



Sierra Leone – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 12 July 2011

Information on forced initiation by all-male secret societies operating in Northern Sierra Leone, particularly in the region of Kenbaya.

A research analysis document prepared by *Country of Origin Research and Information (CORI)*, in a section titled “Functioning of Poro society in Sierra Leone”, refers to secret societies in Sierra Leone as follows:

“Secret Societies are an integral part of Sierra Leonean culture, their primary purposes are to regulate sexual identity and social conduct and to mediate relations with the spirit world. The societies have a religious, judicial, educational and military function. The Poro society educates boys, passing on spiritual secrets and powers of witchcraft. One source reports that membership of a secret society is a prerequisite to full tribal membership and is necessary to be considered an adult ready to marry, ‘as a result, nearly everyone living in Sierra Leone’s provinces, particularly the rural parts, belongs to a secret society.’” (Country of Origin Research and Information (CORI) (9 March 2009) *Fear of forced initiation into the Poro Secret Society in Freetown*, p.2)

A *Writenet* Report by Dr Richard Fanthorpe, in a section titled “Organization and Purpose” (section 2.1), states:

“Secret societies induct members by means of initiation, and both initiates and non-initiates must observe a range of laws and protocols if the cooperation of spirit powers is to be assured. The basic laws are, firstly, that initiates cannot speak of society affairs to non-initiates and, secondly, that non-initiates must not witness society rituals. Patches of forest, whether surrounding a settlement or simply left standing amid land cleared for farming, provide secluded locales for society rituals. The leading societies also have the authority to impose a ritual curfew on a settlement, and at these times all non-initiates must retreat indoors and shutter all windows. ‘Secret society’ is therefore something of a misnomer, since initiates of the leading societies make no attempt to conceal the fact of their membership.” (Writenet (August 2007) *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*, p.1)

In a section titled “Political Role” (section 2.3) this report states:

“There were many socially unattached youths living in the town at the close of the war and this was a source of considerable anxiety to the town elders after their earlier experiences at the hands of young RUF conscripts. Like General Sesay, the elders’ chosen solution was to hold a mass Poro initiation in the town. Those that refused to be initiated were allegedly being denied access to their family lands under Poro law.” (ibid, p.12)

This section of the report refers to the forced initiation of Muslims by the Poro society as follows:

“In March 2005, it was reported that Muslims in Bo township had protested en masse to local government officials following the forced initiation of a local Imam who had questioned the right of Poro members to initiate two of his Arabic students without first obtaining permission from their parents. Some Muslims also took the initiative against their opponents. For example, in May 2006, the eastern regional representative of the newly launched National League of Islamic Organizations of Sierra Leone claimed 420 recent Poro ‘converts’ to Islam in his area and the subsequent burning of 51 Poro bushes. With the stakes thus raised, Poro society members in Pendembu town in Kailahun District were reported to have stormed a mosque where sermons had been preached against the society. Several people were reportedly injured and some members of the congregation were forcibly initiated.” (ibid, p.13)

A section of this report titled “Trans-local Religionists” (section 2.4.1) states:

“As already mentioned the drive to reassert locally rooted culture and authority in the post-war era has seen secret society members come into conflict with ‘stranger’ groups, notably members of the Muslim merchant community. Forced initiation of imams and other leading Muslim figures are overtly political acts designed to intimidate and punish rather than convert.” (ibid, p.14)

A section titled “Risks Faced by Critics and Opponents of Secret Societies” (section 2.5) states:

“Aggressive use of secret society rituals in urban areas has also seen society members clash with non-initiates, especially in the capital district (Western Area). Again, people who speak out against the societies risk violent confrontation and forced initiation.” (ibid, p.16)

A *Country of Return Information Project* country sheet for Sierra Leone, in a section titled “Practical obstacles” (section 1.4.1) states:

“Another obstacle to internal travel comes from the poro society (secret society) during the initiation season, when members are not allowed to move freely upon risk to be captured and forcefully initiated. Successive governments have made little effort to change this picture either because the practice is so deeply embedded in the culture of the people or because politicians fear losing the votes of the people if they attempt to ban it, or both. Caution has to be taken during this season if you are a non-initiate.” (Country of Return Information Project (August 2007) *Country Sheet – Sierra Leone: Bo and Kono District*, p.7)

The 2007 *United States Department of State* country report for Sierra Leone, in a section titled “Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment”, states:

“During the year both men and women were forcibly initiated into tribal secret societies, a process that for women usually involved FGM. For example, in March and April the Poro Society in Manowa Kailahun District attempted to forcefully initiate a man into the society. The man ran away and reported the matter to the police, who deferred to the local paramount chief. The paramount chief then allowed Poro members to drag the man out of his home, beat him, and initiate him into their secret society.” (United States Department of State (6 March 2007) *2006 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone*)

An article from the Freetown-based newspaper *Awareness Times* states:

“Reports reaching *Awareness Times* have indicated a serious tension between Muslims and Poro Society members of Pendembu town in the Kailahun District, when the latter group forcibly captured several of the former and forcefully initiated them into the secret Poro society. Some Imams, Sheiks and other Muslim youths are reported to have fallen victim of this situation. According to reports the action of the Poro members is as result of Islamic preaching against the practices of the society, a situation which had reportedly angered the society members and had therefore adopted the policy of forceful initiation of non members a process which included the religion’s leaders as well.” (*Awareness Times* (29 January 2007) *Muslims clashes with Poro Society in Kailahun, Sierra Leone*)

A *UN Human Rights Council* report, in a section titled “Right to personal security” (paragraph 9), states:

“In February, the town chief of Foindu Mameima Village in Lower Bambara Chiefdom, Kenema district, reported that he had to flee town for fear of being manhandled and molested by members of the Poro society, a secret society for men, because he was opposed to forceful initiation into its ranks. There were also instances of interference by traditional leaders in police investigations into such matters. In January, in Kono district, three arrested suspects involved in forceful initiations were released by the police on the instructions of a local traditional leader. The suspects had allegedly dragged a resident of Taidu Village into a Poro bush, a place typically designated for initiation, and beaten him.” (*UN Human Rights Council* (12 February 2010) *Assistance to Sierra Leone in the field of human rights: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, p.5)

A *Concord Times* article states:

“Some youths residing in Danka Walli village in the Koinadugu district, northern Sierra Leone have condemned the local authorities for coercing them into becoming members of both the Beriti and Gbonsoro secret society. According to them, the act is a clear violation of their rights to freedom of association. This writer visited Danka Walli village where he spoke to some of the youths regarding the harassment they face from local authorities to join the secret sects. One of the youth leaders in the area, Mohamed Kamara, confirmed to this writer that the traditional practices in that part of the country have made a good number of young people constantly living in fear and wanting to flee the village. According to him, local authorities in the village are threatening all male indigenes to go through the initiation rites of the two sects.” (*Concord Times* (12 January 2011) *Sierra Leone: Danka Youths Flee Gbonsoro Initiation*)

The 2011 *United States Department of State* country report for Sierra Leone, in a section titled “Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment”, comments on the prevalence of forced initiation into secret societies as follows:

“Compared to the previous year, fewer men and women were initiated forcibly into tribal secret societies, a process that for women usually involved female genital mutilation (FGM). Although data was hard to come by due to the secretive nature of these societies, government sources extrapolated the decrease in male initiations from observations that fewer young men were returning to their home villages, where initiation ceremonies are held, from their jobs in the country’s main cities and towns.”

(United States Department of State (8 April 2011) *2010 Human Rights Report: Sierra Leone*)

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

References:

Awareness Times (29 January 2007) *Muslims clashes with Poro Society in Kailahun, Sierra Leone*

<http://news.sl/drwebsite/exec/view.cgi?archive=4&num=4619&printer=1>

(Accessed 12 July 2011)

Concord Times (12 January 2011) *Sierra Leone: Danka Youths Flee Gbonsoro Initiation*

<http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/201101130307.html>

(Accessed 12 July 2011)

This is a subscription database.

Country of Origin Research and Information (CORI) (9 March 2009) *Fear of forced initiation into the Poro Secret Society in Freetown*

<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/49db6ccb2.pdf>

(Accessed 12 July 2011)

Country of Return Information Project (August 2007) *Country Sheet – Sierra Leone: Bo and Kono District*

<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/476292e82.pdf>

(Accessed 12 July 2011)

UN Human Rights Council (12 February 2010) *Assistance to Sierra Leone in the field of human rights: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*

<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/4bbda25a2.pdf>

(Accessed 12 July 2011)

United States Department of State (8 April 2011) *2010 Human Rights Report: Sierra Leone*

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/af/154368.htm>

(Accessed 12 July 2011)

United States Department of State (6 March 2007) *2006 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone*

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78756.htm>

(Accessed 12 July 2011)

Writenet (August 2007) *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*

<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/46cee3152.pdf>

(Accessed 12 July 2011)

Sources Consulted:

All Africa

Country of Return Information Project

Electronic Immigration Network

European Country of Origin Information Network

Google

Lexis Nexis

Refugee Documentation Centre Query Database

United Kingdom Home Office

UNHCR Refworld

United States Department of State

Writenet