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REVIEW ESSAYS

One Man's *Sande*: Roger Dorsinville's *L'homme derrière l'arbre: un Haïtien au Libéria*, a Photographic Initiation

George Lang

Sande or Bundu is the main sodality for women among some peoples of the Upper Guinea Coast, especially the Mende, Vai, Gola, and Kpelle. According to Sylvia Ardyn Boone, the essence of Sande is "women in fellowship" (18) and the mutual support and promotion of those who participate. Since virtually all women within the orbit of village life in the regions of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea where its values remain vital adhere to or at least acknowledge it, Sande is trans-ethnic, though there is considerable variation in its practice. Thought by some, including Walter Rodney ("Reconsideration" 242-44), to stem from the migration of the peripheral Mande into the forest region from the disintegrating empire of Mali, led by the Mane warrior queen Mansarico, the institution has spread to non-Mande speakers like the Gola (whose language belongs to the Mel group), and recently many Bassa (belonging to the Kru group) have accepted it (Boone 15).

There is a long history of photographic representation of Sande artifact and ritual, due in no small part to the beauty of the *sowo-wui* (in Mende) helmet.[1] No display of African art is complete without a specimen, though some museum pieces are far from typical, given the differing criteria among foreign collectors and those who commission and revere the masks: deviance from Sande norms may well appear as attractive originality in the eyes of the former. In any event, Sowo helmets were already acquired by curators in Britain and the U.S. before 1900 (Siegmann and Schmidt 10), and it is perhaps significant that the first ethnographic film images taken in Liberia were of Sande ritual: H. Schomburgk's 1923 *Geheimbund-Riten der Frauen in Liberia* (UNESCO 187).

Roger Dorsinville's vision of Sande can be found in the relevant photographs grouped in *L'homme derrière l'arbre: un Haïtien au Libéria* (1991), their negatives having remained in storage over twenty years before their retrieval from Senegal in 1990 by Jean-Jacques Mandel, a French admirer who was responsible for their selection and the commentary upon them. Dorsinville had returned to Port-au-Prince upon the fall of Baby Doc, though unfortunately just as glaucoma deprived him of vision. *L'homme derrière l'arbre* is thus a curiously composite

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book. Alongside the photographs, themselves a motley collection, are Mandel's introduction and reprints of several of Dorsinville's articles on Liberia, plus passages from novels inspired by his seven years there, in particular one from the novel *Renaître à Dendé* (1980), whose heroine Martha is made to suffer clitoridectomy in the Dan village of her mother's family before returning to *kwi* life in Monrovia (in Liberian English, *kwi*, alleged to derive from the Portuguese word *portu***guês**, refers to non-tribal styles of life). There is also a preface dictated for the publication in light of the Liberian civil war, which at that writing as at this one remained "a war far from being finished" (30).[2]

Critics regularly challenge the wide-spread misconception that photographs capture reality directly, that photography is unmediated mimesis. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, "Seul un réalisme naïf fait tenir pour réaliste la représentation photographique du réel; si celle-ci apparaît comme objective c'est que les règles qui en définissent l'usage social sont conformes à la définition sociale de l'objectivité" (12) 'only naive realists would claim that photographic representation of reality is realistic. If such representation appears objective, this is because the rules that define the social use of photography conform to the social definition of objectivity.' An extreme example of the conventionality of photographic representation can be found in the anecdote cited by Philippe Dubois (37) in which the ethnographer Melville Herskovits showed an aboriginal woman a snapshot of her own son, a portrait she was able to discern only after Herskovits traced out its outlines and provided a key to the photographic code. It is hard to imagine any contemporary culture without sufficient exposure to photography to have assimilated its rules of representation, but it is undeniable that a photo, being two-dimensional, is at the very least reductive of three-dimensional reality, and the black and white photographs in *L'homme derrière l'arbre* as well subtractive of color. Nor should there be any doubt that photographers and their public belong to an interpretative community whose internal references and allusions constitute and to some extent control the content of photography. There are also academic conventions which prescribe the uses to which photograph can be legitimately put within anthropological research (see Collier and Collier for an overview of the traditions and techniques of ethnophotography).

The fact nonetheless remains that the illusion of mimesis through photography is based on a solid intuition: photographs originate in a given time and place, hence are simultaneous with the events they simulate. No amount of disputation is likely to dissuade most of us from our conviction that we take pictures *of* people and things, and in particular of ones we would like to remember.

Dubois suggests one way out of this conundrum by drawing upon C. S. Peirce's typology of signs. Instead of icons, which represent by means of resemblance, or symbols, which are predicated on social convention, photographs are what Peirce calls indices; they signify by way of physical contiguity of the sign with its referent (Dubois 40). Obviously, the anamorphic transfer that assures contiguity of sign and referent is not only rooted in the laws of optics and chemistry, but is invisible to the common viewer. Since the imprint of that precise moment of contiguity has its own temporality, one distinct from that of its referent, sign and referent are condemned to drift further and further apart the instant the shutter snaps. The ensuing separate trajectories of sign and referent are in fact telling of the social orders in which each transpires.

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Roger Dorsinville's military, pedagogical, and political career prior to his arrival in Liberia in 1965 is recounted with customary candor in his autobiography, *Marche arrière*. Haitian ambassador to Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Senegal during the early years of the Duvalier regime, when he thought it still possible to play a constructive diplomatic role, especially given the Revolution in neighboring Cuba and the U.S. imperialist machinations of those times (*Marche arrière* 173-76), Dorsinville began exploring safe exits to Africa in 1963, and finally was named to a position as cultural advisor to the government of President W. V. S. Tubman. By the mid 1960s Tubman's Unification Program, which sought to integrate indigenous ethnic groups into the national community without upsetting the bases of Americo-Liberian privilege, had petered out (Liebenow 59-70). Affirmation of "tribal" culture (the word was less pejorative in Liberia in the 1960s than elsewhere in West Africa) had nonetheless become a reflex of government rhetoric, and this propensity was reinforced by diplomatic considerations during those years of decolonization, given the need to affirm Liberia internationally as the oldest African republic. Having served as Haitian ambassador to Senegal in 1961, Dorsinville was well suited to help prepare the Liberian delegation to the forthcoming (1966) World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, and his administrative skills were also needed to run the Monrovia Cultural Center, established towards the same end.

There is thus some question about the relative weight of the ethnographic as opposed to the personal or aesthetic impulse in Dorsinville's photographs. On one hand, many of the photographs were taken in the course of his work as director of the Cultural Center. Dorsinville was documenting its activities with his antiquated Soviet *Zorki*, and took advantage of the opportunities his public role afforded to shoot moments of Sande initiation, though the events to which he had access were public displays in the sense that they took place outside of the Sande compound and were therefore staged for the public. On the other hand, every photograph in the book and moment of his life in Liberia was involved in his (re)birth as a particular kind of diasporic writer, one doubly in exile, first from Africa, and then from his own Caribbean native land back to Africa. In other words, whether or not Dorsinville knew he was in part following "photo-ethnographic" conventions that dated back to Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's 1942 *Balinese Culture*, he also diverged significantly from them.

Dorsinville was conscious of the ambiguity of his position. As the subtitle, *Un Haïtien au Libéria*, makes clear, this book is rooted in what we might call a "meta-diasporic" situation, one in which *retour aux sources* was accomplished not only metaphorically, but physically. This infolded exile turned out to be artistically productive. The culminating phase of his many faceted career, that as novelist, was initiated in Liberia, and for typically diasporic reasons. When asked what Africa brought him, Dorsinville answered: "l'évidence est dans le fait: un lieu de ressourcement, au contact de la vie tribale. Non pas que tout dans la tribu soit beau, édénique, je ne verserai pas dans cette négritude d'Épinal, mais, là, j'ai rencontré mes origines" (*Marche arrière* 181) 'the proof is in the facts: I found my roots there in contact with tribal life. Not everything about tribes is beautiful, Edenic; that kind of simple-minded Negritude is not my own. Liberia is where I found my roots.' Still, Dorsinville's encounter with Africa was not without ripples. Though he had been inducted into the *Société Haïtienne de Folklore* by Jean

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Price-Mars in the 1930s (*Marche arrière* 61), he held an altogether different notion of culture than did those whose culture he was supposed to promote in Liberia: "Une surprise m'attendait! Au Libéria, ce à quoi j'étais fait dans le monde des mots et des idées se désignait 'éducation,' tandis que le mot culture était spécifiquement réservé aux rites, croyances et arts des 'natives,' des tribus" (*L'homme* 251) 'There was quite a surprise in store! In Liberia, what I had experienced in the realm of words and ideas was known as "education," while the word "culture" was specifically reserved for the rituals, beliefs and arts of the "natives," of the tribes.' And over and above this fundamental cleavage between two cultural modes lies a second level of contradiction, one inherent in not only the Liberian effort at nation-building, but any self-conscious construction of identity. The Monrovia Cultural Center that Roger Dorsinville oversaw was a heterogeneous collection of huts typical of each of Liberia's tribes assembled artificially in an enclave on the outskirts of the capital. The dances rehearsed on these premises were conceived in terms of what Dorsinville called a "projet à l'italienne" (Italian style project, in other words, theatrical presentation of dance [*L'homme 25*])—the formula prescribed for the 1966 Dakar performances.

Parallel to the relatively knowable though aleatory itinerary of the photographs assembled in *L'homme derrière l'arbre* as well as that of the historical figure who took them, is the ephemeral specificity of the events with which they were once contiguous. These movements and gestures captured on film some time in the mid 1960s were by their nature fleeting: only the ritual moment they marked made them memorable. Equally beyond retrieval are the life histories of the women who were Dorsinville's subjects. At first glance, this disparity devolves from a typically patriarchal distribution of power between male photographer and female subjects. It also reflects the different technological systems, on the one hand, of Sande, on the other, of those for whom these girls and women were photographed, including now of course readers of this very article. Sande springs from and expresses an oral social order, whereas a photographer by definition subscribes to the (illusory) permanence luminescence inscribes on a photochemical sheet. The dichotomy between oral and written is, it would appear, only another form of a deeper division whose terms cannot be resolved in a study of this scope, but of which the dissimilar ontological status of the Sande initiates and their photographs is emblematic.[3]

Walter Rodney observes that the first European allusions to Sande occur in writings of the sixteenth-century Portuguese travelers Valentin Fernandes and de Almada (*History* 65). Typically, these Portuguese conceived the Sande compound, *kpanguima* in Mende, in terms of the only comparable institution they knew, the Catholic convent. The analogy is wrong in almost every possible way, but in retrospect one might admire the willingness to find similarity rather than abject difference when confronted with the unknown.

Ethnographers of Liberian culture have been deeply influenced by the imagery and argument put forth in George Way Harley's monographs of the 1940s, the drift of which is suggested by his title *Masks as Agents of Social Control in Northeast Liberia* (1950). The implication, borne out by numerous descriptions of the terror masked figures instill, is that the societies with these gendering institutions somehow exert more control over their members than any other (say Western) ones, and do so by resorting to "primitive" emotions of fright Sande and

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Poro secrecy promote above and beyond the universal norms of sanctioned fear. According to this way of thinking, at the core of secret societies reside mysteries so awe-inspiring that they can be brandished against the disobedient as well as the non-initiate; hence the inviolable nature of the secrets. A classic instance of the consequences of revealing these Sande and Poro secrets is the story told about the Reverend Max Gorvie, the publication of whose *Old and New in Sierra Leone* (1945) led to his being branded "a traitor and run out of the country." Sylvia Boone discusses this incident (xiv) because her research ran into repeated injunctions against exposing Sande to outsiders, though she learned much by asking about ideals of beauty rather than about Sande itself.

Since the very existence of Dorsinville's photographs might, to some, raise the question of how this foreign male was allowed such glimpses into rituals that are so sensitive, let me sketch out the exceptions to the rules of secrecy which might provide some males access to Sande, and as well the traditional consequences of their violation. There were, to be sure, obvious political reasons, suggested above, for which Dorsinville was allowed to take the photographs he wanted. He was a representative of the Liberian government, which had, as a matter of policy, infiltrated Poro and placed it under the authority of the Ministry of Local Government. (When he became president, Tubman, decidedly *kwi*, joined Poro and had himself declared "Grand-Zo" throughout Liberia [Bellman 13-14]). The point I want to make is not only that Poro and Sande were in the 1960s more ethnically open institutions than might be imagined, but that the gender boundaries within them were similarly not as rigid as often implied. Rather, a kind of situational ethics prevailed, one which allowed for diversification of role. The primary exception to the exclusion of men from Sande is called *ngegba* in Mende, the male who is occasionally allowed into the Sande compound for purposes of upkeep, and who undergoes a limited form of initiation to Sande in order to justify his access, and to protect him from the afflictions that fall on ordinary violators (impotence first and foremost, but also, among the Kpelle, hernia). There is, incidentally, an analogous role for women within Mende Poro, the female *mbole* who takes care of the razor used during scarification (Richards 71). Also excepted are the male grandchildren of senior Sande officers, who are permitted into the compound, but excluded once they come of age (Boone 46). To some extent the higher ranks of Sande and Poro who act as liaison between the two are also initiates in the counterpart society. I should mention, finally, another type of exception in a revealing sense of the word: the male who has violated Sande privacy and who must be "initiated" into the society at great financial cost (Phillips 272).

But what does it mean to violate secrecy? In the words of Caroline Bledsoe, "initiates in the secret society 'bush schools' learn little that they did not already know. . . . It does not matter what the secrets are: it is more important that the young believe that the secrets the elders protect are important, and that they have no right to know things only elders are entitled to know" (69). The purpose of having secrets is to reveal them, or have them revealed, at appropriate moments, appropriateness defined by one's status at a given point in time. For example, for the small boys mocking the procession in Figure 3, the shoe would soon be on the other foot. At this moment they were marginal to the procession and oblivious to its import and solemnity, not at all the case of the woman standing next to them, whose body language is easy to read. In other words, whereas it is undeniable that

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secret societies are built upon injunctions against revealing "secrets"—what d'Azevedo calls the "paramount value in this system" (133)—the essence of Sande and Poro lies instead in the active and creative rather than passive and repressive aspects of secrecy.

Like Bledsoe but more elaborately, Beryl Bellman argues that "the *contents* of the secrets are not as significant as are the *doing* of secrecy and the recognition that a do-not-talk-it prescription is a feature of all legitimate social interactions" (17; emphasis in original). Secrets are not absolute forms of knowledge detached from the context of their expression, but effects produced by degrees of discretion about what should and should not be expressed in any given situation. In Kpelle thinking, social situations are organized in terms of *meni*, what Bellman calls "orders of reality" that provide "different meaning contexts, both for producing and for interpreting the meaning of talk and the symbols used in ritual activity" (44). *Meni* are the frameworks governing what can be revealed in front of others, ultimately the basis of determining who Others are. How flexible these categories are can be found in the fact that Bellman, a (white) American, was admitted into a number of societies connected in one way or another with Poro, by no means an isolated example of Poro openness (Richards 70). The greater his knowledge of appropriate behavior, which essentially meant his knowledge of how to speak "deep" registers of Kpelle, the more extended Bellman's access to and understanding of various *meni* became.

I should mention that Bellman was co-author (with Bennetta Jules-Rosette) of *A Paradigm for Looking: Cross-Cultural Research with Visual Media* (1977), in part a study of the introduction of visual media to the Kpelle village in which he lived, and which contains the transcript and description of the filming of a Kpelle Sande dance (Bellman and Jules-Rosette 84-92 and 99-110).[4] Much like those photographed by Dorsinville (but not in my figures), the dances were produced for performance, here before the *zo* or head of the local Poro (despite the phonological and syntactical variation, the kinship of the Kpelle word with the first syllable of *sowo* in Mende and *zoba* in Vai and the second of *mazo* in Gola is apparent). By contrast, though, the Bellman videotape was taken by a ranking member of the Poro, someone knowledgeable about the various conventions of the dance and whose anticipations of action telegraphed a Kpelle point of view on the proceedings (4). In other words, the participant-observer who aimed the camera was much more the former than the latter. My point, speculative I admit, is that it would have been unlikely that a native informant holding the camera in Niavola in the mid 1960s would have produced Dorsinville's particular images since Vai eyes would normally have been averted from what was obviously the center of attention for Dorsinville, the initiates, and turned toward the powerful Sowo maskers who were presiding over the ceremony.

The bulk of Bellman's discussion bears upon the hermeneutic complexity of Kpelle discourse, and he touches only in passing upon Sande per se. Nonetheless, his concept of the interactive nature of secrecy and his recognition that Sande and Poro "provide their members with instructions in how . . . to assume their respective gender roles" (33) complements Sylvia Ardyn Boone's study of Sande esthetics, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (1986), though she, like Bledsoe, seems to have been unaware of Bellman's work, which dates back to 1967.

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It would be possible to accuse Boone of apologist attitudes towards Sande, since she is unflinching when discussing its more equivocal features. She alludes only in a most peremptory way to clitoridectomy (65), a matter to which I shall return and which is an explicit topic of *L'homme derrière l'arbre*. Likewise, her empathetic observation that a primary purpose of Sande is to prepare women for harmonious life within polygamy (52) will leave some (especially Western feminist) readers ill at ease. Although Boone's synthesis of years of fieldwork is admirable, she tends to posit canons that take a life of their own, especially in her chapter "Physical and Metaphysical Aspects of Mende Feminine Beauty" (81-152), where she passes, first, from head to toe through a number of female physical attributes and feminine gestures, and then on to aesthetic categories that are increasingly essentialist (beauty as ideal, as process, as person). Boone's positive interpretation of Sande as an institution within which women find self-fulfillment is, notwithstanding, a welcome contribution to a literature largely devoted to disdain of tribal practices, and of many women's choices:

> In Mende culture, the Sande Society has [the] creative forces of life in its control. Sande has the power to make life good through showing the way to health, wealth, love, and self-expression. It offers the community, cleanliness, freshness, health—all water-borne properties of physical well-being. It offers wealth through the organization of women at the *mawe* [household] level united through their *kpanguima* [compound] sharing in productive farming teams. It offers a woman affection, attention, caring, fellowship, and loving support, so that she is not alone but has sisters who wish her well. And Sande offers opportunities to intellectual development through graded instruction in herbalism, ethics, and jurisprudence. (246)

Most readers will understand that Boone is dealing as much with the construction of gender as with aesthetic canons, though there are points at which these conceptual domains collide. To take one example, there is a myth, in the sense of an art collector's canard, that the double rows of curved ribs on the top of some Sande helmets symbolize labia majora and minora (as on the crown of the *sowo-wui* in the left foreground of the photograph on pp. 100-01). Boone observes, correctly, that "from a general appreciation of Mende culture, aesthetics, and decorum, it is impossible to imagine female genitalia displayed atop the head and even more remarkable to find them spread wide open to public view" (223). Is this same sense of discretion responsible for the fact that the aftereffects of clitoridectomy, the primary act that constitutes Sande initiation, are absent from otherwise quite public and graphic discussion of feminine genital beauty, at least as she reports it (114-18)? Working from premises others would call phenomenological, the effort in Bellman's words to present social activities "from the point of view of their producers" (Bellman and Jules-Rosette 63), Boone remains silent about how her knowledge of Sande, indirectly produced through discussion on parallel topics, must also have been shaped by her own interpretative choices. It follows, however, that if her reading of Sande values is accurate, then clitoridectomy, a matter of no slight trepidation on the part of both girls and parents at the moment of initiation, utterly disappears from the realm of the mentionable and apparently even the visible after its ritual accomplishment.[5] She may be right: the

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only instances in my own culture in which males call attention to circumcision scars (or their absence) are what many would consider licentious (I am referring to homoerotic "pornography"). But there may be things about circumcision Boone did not want to tell us, and that Dorsinville, not in the photographs but in the related texts (esp. 87-89), felt he had to insist upon.

Boone's position is unassailable, at least by me, since it is impossible to confirm her data without going where she went, where males cannot go, at least in person. Not that Boone is secretive, in the sense of evasive, only that she may have chosen to honor a certain discretionary imperative—a *meni*, an order of reality which is not open to me and to the vast majority of her or my readers. Such is at least suggested by the anecdote she tells early in her book:

> A common social misdemeanor helps us grasp the profound meaning of Sande. Village streams have designated male and female bathing areas. A man creeps to the women's place and surreptitiously observes their activities. Hearing a suspicious noise, one woman will call out: "*Ye mia*"—"Who's there?" and if the answer is not correct, all the women will rush to apprehend the intruder. Brought before the chief, he will be accused of the crime of "spying on the Sande"—*Sande ma nee lei*. Thus a few women splashing about together in the water can be "Sande". By this, we see the heart of the hale [secret]: *Sande is women in fellowship*. Women create Sande on any spot where they group together, sharing with one another, excluding men, the space defined by their group in privacy and secrecy. (18)

In other words, like Bellman, Boone understands Sande (and by extension Poro) secrecy to be interactive, and to consist of overlapping sets of discretion that depend on socially determined identities, though the trouble-free conception she proposes of the feminine in Mende society raises numerous questions, especially in conjunction with *L'homme derrière l'arbre*.

Ethnographic film, and it follows ethnophotography must, according to the scholarly tradition that defines it, "be based on ethnographic understanding" (Heider 123). It was most unfortunate that Roger Dorsinville, totally blind by 1989, was unable to edit his own photographs, since he would not have allowed the incongruities of the published sequence in *L'homme derrière l'arbre* to stand, at least without explanatory captions that it is incumbent upon me to supply. Though, initially, the Sande photographs are grouped in proper sequence (92-101), the order thereafter (102-13) is scrambled. Unfortunately, for reasons of space, I have had to exclude the photographs on pp. 100, 101, and 108 from my figures published here, but the actual order of Sande events can be reconstructed by way of reference to them.[6]

Briefly, then, Figures 1 and 2 portray the girls in black and belong to the first stages of initiation prior to purification. This is an occasion of some solemnity and of trepidation on the part of the parents as well as children. Figure 3 represents the second stage of Sande initiation, the first return to the village and public presentation of the initiates. Figures 4 and 5 depict the third phase, the coming-out ceremony in which the (now) women are exuberantly dressed and made-up. By the mid 1960s, umbrellas had replaced the traditional country cloth canopies that were symbolically protective of the young women (Phillips 271),

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Fig. 1. First stage of initiation. From Dorsinville and Mandel, *L'homme derrière l'arbre*. With permission.

and this ritual moment in Figure 4 contrasts with the portrait in Figure 5. Although the events in Figures 1 through 4 are all staged in the sense that they take place outside of the Sande compound and were intended for public consumption, Figure 5 belongs to a particular genre of Western photography, the stand-up portrait, which finally allows the mature Vai women to return the gaze of the Haitian photographer.

Any reader will notice that the majority of the photographs throughout *L'homme derrière l'arbre* depict nubile women (not just in the Sande sequence). There is no shame in this, at least not necessarily so. Roger Dorsinville himself was conscious of the fact that, whereas the dancers sponsored by the Monrovia Cultural Center were young and attractive, the site of their performance was meaningful to a community much larger than himself. The dances he photographed (here excluded for reasons of economy of space and argument) were described in a 1975 article in *Éthiopiques*, reprinted in *L'homme*, as being able to move and engage older persons who had long since lost the grace of their youth: "Une adulte visiblement déformée par les maternités, ou une exécutante ridée, gagne l'aire de danse, pince son pagne et prend la pose, laissant jouer sur ses lèvres le défi d'un sourire. Elle entre dans la danse et on oublie ce qui fut avant elle le déploiement de corps parfaits d'adolescents" (*L'homme* 73) 'An adult woman visibly distorted by successive maternities, or an wrinkled performer, moves onto the area of dance, takes hold of her lappa and strikes the dancer's pose, letting play across her lips a challenging smile. She enters into the dance and one forgets what had been before the display of perfect adolescent bodies.' One suspects, nonetheless, that the desire to remember, which motivates much photography, may have been mixed with the desire to remember youthful desire, and sometimes affected Dorsinville's choice of subject matter, shot, and angle.

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Fig. 2. First stage of initiation. From Dorsinville and Mandel, *L'homme derrière l'arbre*. With permission.

Fig. 3. Second stage of initiation. From Dorsinville and Mandel, *L'homme derrière l'arbre*. With permission.

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Fig. 4. Third phase of initiation. From Dorsinville and Mandel, *L'homme derrière l'arbre*. With permission.

Fig. 5. Third phase of initiation. From Dorsinville and Mandel, *L'homme derrière l'arbre*. With permission.

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Accordingly, the absence of voyeurism from the Sande photographs should be taken as evidence of his sensitivity to the subjectivities he portrays. In her study entitled "The Politics of Citation," Mieke Bal shows how even well-intended critical use of cross-cultural imagery can purvey prejudices that escape the critics themselves.[7] Strictly speaking, her observations about citation of visual imagery across cultures do not apply to Dorsinville's book—these are after all *his* own photographs. They might, however, apply to me. In fact I am deliberately citing Figure 1, the kind of photograph that Bal could find problematic, by way of exploring how one (or shouldn't I even say "I") can "talk these things" (to use Bellman's Liberian idiom). Am I implicated in what Bal calls the "politics of citation" by virtue of the fact that I am recommending to the reader and causing to be exposed secondary sexual attributes that might provoke the gaze and appetite of some male somewhere—the old *National Geographic* syndrome? Obviously, I would claim not, though I cannot base my argument upon the mere matter of my own (good) intentions, as Bal demonstrates at length about the images cited by Raymond Corbey, Malek Alloula, and Sander Gilman. It would be instead the kind of captioning that this article endeavors to provide which would justify the citation of these photographs, captioning that works against random "seriality" by restoring the order and sequence inscribed in the images themselves.[8]

We do not know if Roger Dorsinville bothered to study ethnophotographic traditions, but he did infuse his photographs with a focus rare in Africanist ethnophotography. For example, his attention fell less upon the presence of Sowo, the spirit who invests the Sande helmet, than upon the participant girls and women. Dorsinville took many photographs of maskers and dancers, but seems to have been more interested in the interaction between the maskers and the women who honor them. For example, the caption to the photograph on p. 108 underscores the "respect et connivence entre les villageoises et les porteuses de masques" (108) 'the respect and complicity between the village women and the maskers'—a remark that sets him apart from the tendency to conceive of secret societies as instruments of an obfuscatory elite, rather than as collaborative collective behavior.

It is not unknown for Sande initiates to be made to appear or dance in public; indeed, it is "one of the finest entertainments a chief could provide for important visitors" (Phillips 267)—someone like the Liberian Government's cultural advisor. Photographs of initiation rituals in which Sande bound girls themselves occupy centre stage are nonetheless rare. As I suggested above, it is natural that Sowo, her apparatus and the mature females around her dominate the proceedings, since Sowo has ultimate authority in such moments. As if backhandedly respecting this authority on the ground, most ethnographic attention has also been drawn to the maskers, the masquerade and the helmet mask. Even Boone, whose argument is that Sande women are the active creators of their own realm, offers only a few photographs of ritual in which Sowo is not the centre of attention (see her Fig. 27, of initiates performing a dance for festive rather than initiative reasons; and her Figs. 46 and 50, analogous to my Figs. 4 and 5). More common are photographs like those in d'Azevedo (facing his p. 138) in which Sowo (in this case *zogbe*, since this photograph was taken in Golaland) is shown dancing among her/its attendants. With this last slash I am not trying to throw some strange curve. Gola Zogbe is usually referred to in the neuter, since, though worn by a Sande

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woman, it is considered the impersonation of a male water spirit whose "wives" are all Sande women. When Zogbe presides, no males can legitimately oppose demands upon their wives or the female relatives they usually control. Zogbe momentarily becomes the reigning patriarch. In the Vai photographs Dorsinville and Mandel themselves call attention to the *aspect viril* (masculine aspect) of a particularly inspiring *zo ba* (this time in Vai) wearing ankleboots (*L'homme* 110). The boots, of course, actually have the function of concealing the masker's last inches of flesh (Phillips 273)—even though feet, for Sande women, are the most anonymous and least interesting of features (Boone 119). Sande and Poro are engendering institutions, and the middle ground between the idealized female and male types they convey are much more complex than has been acknowledged.

As treacherous as it might be for me to wade into the debate about clitoridectomy, it can be put off no longer, precisely because Dorsinville, whose concern with it doubtless dates from the period of the Sande photographs, did not want to avoid it. In fact he "captioned" these photographs with texts explicitly treating the trauma of clitoridectomy. The 1980 UN Women's Decade meeting in Copenhagen is often cited as the moment at which Western preconceptions of clitoridectomy as yet another instance of Third World "primitiveness" were finally countered by African women representatives, who insisted that this custom can not be understood without reference to the cultural frameworks within which it occurs (Mansaray 120). Five years earlier Roger Dorsinville had set forth what he took to be the cultural and metaphoric framework of initiation:

> Les actes majeurs [de l'apprentissage] sont, pour le garçon, la circoncision, signe et symbole de propreté, de netteté, d'aggressivité mâle, et, pour la fille, l'excision, l'ablation chirurgicale de toute turgescence ou excroissance capables d'engendrer une sensibilité superficielle et des désirs incompatibles avec l'ordre social. (*L'homme* 104)

> the major acts of initiation are, for boys, circumcision, sign and symbol of cleanliness and neatness, of male aggressivity, and, for girls, excision, the surgical removal of any turgescence or excrescence capable of producing superficial sensitivity and desires incompatible with social order.

Similar wording occurs in *Renaître à Dendé*, published the year of the Copenhagen conference, when the hero Ousmane explains to Martha, the heroine who had been circumcised against her will:

> Ce qu'on vous a enlevé, c'est la source des désirs superficiels. C'est à cela que tendait la culture rurale: socialiser les affections . . . . L'ancienne société, s'adressant à la sources des sollicitations désordonnées, l'amputait. . . . C'était pour contrôler les adolescentes, empêcher qu'elles ne suivent n'importe qui au premier frôlement. (188-90)

> What has been taken from you was the source of superficial desire. Rural culture tended towards the socialization of affection . . . . The old society, turning to the sources of disordered solicitation, cut it off. . . . The point was to control adolescent girls, to keep them from following anyone off at the first caress.

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It is easy to critique these passages and the social discourse they claim to translate. Why is clitoral pleasure "superficial" and "incompatible with social order," whereas the ablation of the male foreskin, which at most merely restructures a site of pleasure, is synonymous with mere cleanliness? Or, again, why is the clitoris rather than the penis the "source of disordered solicitations"? Yet those who defend clitoridectomy can reply, like the Sierra Leonean Khadijatu Mansaray ("an African woman who has gone through the ordeal" [115] and looks upon female circumcision as "necessary and normal" [120]), that its functions are economic as well as social, and are linked to integrity of lineage and ultimately to the familial complex. One European feminist's scathing riposte to such arguments can be found in Renée Saurel's account of the Copenhagen conference (260-66), and a more culturally sensitive though nonetheless committed rationale is in Olayinka Koso-Thomas's *The Circumcision of Women* (5-12).

Suggestive of the position Roger Dorsinville took vis-à-vis the gendering practice it was his professional business and personal endeavor to comprehend, is a passage originally published in *Renaître à Dendé*, and that he inserted alongside the photographs in *L'homme derrière l'arbre*—in fact only a few pages away from Figure 1. Here are his heroine Martha's memories of clitoridectomy:

> Quant à moi, dernière après tant d'autres qui s'étaient débattues en hurlant leur terreur, à peine avais-je senti sur mes épaules le poids des mains qui me clouaient au sol, et autour de mes chevilles les poignes qui m'enserraient après m'avoir brutalement écarté les jambes que je me mis à vociférer, appelant ma mère. Une douleur insupportablement haute me dit que mon clitoris avait été enlevé et je m'évanouis. (*L'homme* 88; *Renaître* 23)
>
> My turn came, the last among so many others who had cried out their terror. I had just felt the heavy hands on my shoulders pinning me to the ground and around my ankles the iron grip holding after having pried my thighs apart when I began to scream, calling out for my mother. An insupportable pain confirmed that my clitoris had been removed, and I passed out.

An analogous passage by another male writer can be found in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendences*, and in both cases we are dealing with what amounts to a violation of women's secrets (and, it could be argued, a peculiar kind of voice appropriation). Kourouma, in fact, goes much further in assaulting ethnic values, since he has his victim Salimata raped by village authorities just after her clitoridectomy, a blasphemous eventuality in no way condoned by traditional values. As for Martha, she returns to Monrovia and in the end meets a loving man who reminds her, excruciatingly: "Vous êtes faite de chair et de nerfs. Une extrémité des nerfs a été cautérisée, mais les nerfs, c'est un long chemin et un vaste appareillage. Cessez de vous torturer" (*Renaître* 188) 'You are made of flesh and of nerves. One extremity of the nerves has been cauterized, but nerves are a complex network and a vast apparatus. Stop torturing yourself about excision.' In the case of both Kourouma and Dorsinville, fiction is made to represent something fundamentally unrepresentable in traditional terms, and thus violates what should be secret.

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Let me conclude with dispatch, and a final allusion to Bal, who cites Alloula's observation that "a reading of the sort that I propose to undertake would be entirely superfluous if there existed photographic traces of the gaze of the colonized upon the colonizer" (39). As she observes, this is often true "only if one fails to look hard enough." What one easily sees transcribed in Figure 5 is the kind of returned gaze of which Bal speaks, one which casts a troubling presence over the entire Sande sequence, at least in the eyes of this reader. It would perhaps be unwise for me to read any precise content into the expressions of the parents standing behind the young women (whose own gazes throughout these images are averted from all other eyes), but there is no doubt that the moment is one of pride. Observe also that the same women are also captured in Figure 4, where they are holding symbolically shielding umbrellas over the daughters they recently had circumcised. Roger Dorsinville's achievement as a photographer (and initiation into the Africa that was to inspire so much of his writing) can be found in the profound ambiguity these images convey when read in conjunction with what he knew and we know about clitoridectomy.

NOTES

1. Though Dorsinville's photographs are of Vai initiation, most of the terms commonly applied to Sande are from Mende, not only because there has been more research on Sande among the Mende, but because their Sande and its artifacts are felt to represent the canonical form of those things. Where possible, I insert Vai and Gola terms, *zo ba* and *zogbe* respectively, for Mende *sowo*, the spirit who invests the *sowo-wui*.
2. All translations are my own.
3. Boone's chapter "The Sande Society" (13-43) and its notes provide an overview of scholarship on Sande. It should be complemented with Bellman's chapter "The Poro in West Africa" (13-18), since Sande and Poro are inseparably linked and much that can be said about the latter holds for the former.
4. Obviously, I do not follow Boone in restricting the terms Sande and Bundu to those who "regularly display the archetypal Sowo masquerade figure and feel allegiance to it" (40), since the Kpelle Sande does not use masks (Bellman 33), yet exhibits almost all other Sande traits.
5. On this point, see Olayinka Koso-Thomas, a Nigerian doctor married to a Sierra Leonean, responding to "aesthetic" arguments in favor of clitoridectomy: " . . . [M]any ethnic groups still consider the normal female genitalia very ugly to look at or to touch. . . . The eye that finds the normal female genitalia ugly has been conditioned to this perception" (7, 10). A few pages later, she writes: "It is amazing how many African [Sierra Leonean] females have no idea what female genitalia should look like" (12).
6. The co-presence in the scene on pages 100-01 of the maskers, their type of head tie, and the white-clad initiates in the background are an important marker of discrete ritual moments, whose order is otherwise not obvious in the actual captions of *L'homme derrière l'arbre*. Similarly, the umbrellas in the background on page 108 alongside the maskers' white head ties, confirm that it and other images with the same content, such as the umbrellas in our Figure 4, belong to a subsequent ritual event, one quite separate in time. Mieke Bal has observed that "seriality . . . in presentation makes . . . images take on a life of their own" (27), meaning that random presentation of cross-cultural images inaccurately captioned opens them even more to misreadings.

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7. Bal was referring to photographs (in Corbey's *Wildheid en Beschaving: De Europese Verbeelding van Afrika* and Alloula's *The Colonial Harem*) and illustrations (in Sander Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies"), which were more immodest than those before you, but her point is well taken. In any event, Roger Dorsinville's photographs of Liberia cannot be put into the category of a colonial's gaze without much prevarication. Whereas he was, as a cultural advisor to the Tubman government, in some sense an agent of the Americo-Liberian colonial project that created Liberia, his diasporic eye should not be assimilated to that of an utter outsider.
8. "Seriality . . . in presentation makes the images take on a life of their own," according to Bal (27). Bal is using seriality in the sense of a haphazard order of photographs, as opposed to one that displays the logic of the events themselves. Extracted from their original sequence, images like these are vulnerable to readings that reflect the readers' own biases, or are framed in terms of criteria that have nothing to do with the ethnographic event in question.

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