing or ‘encouraging’ officials to find, arrest, try and punish the latter for their crimes, including handing out death sentences (Kraaij 2015: esp. 36-40). Tolbert’s response actually resembled his recurrent signing of death warrants since the early 1970s for convicted perpetrators of ‘common’ murders and other grave crimes.³⁰

Yet it soon became apparent that Tolbert’s harsh and drastic measures against ritual murders this time—perhaps because these were exceptional ones that he and his successors failed to follow through and follow up in later years—did little to counter the apparent brutalising trends of both authorised and self-styled sorcery and lethal ritual violence. Such violence often, and increasingly, involved not ‘just’ removing hearts, but also cutting off (parts of or skins around) eyes, ears, tongues, genitals or other organs and body parts—or draining blood from entire bodies.³¹

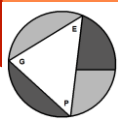
These ritual brutalities within both the public and private spheres in Liberia had been going on for decades on a regular yearly basis. These occurred within Liberia’s society at large among “both tribal and non-tribal Liberians” with victims ranging from rubber plantation workers to urban labourers.³² Yet above all these brutalities emanated from Liberia’s ruling circles i.e. especially the few dozen mainly Americo-Liberian families still making up and rivalling within the True Whig Party. Indeed “politicians from Monrovia impatient for high status in the Poro, and



unwilling to rise up through the hierarchy over years, came to see blood sacrifice as a means of generating instant access, giving them instant power” (Ellis 2001a: 233)—and to sustain this power during election campaigns through ritually killing perceived opponents, internal rivals and wayward supporters. Sometimes local media boldly accused the powerful of such practices; thus the newspaper *The Sunday People* bluntly suggested on 30 March 1980 that “those behind these crimes want to gain political power and are preparing for the elections in 1983”—and that those “rich and influential” already “consider themselves untouchable”.³³ Yet all such protestations appeared to be in vain.

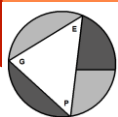
Even Van der Kraaij, so impressed and shocked by the executions and other harsh sentences meted out against the convicted perpetrators of the Maryland and Sinoe Murders, has had to admit that these remained exceptional without equivalent follow-ups—apart from occasional arrests with few convictions and no death sentences—by Tolbert or any of his internationally recognised or self-styled successors and did “far from” stop ritual killings from then on to the present day (Kraaij 2015: 40).

For one thing, the execution of the Harper Seven for the Maryland Murders did not refrain some people from ritually hypnotising, murdering and heavily mutilating 29-year-old high school student Princelet (Princelett) Hilton Teah (Tiah) in July 1979; his “relatives only identified the deceased by his shoes and socks” as many body parts were missing.³⁴ Half a dozen suspected perpetrators of the Sinoe Murder were caught, including self-styled prophet and chief *boyò* (ritual killer) Joseph Frazier; he and some other suspects confessed and named a dozen other culprits who were subsequently arrested—including “high-ranking public officials” and even the victim’s uncle James Teah (Tiah)



who allegedly ordered and/or facilitated the killing.³⁵ In early October 1979 even some of these “high-ups or ‘big shots’, as they are commonly called in Liberia” were arrested, namely counties-inspector Lloyd Grigsby (brother of Senator Harrison Grigsby), high-school principal Moses Pajibo, Napoleon Brown and Madam Mary Powo—bringing up the number of detained suspects to twenty-nine (!).³⁶ Clearly it took a lot of people to organise, carry out, cover up and get ‘spiritual’ and political benefits from a ritual murder like this. Thus according to Joseph Frazier, James Teah “had asked him to kill his nephew so that he—Tiah—could become Superintendent of Sinoe County after his boss would have been appointed Minister of Defense or elected Senator”.³⁷ This uncle—as so many other perpetrators—clearly believed that by a magical spell, spiritual possession or other supernatural strength gained from a ritual murder, one could irrevocably advance one’s power, career or other yearned objective that one supposedly could not achieve quickly, likely or at all in the natural world.

So for many decades some or many politicians and other leaders in Liberia, even or those of Americo-Liberian descent, reportedly used (their leading roles in) the ‘ritual-murder’ cults within broader secret societies like the Poro to ritually kill and even cannibalise the hearts and other human body parts of both innocent victims and perceived enemies to enhance their spiritual power in their own eyes and/or those of their supporters—and intimidate potential rivals and the wider populace at the same time. This apparent trend shows how ingrained ritual violence has become and remained to be so across all layers in Liberian society. One must keep in mind however that this trend is part, or a revitalisation, of a much older and wider trend by young warriors and other entrepreneurs in pre-republican and early republican times

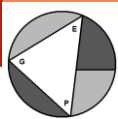


to assume and consolidate power by assuming a leading position in a native secret society or a Christian, Islamic or other foreign lodge, which could supersede, overrule and even punish chiefs, warriors and civic leaders who lacked such religious functions for their supposed transgressions and abuses of power (see Ellis 2007: 204-206).

Therefore many Americo-Liberians, including those in leading positions within and outside government, undermined the original intention by their own government in the late nineteenth century to ‘annihilate native customs and beliefs, including native forms of ritual violence’ (see Introduction) by adopting and internalising many elements of the latter by the early twentieth century. As will be shown in subsequent parts of this Ritual Violence in Liberia series in depth and detail, this cultural process came to fruition as a heterodox, hybrid belief system among many or most Liberians by the late twentieth century, whereby the original ‘ideal’ of Western assimilation definitely came to naught—just as much as traditionalist calls for cultural renaissance came to naught, falling on deaf ears among young and old alike.

Ritual violence in Liberia during the coup and early reign of Samuel Doe

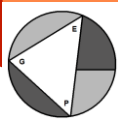
Tensions and underlying grievances hardly subsided in Liberia after the April 1979 Rice Riots; if anything, these rumbled on and quickly resurfaced in force. Thus the Progressive People’s Party (PPP)—newly formed in early 1980 out of the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL), and arguably Liberia’s first official, registered opposition party since TWP’s single-party rule from the late 1870s onwards—demanded Tolbert to



resign given his mismanagement, unresponsiveness and autocratic rule and for a general strike to compel him to do so. These demands were uttered during a rally on 7 March 1980 after Tolbert had 'refused' an instant audience with the PPP leadership to talk about the popular grievances—though the latter was not in his Executive Mansion but 'up-country' at the time. Ever since there has been speculation on whether this demand of resignation was "a calculated effort to hasten the pace of political change or .. a spur of the moment decision" of PPP leader Gabriel Baccus Matthews to "placate his own followers who were hungry for concrete, immediate results to sustain their enthusiasm for PPP" (Liebenow 1987: 175).

At any rate, Tolbert was incensed, believing he already had given this opposition party plenty by allowing its registration—though only after the latter threatened street protests if its recognition were not finalised. He responded by effectively banning the PPP and arresting Matthews who previously had been interned after the rice riots like many others, Oscar Quiah, Marcus Dahn Chea Cheapoo and other PPP leaders, ordinary members and dissidents, some of whom voluntarily turned themselves in—on top of members already imprisoned before PPP's formal establishment, like future warlord George E.S. Boley. These internments simply stoked up tensions and sparked more furious protests, rather than cowing the political and civil society opposition or the larger population into submission.

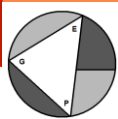
People were not just incensed, but gained courage from the fact that Tolbert's repression was checkered, incomplete: thus the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) was largely left unscathed, mainly because it still preferred to "remain a movement rather than a party" intent on



restructuring Liberian society through anti-corruption, equal-rights and other reform measures from the bottom-up—and was “very careful to avoid the provocative challenges to the Tolbert regime” (Liebenow 1987: 176). MOJA’s founding leaders, economics professor Dr. Togba-Nah Tipoteh and political-science professors Dr. Amos Sawyer and Dr. H. Boima Fahnbulleh, remained free, like (most) other leading and ordinary members of this movement. Their more careful, accommodating approach, less bent on zero-sum confrontations and outcomes than those of the PPP and other opposition groups, may seem paradoxical as it arguably sought “a more dramatic restructuring of Liberian society” than the latter (Ibid: 176)—amongst other things within the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) through a ‘Barracks Union’ night-school led by Amos Sawyer himself (Ellis 2007: 52; Dolo 1996: 50).³⁸

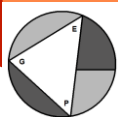
Thus MOJA just gradually entered the political fray after Tolbert kept refusing to adopt its reform proposals or to effectuate his own declared reforms; thus Amos Sawyer only reluctantly agreed to the party’s call on him to run as an independent candidate in the mayoral elections of Monrovia slated for November 1979—which the ruling True Whig Party (TWP) duly delayed until June 1980, in the hope of forestalling and scuttling Sawyer’s otherwise likely victory. Consequently even MOJA’s base became more restless and rebellious against both their own party leadership and the Tolbert regime and its softly-softly approach towards the latter (Liebenow 1987: 174-178; Kraaij 2015: 41-42; Ellis 2007: 50-54, 317).

Clearly not all or even most opposition members were hellbent on escalating matters toward a zero-sum power grab and violence against the incumbent elite and their supporters; thus intercultural communication specialist Emmanuel Dolo, student and MOJA member



in Monrovia at the time, stresses the degree of idealism and “democratic activism” back then by him and his fellow travellers: to them, MOJA, PAL (or rather PPP) and other opposition movements “had the right ideas and strategies to effect democratic change (*at least so it seemed at the time*)”—but as it soon transpired, he and others were “zealous, had lots of energy” but were “also naïve and gullible” (Dolo 2007: xv; italics added); thus the steps and countersteps taken by the opposition and the regime led—deliberately, unintentionally or both—Liberia to the brink of the abyss.³⁹

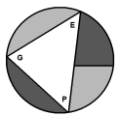
During all this political unrest and fervour in Liberia during the late 1970s, both regime and anti-regime actors and personalities ostensibly exhibited ‘modern’ convictions, needs, demands and interests, steeped in the discourse of equal or special rights in participation, decision-making and redistribution of wealth by and for all of Liberia’s citizens irrespective of their tribe, ethnicity, language and belief. Hardly any of them openly expressed ‘traditional’ convictions, needs and demands in the public discourse—apart from calls for ‘renativisation’ by some intellectuals who rarely lived in traditional, pre-republican ways themselves—based on particular native or settler identities, beliefs and practices. Even fewer if any of them openly expressed traditional animist or other magic-ritual beliefs and practices in their speeches, rallies, marches, protests, riots or repressive countermeasures—let alone publicly threaten or perpetrate magic-ritual violence involving human sacrifices and mutilations. This may mean that either such beliefs and practices were irrelevant at the time, or were happening in the dark, underground both at random and between political opponents.



Nevertheless, magic-ritual beliefs and practices took center stage in the coup of 12 April 1980 by seventeen AFL non-commissioned officers and enlisted men, led by Sergeants Thomas Weh Syen, Thomas Quiwonkpa and Samuel Kanyon Doe. Admittedly such beliefs and practices did not provide the immediate spark nor the major motive of this coup d'état: rather, the probably unwarranted rumour—fanned by PAL and MOJA members through the Barracks Union and other channels—that Tolbert was about to execute a group of political prisoners on the April 14th anniversary of the 1979 Rice riots, convinced these men to act pre-emptively at that time.

The normally well-informed, over 500-strong US embassy and its resident CIA headquarters—both reportedly (among) the largest of their kind in Africa given Liberia's longstanding relations and Cold War alliance with the United States (Kappel apud Kappel et al 1986b)—apparently had missed this rumour: it was “completely surprised” by the timing, manner and authorship of the coup, as American ambassador Julius Walker confided to Fred van der Kraaij on a later date (Kraaij 2015: 43-44).

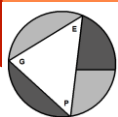
At any rate, a military coup would probably have happened sometime during the early 1980s anyway, given the heightened repression and concurrent grievances in general and the increasing stoking of PAL, MOJA and other militants in particular—who were continuously urging their “new friends in the armed forces” like notably Thomas Weh to depose Tolbert and his regime in the hope of bringing themselves and thus a “new generation of politicians” to power (Ellis 2007: 53). Moreover, some other coup-conspiring groups within the military—like the one led by US-trained counterinsurgency specialist Major William Jarbo—reportedly had the “blessing of the Americans” according to independent journalist Thomas



‘Tom’ Saah Kamara ⁴⁰ and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) set up after Liberia’s civil wars, because Tolbert had been seeking to diminish generous concession agreements to American companies and constrain American military and diplomatic presence in the country, reversing his predecessor’s policies on these matters (Kraaij 2015: 44 (incl. quote); TRC Vol.2 2009:142).⁴¹

Even so, magic-ritual beliefs and practices did influence and characterise the timing, manner and brutality of the coup by the group that finally did act decisively. Crucially, Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, who led a group of the conspirators into the Executive Mansion on the night of April 12th, did *not* expect Tolbert and his wife and close confidantes to be there; persistent *radio-trottoir* rumours, clearly known to the conspirators, had it that Tolbert hardly ever spent the night at this mansion but rather stayed at his private residence in Bentol, his native village near Monrovia, because he firmly believed that his predecessor Tubman had arranged ritual ceremonies at the mansion during his tenure that would bring bad luck to any successors spending the night there. Thus Doe and his co-conspirators expected Tolbert and his entourage to be away, leaving the way open for them to occupy the Executive Mansion and claim the mantle of power.

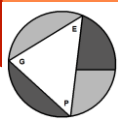
To this day it remains a mystery as to why Tolbert decided to stay, “on this night of all nights”, at the mansion; when Doe and his men forced their way into the presidential bedrooms and found to their amazement Tolbert and his wife Victoria there, they—clearly perceiving it as a good-omen opportunity not to be squandered, reportedly “killed—or rather, slaughtered—the president on the spot” (Kraaij 2015: 43 (quotes)) while sparing his wife’s life and putting her under house arrest soon after for



some months, then allowing her to leave for the United States. Though accounts vary on the precise location and manner of Tolbert's violent death—ranging from being killed in his office while found sleeping (Ellis 2007: 53) to being killed in his own bed (Sirleaf 2009: 25)—his demise by the end of the day remains undisputed. The coup was far from bloodless apart from Tolbert's death: at least 26 or 27 (estimates vary) of Doe's security personnel were killed during fighting in or near the Executive Mansion, including Brigadier Charles Raily who led the Palace Guard (e.g. Chaudhuri apud Keppel et al 1986: 47); few if any sources (appear to) mention any casualties among Doe's men.

Magic-ritual beliefs—in rather loose and spontaneous fashions emanating from self-initiatives and self-interpretations by commoners rather than strict and orchestrated rules emanating from decisions and announcements by elders or (other) priests—also characterised some celebrations in the streets of Monrovia and elsewhere during the day by people fed up with the quickly dissipating Tolbert regime, with some or many of them “dressing in masks and extravagant costumes” (Ellis 2007: 53).

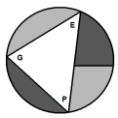
After he heard of Tolbert's violent death, Sergeant Thomas Quiwonkpa—the acknowledged leader of the coup during its early days despite Master Sergeant Samuel Doe being the highest-ranking coup plotter—immediately ordered the arrest of hundreds of people, including practically all cabinet members and TWP leaders; he did not appear to have ordered or encouraged widespread lootings and killings, nor to have legitimised such violence with magic-ritual incantations. Still, such looting and violence did occur, degenerating into a “witchhunt for Americo-Liberians” (Kraaij 2015: 45) who were blamed rightly or wrongly for the country's ills—though paradoxically many leading Americo-Liberians were to collaborate with or



even join the new Doe regime in its early days and years (see further next part IV of the Ritual Violence in Liberia series). At any rate, a jubilant and angry crowd shouted insults and threw rocks at the bodies of a few dozen victims of the coup while being dumped in a mass grave; reportedly one of these bodies was Tolbert's. Later his body was put in a grave in Monrovia's Palm Grove Cemetery, close to the graves of those killed in the 1977 Rice Riots—perhaps a deliberate, ritual move.⁴²

Arguably the public execution on 22 April 1980 of thirteen former cabinet members and TWP leaders—all of them Americo-Liberians, condemned to death by firing squad after a quick military 'trial' after the coup—at Redemption Beach between the Barclay Training Center (the site of the trial) and the Executive Mansion in Monrovia was imbued with ritual meaning too. First of all this violence, as any execution with a minimum of planning and orchestration, amounted to a *ritual act*: carrying out one or more observable rites consisting of "one or more sequenced gestures, words, objects or .. actions" (Ten Dam 2023: 47); marching or dragging the condemned to the execution pot, barking an order to take aim at the condemned, and so on. Witness accounts do not paint a picture of a spontaneous, non-orchestrated shooting without any sequenced movements, utterances, weapons and other objects used. Thus this execution certainly manifests ritual violence in the broad(est) sense, which I have circumscribed as any violent confrontation between individuals a/o groups for all conceivable reasons and involving all conceivable rituals in bodily and verbal posturing and actual violence (Ibid: 48).

I have warned against conceptualising 'ritual violence' too broadly as supposedly encapsulating all kinds of violence however, because a) manifestations of violence may be devoid of any notable, actual rituals; and

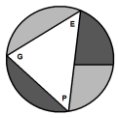


b) equating ritual violence with violence per se turns the concept of 'ritual' into a meaningless catch-all phrase (Ten Dam 2023: 53-54). Still, the Redemption Beach execution manifested at least some rituals as indicated. Thus a BBC reporter described it as follows in Van der Kraaij's words:

To the cheers of thousands of spectators, the first group of condemned men were tied to the [nine] poles and, without being blindfolded, shot. Their ropes were then cut loose and the four remaining men were tied to the poles, with their dead colleagues still lying at their feet. These four, too, were shot to loud cheering, after which the firing squad and the young new head of state, 28-year-old General Samuel Doe, posed triumphantly with the executed men, while they were photographed and filmed by members of the national and international press" (Kraaij 2015: 52). ⁴³

The atmosphere of ruthless retribution permeating this execution eerily resembles the one permeating the execution by hanging in February 1979 of seven perpetrators of the ritual Maryland Murders, which Van der Kraaij witnessed and described so vividly earlier (see preceding subchapter 'Secret societies and ritual brutalities of new')—even though their trial had been more fair and thorough, their execution more procedurally 'correct' and thus less brutal, the crowd more restrained—and last but not least, president Tolbert not jubilantly present to gloat over the corpses.

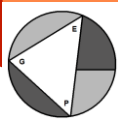
At any rate, Doe's executing of so many of the once high and mighty of the former regime in such a brutal manner, after a speedy mock trial, in public and so close to some major buildings symbolising national power, amounted to *ritual intent* as well: sending a simple message to those still resisting or doubting the validity or strength of the new



regime: ‘we have cut off the head of the snake—better accept it, or we cut off yours too’. The sparing of vice-president Bennie Warner, finance minister Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and three other cabinet members of the Tolbert administration may have had ritual meaning too for so far the pardoning was done publicly and expressively: at least three of them (including Sirleaf) had tribal roots even though adopted and raised in ruling Americo-Liberian families, and at least some of them (like Sirleaf) had tried to keep Tolbert on the reform path to ameliorate or address widespread deprivations and grievances among those not (part) of the Americo-Liberian elite (Kraaij 2015: 50-52; Sirleaf 2009: 102).

On the one hand the self-promoted generals Doe, Weh Syen and Quiwonkpa—being chair and co-chairs of their so-called People’s Redemption Council (RDC) respectively, with Doe becoming head of state and Quiwonkpa commander of the army as well—formed a regime that acted ruthlessly, brutally and repressively from the start against those allegedly or actually opposing it. Many actual and potential rivals of Doe and his seat of power were persecuted and either formally tried and executed or informally hunted down and (often ritually) killed at home or abroad—like CIA-supported Major William Jarbo, who had been planning his own coup when Doe and his fellow-plotters beat him to it; Jarbo initially resisted Doe’s coup in Batala, Bong County with a small band of armed supporters, yet was quickly routed and killed during his attempted escape to Sierra Leone.

On the other hand, Doe’s regime at first initiated reasonable reforms like increasing the meagre wages of government employees, police and military—though these did little to discourage (as reportedly intended) the rampant lootings, molestations and other (revenge) attacks by many

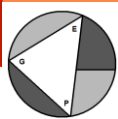


of the latter against both Americo-Liberian and random people and their properties during the first days after the coup. Far more significant, wise and effective was Doe's quick welcoming of many (former) TWP members *and* (former) MOJA, PP and other opposition and dissident members of both native and Americo-Liberian descent into his RDC cabinet and wider administration—if and for so far the latter were willing to embrace the legitimacy and promise of the new regime. Most prominent among them were PPP leader Gabriel Baccus Matthews, who immediately became the new Foreign Minister after his release from prison. Many or most of them, including apparently Matthews, genuinely believed or hoped that this regime would further democracy, equality and prosperity in the country (see Chaudhuri apud Kappel et al 1986: 49; Ellis 2007: 53; see further Korte apud Kappel et al 1986; Schröder & Korte 1986; Schröder & Korte apud Kappel et al 1986).

But as the next parts of our Ritual violence in Liberia series will show, endemic and interrelated greeds and grievances, ethnic divisions and often ritual(ised) brutalities would increasingly characterise Liberia's society and politics under the Doe regime and precipitate its fall and continue characterising the subsequent civil wars—and beyond, to the present day.

Concluding observations on secret societies and ritual brutalities at large

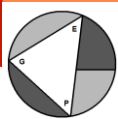
The apparently persistent 'popularity' of ritual murders for power, status, fearsome reputation, revenge or other purposes—especially during 'democratic' and 'peaceful' elections or obviously undemocratic and violent battles for supremacy through coups, rebellions and the like—among the



ruling elites in Liberia and other African countries helped to legitimise, ingrain and perpetuate the practice of such murders among the wider populace for identical or kindred purposes in these countries—whether or not performed or approved by priests, sorcerers or other ‘authoritative’ actors. This alarming development is part and parcel of the wider, more peaceful trend in Africa since at least (post-)colonial times for politicians, officials and other leading figures to “derive advantage from the religious authority of others, including through co-opting them into patronage systems and consulting .. religious specialists” (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 67)—or donning the mantle of religious authority themselves over secret organisations ranging from native religious societies to Freemasons, Rosicrucians or other groups of “European origin” (Ibid: 75 (quote)-78).

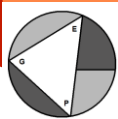
Many or most of these politicians, officials and other leading figures—even those ostensibly most progressive, revolutionary and secular—appear to genuinely believe in the magical and (other) religious ideas, doctrines and rituals they utilise themselves, rather than just opportunistically activating and mobilising these beliefs and practices among their ‘gullible’ followers, particular communities or wider populations. As mentioned earlier, some of them reportedly “even practice ritual human sacrifices to retain their power” (Hebga 1990: 74; Ten Dam 2024: 51-52).

Thus Presidents Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea (1960 till 1980) and Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d’Ivoire (1960 until his death in 1993), an ostensibly enlightened Catholic, were accused of committing such ritual murders themselves—whereby the latter was also posthumously rewarded with sacrificed victims who had to serve him in the afterlife (Toulabor apud Konings et al 2000: 213-214; Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 72, 80).⁴⁴ According to one of his former cabinet ministers in his memoir,



Sékou Touré even had seventy of his party and state functionaries ritually killed—on the advice of a *marabout* (Muslim leader, scholar, teacher)—as a magical spell against his hated rival Houphouët-Boigny on the latter's seventieth birthday, as this would bring about his 'inevitable' downfall (Diallo 1985: 131; Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 80).⁴⁵ If true, this *marabout* acted complicitly, like so many of his colleagues in especially West and North Africa, as a seer or sorcerer at odds with professed Islamic teachings, including those of Sufi and other heterodox varieties. Other leaders like dictator Idi Amin of Uganda and Emperor Jean-Bédel Bokassa of the Central African Empire (CAE)—renamed back to Central African Republic after his overthrow in 1979—already known for their cruelties in general, were accused of human sacrifices and other violent rituals as well.

However, a note of caution is in order: even the best analysts tend to present both *radio-trottoir* rumours and speculative analyses about ritual violence by African leaders rather uncritically and unquestioningly.⁴⁶ Ellis and Ter Haar argue in their *Worlds of Power* that the issue of whether “such stories appear to observers to be empirically true is perhaps not the point in most urgent need of investigation” given that these are “credible to the people who tell them and who constitute their immediate audience” (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 80). Their argument and consequent research approach may be sociologically relevant, but may have unethical consequences if it fails to test such allegations on their validity at all. For one thing, if one just mentions and analyses these allegations for their social and political effects without assessing their veracities, then these may turn out to be uncorroborated or downright false, to the detriment of those thus unjustly accused and their immediate families, friends and descendants.

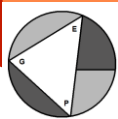


Therefore I seek and propose others to be very careful in mentioning, assessing and adopting (if at all) such allegations, as those with apparent or obvious grudges against the accused often appear to make these out of spite, opportunism or any other (unethical) reason. Still, Liberia's presidents and other leaders—also or rather particularly after the reign of Tolbert—have been accused of such acts as well—and in some cases have blatantly, openly or otherwise definitely shown to have done so, as this Ritual violence in Liberia series will show in its subsequent parts.

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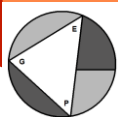
Endnotes

1. The term 'ritualistic' may better describe the phenomenon studied than the term 'ritual'—in the conceptual and phenomenological sense. Yet a frequent use of the former term would decrease the article's readability.
2. The distinct articles in this Ritual violence in Liberia series were originally intended to constitute more advanced, updated and improved versions of equivalent chapters in my planned book *Ritual violence in Liberia – Ritualised brutalities in Liberia prior to, during and after the Civil Wars*. But now this book will appear only after the series has come out in full, whereby the book's chapters will be the more advanced versions of the series' articles.
3. Here, I particularly rely on Van der Kraaij's *From the Love of Liberty to Paradise Lost* (2015: esp. 33-41) and his *Liberia Past and Present and Ritual*

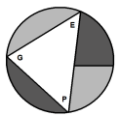


Killing In Africa websites, esp. his 'Ritual Killings – Past and Present, From Cultural Phenomenon to Political Instrument', Parts I (Before 1950) and II (1950 – 1980), in: *Liberia: Past and Present of Africa's Oldest Republic*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsIndex.htm>. After all, he is "one of the few scholars studying ritual violence in a comprehensive manner" (Ten Dam 2024: 40).

4. See for more background esp. Fred van der Kraaij, 'Tribal resistance to Americo-Liberian rule', in *Liberia: Past and Present of Africa's Oldest Republic* [year?]; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/TribalResistance.htm> (incl. 'Sources and recommended literature').
5. From here on we refer to 'Kraaij' in short for easier readability—yet one seeks in the Bibliography for 'Van der Kraaij' i.e. the author's full surname.
6. Kraaij, 'Introduction: Caution', in *Liberia Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsIntro.htm>. Despite his obvious view that ritual killings generally are brutalities i.e. violations of both local and international norms that should be condemned accordingly, it is not his intention to "stigmatize a particular tribe, political class or group of people or to suggest that the practice of ritual killings is limited to Liberia only" (Ibid). Even though his analysis "contains names of victims, perpetrators and accomplices", it is not his intention to "blame, shame or to insult anybody"; still, he apologises to "their relatives and friends for any inconvenience or embarrassment caused by this public exposure" (Ibid).
7. Kraaij, 'Ritual Killings – Past and Present: From Cultural Phenomenon To Political Instrument, Part I: Before 1950 – Concluding note on the sources of information' *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsConclusion.htm> (incl. quote).
8. See Kraaij, 'Part I Ritual killings: Before 1847'; '1900-1950: The Leopard Society in the Nimba Range and at the Kru coast'; '1900-1950: These

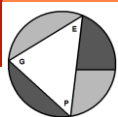


- people bad, they chop men’; ‘1900-1950: The Leopard Society in ‘Vai country’, in Bassaland’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005;
<https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsBefore1847.htm>;
https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillings1900_1950a.htm;
https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillings1900_1950aa.htm;
https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillings1900_1950b.htm.
9. See Kraaij, ‘1900-1950: The Leopard Society in ‘Vai country’, in Bassaland’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005;
https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillings1900_1950b.htm
 (incl. quote).
 10. Ibid (incl. quote). Kraaij: “Very likely, Guenter describes here a kind of ‘sasswood trial’, a traditional Liberian method used to point out who is guilty of the committed crimes under investigation” (Ibid). Chief Dabapa died soon after—a natural death, under mysterious circumstances or by the Leopard people? And what happened to the ‘discovered’ perpetrators? I will seek to uncover these facts and circumstances in future research.
 11. Ibid (incl. quotes). See further ‘Ritual object or ‘Kru money’? *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/culture2.htm>.
 12. Here I follow Kraaij’s typology of Liberia’s tribes and languages, as described and shown in his reproduced Map 3 in the first article of this series (Ten Dam 2023:35)—even though Liebenow’s Map 3 seems similar (Liebenow 1987: 34).
 13. Again, I prefer the term ‘supernatural’ rather than ‘invisible’, and thus speak of the ‘supernatural world’ and ‘supernatural powers’ rather than the ‘invisible world’ and ‘invisible powers’. See discussion on this distinction near the end of section ‘Ritual violence vis-a-vis convictions and other factors of brutalisation’ in the first article of this series (Ten Dam 2023: 60-61).
 14. Siegmann criticises the uniform descriptions of masking traditions as supposedly all Poro and kindred in northern Liberia by ethnographer George Way Harley (1894-1966), which most of his colleagues have uncritically adopted ever since: thus Harley mingled i.e. “misread and confused the roles” of the Poro society and an “older cult of masks similar

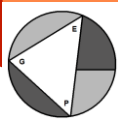


to that of the Dan [Gio]" among the Mano tribe—and extrapolated his garbled observations to the Gio (Dan) as these “do in fact share much in common with the Mano”; yet the Gio (Dan) “do not .. have the Poro society” and thus do not wear ‘Poro masks’ (Siegmann 1980: 89 (quotes); Fischer 1980: 82). See contrast with especially Liebenow in note 16.

15. See preceding note.
16. Here Ellis refers to Liebenow's *Quest for Democracy* as a source (Ellis 1995: 189, footnote 75) on these exclusive murder-cults within the Poro and Sande societies; yet Liebenow speaks of no such cults in these terms on either referred page 41 or any the surrounding pages of his book.
17. It is not entirely clear whether Ellis means to say here that these secret societies were relatively ‘benign’ even before the ‘civilising’ or at least curtailing effects of republican government and Christian education, or were so until the—perhaps paradoxical and unintentional—brutalising effects of these political and societal changes.
18. Scholars, investigators and observers describe ‘heartmen’, ‘leopard men’, ‘snake men’ etc. as either ritual contract killers, or as “freelance vendors” (e.g. Ellis 2001a: 233) of human body parts; these meanings coalesce only if the killers proceed to sell the hearts or other body parts of their victims to either their contractors (often elders, priests, witches a/o politicians), or to anyone else interested in these for magical or other purposes.
19. Contrary to Ellis and other scholars and analysts, I am rather sceptical about the claim of the Poro and Sande being pacified and generally peaceful societies since the early twentieth century onwards. The descriptions of Poro ritual violence in the preceding section already makes one wary of this claim—and the anecdotal evidence of such violence in more recent history, also described in subsequent sections here, question this claim. At the very least individual Poro and Sande members continue to practice ritual violence underground to the present day.
20. See Kraaij, ‘Part I Ritual killings: 1847-1900’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillings1847_1900.htm.

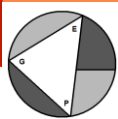


21. It remains unclear—or at least unspecified by the available sources (Ellis 1995:188; Ellis & Ter Haar 2004:79)—whether Tubman and Tolbert openly or internally i.e. secretly proclaimed their leading roles in Poro, only to come out by witness accounts and/or *radio-trottoir* rumours at a later stage.
22. Kraaij, ‘The second half of the 20th century: ‘heart man’ murders – Ritual Killings and Liberian Politics’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20thC.htm> (quote).
23. Kraaij, ‘The second half of the 20th century: ‘heart man’ murders – Introduction and Caution’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20th.htm> (quote).
24. Esp. Kraaij, ‘A wave of ritual killings’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20thF.htm>. Here he presents and discusses just one “selection of newspaper reports” on ritual killings (Ibid.); he has selected and discussed many more on such killings in preceding and subsequent periods on his *Liberia Past and Present* and *Ritual Killing In Africa* (www.liberiapastandpresent.org & www.ritualkillinginafrica.org). This series has just room to zoom in on a handful of these reported cases—hopefully representative and revealing ones characterising ritual violence in Liberia—all of which one could consult in Van der Kraaij’s own major works and (indicated) websites at any rate. A full-fledged qualitative and even quantitative analysis of all Kraaij’s selected cases may be doable in future (collaborative) research and for future (collaborative) publications.
25. See also Kraaij, ‘‘heart man’ murders – Introduction and Caution’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20th.htm>.
26. Kraaij argues that the open reporting of ritual killings during the late 1970s was partially due to the “relative freedom of expression and of the press that characterized these days of the Tolbert Administration”, but possibly

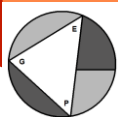


also due to “orchestrated, or at least encouraged” approval by the latter to report these cases, as Tolbert apparently finally sought to put a halt to such killings: ‘A wave of ritual killings’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005, <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20thFf.htm> (incl. quotes).

27. Kraaij, ‘A wave of ritual killings – Ritual murder cases 1975 - 1980: a selection’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20thFf.htm> (incl. quote). Perhaps he just selected those reports which involved especially arrests—or local media mainly reported just those ritual killings which led to arrests or at least disciplinary measures against suspected perpetrators.
28. The “victim’s [sur]name is variously spelled as Tiah or Teah”—or ‘Tieh’ in some newspaper accounts: Kraaij, ‘The Sinoe Ritualistic Murder Case – The victim: Princelet Hilton Tea’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSinoe.htm>. Yet the victim’s first name appears to be variously spelled as well—or one of these spellings concerns a simple typo error.
29. Regarding the outcome for most of the suspected and convicted perpetrators of the so-called Maryland Murders, Ellis remarks rather speculatively that it “seems that Tolbert signed their death warrants in an attempt to both act against this practice [of ritual killing] and to weaken the opposition within his own party” (Ellis 2007: 255).
30. See Kraaij, ‘The preacher-President’s crusade against a sinful world’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20thG.htm>.
31. See e.g. Kraaij, ‘A wave of ritual killings – Ritual murder cases 1975 - 1980: a selection’ *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20thFf.htm>. Alas, on this web page the particular link to ‘All newspapers: The Maryland Murders’ is not working. Yet see ‘The Maryland Ritual Murders’

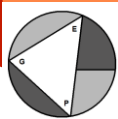


- Ibid;
<https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/MarylandRitualMurders01.htm>.
32. Kraaij, 'President William Tolbert and Ritual Killings' *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005;
<https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf2ofhD.htm> (quote); 'A wave of ritual killings' Ibid;
<https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf2ofhFf.htm> (rubber plantation workers).
33. 'RITUALISTIC MURDERS AIMED AT 1983 POLLS?' *The Sunday People* Vol.2 No.13, 30 March 1980;
https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/NewspaperArticles/SundayPeopleMarch30_1980.htm.
34. Kraaij, 'The Sinoe Ritualistic Murder Case – The victim: Princelet Hilton Tea' *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005;
<https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSinoe.htm>.
35. Ibid; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSinoe.htm> (quote) &
<https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSinoe02.htm> (uncle 'James Tiah').
36. Kraaij, 'The Sinoe Ritualistic Murder Case – 'Big shots' arrested' *Liberia: Past and Present*, 2005;
<https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSinoe02.htm>.
37. Ibid; <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSinoe02.htm> (quote).
38. Years later, Sawyer hardly ever referred to his role in the politicising the AFL through the Barracks Union (thus there is no reference on it in Sawyer 2005)—perhaps because he is embarrassed about the latter's role in shaping the ambitions and mindsets of future coup leaders and warlords (see further this and subsequent parts of the Ritual violence in Liberia series).
39. Dolo actually arrived in Monrovia in "the early 1980s" to study and become politically active there, suggesting that his activities and experiences there



and then took place right after the 1980 coup (Dolo 1996: xv). Even so, his cited observations in the Prologue of his *Liberia's National Identity Crisis* (2007) are relevant and arguably valid for the politics in Liberia in the years and months immediately leading up to the 1980 coup as well.

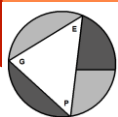
40. Kamara died unexpectedly on 8 June 2012 in Brussels. Kamara “collapsed at Brussels International Airport while on his way to the Netherlands to receive medical treatment”: anonymous, ‘Tom Kamara’ *Wikitia – An Encyclopedia by Verified Editors*, edit. 3 November 2022; https://wikitia.com/wiki/Tom_Kamara. Apparently Kraaij spoke to him sometime in May 2012, “one month before his unexpected death” (Kraaij 2015: 44).
41. According to the TRC final report, “In 1979 Tolbert refused to allow the bunkering of the US Rapid Deployment Force at Roberts International Airport. This refusal embarrassed both the CIA and the Pentagon who were now prospecting for leadership change in Liberia, lending support to Major William Jebbo, a US trained Ranger” (TRC Vol.2 2009: 142). Kraaij’s citation spells the name of the said major as ‘Jarbo’—apparently correctly (e.g. Ellis 2007: 53). NB: Kraaij’s source reference mentions page 111 rather than page 142 of TRC’s final report—perhaps an error, or concerning a different edition of this report.
42. See Time, ‘Liberia: After the Takeover, Revenge’ *TIME Magazine*, 18 April 1980; Oswald Hanicles, ‘Liberians Remember Their Dead’ *Daily Observer* (or *Liberian Observer*), 12 March 1981. Sources found at notes 21 & 22 in: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_R._Tolbert (first acc. 18-4-2023). See further https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberian_Observer (first acc. 8-1-2024).
43. Apparently Kraaij describes the scene of the execution at Redemption Beach in his own words, as recollected from the one given by the reporter of the BBC programme *Focus on Africa*, to which Kraaij listened during the afternoon of that fateful day (Kraaij 2015: 50). Still, his description of it may actually be a collation of the BBC reports and those of (non-referenced) others.



44. Supposedly “some important sources” made these allegations about ritual killings by presidents Touré and Houphouët-Boigny; yet these appear to emanate from just a single “African political scientist”, namely Comi Toulabor (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 72 & note 8; 80 & note 42: Toulabor apud Konings et al 2000: 213-214). Other sources spoke of “secretive traditional religious practices” by the likes of Houphouët-Boigny (Ibid 80 & note 41: Baulin 1982: 116-118), but these may (exclusively) involve non-violent, non-harmful rituals and thus concern less explosive and arguably more reliable allegations.
45. The allegations against Sékou Touré seem a bit more credible than those against Houphouët-Boigny, as the former concern, mainly or amongst others, those made by former minister Alpha-Abdoulaye Diallo in his 1985 memoir *La vérité du Ministre* (see Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 80 & note 44). Still, one should treat such allegations by “former colleagues” against African heads of state and other leaders, often openly expressed in e.g. memoirs and “press interviews”, with care: these allegations are not just quite stark and resemblant of implausible conspiracy theories, such as West and Central African leaders meeting to “drink or wash in human blood” (Ibid 2004: 80 (quotes) & note 45; esp. Toulabor apud Konings et al 2000: 216-217)—but the authors of these allegations may bear personal grudges against the accused, or regard them as political enemies to be discredited at any rate.
46. See the immediately preceding two notes for my cautionary interpretations of ritual-killing allegations.

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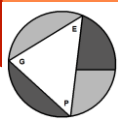
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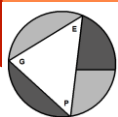
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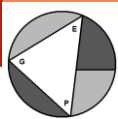
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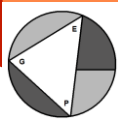
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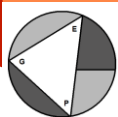
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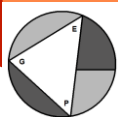
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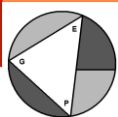
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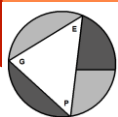
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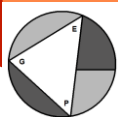
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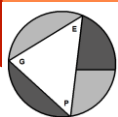
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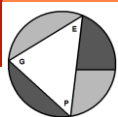
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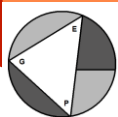
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*: Zhang Shi in Chinese; she is also editor of (any) Chinese section(s) in this journal (see Editorial Board on page 2 of its more recent issues and volumes).