

Chapter 3

Freetown's Yoruba-Modelled Secret Societies as Transnational and Transethnic Mechanisms for Social Integration

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Introduction

Sierra Leone's history supplies the basis for understanding the geographical, psychological, emotional and political macro- and micro-fields on which the current significance of Freetown's secret societies is being played out. Some of the contexts are divided by centuries, but all these periods are swathed in enduring issues of identity, integration and power, among others, that are still relevant today.

In 1787, a humanitarian organization, Society for the Black Poor, mobilized resources and the British government's approval for the first repatriation of a group of ex-slaves to Africa. The efforts aimed not at returning them to their specific geographical homelands in West Central Africa, Bights of Benin, Bights of Biafra and the Gold Coast but at settling them in places considered similar to the settlements from which they and their ancestors had been uprooted by the slave trade. The current territory of Freetown was that chosen settlement, and the first set of repatriated slaves was called the Original Settlers (Peterson 1969; Alie 1990).

Although Britain had pronounced an official end to the trade in slaves and slavery in 1807 and 1833, respectively (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000), abolition was not generally enforced in all the areas where these practices were active. Britain accepted control of the coastal area where Freetown currently sits and declared it a Crown Colony in 1808.

On the waters of the new colony, Britain intercepted ships that flouted the abolition orders, redirected them to the colony and freed the intended slaves into the community of already resettled ex-slaves. The first members of this later group, known as the Recaptives or Liberated Africans, including many captives from Nigeria, were brought in in 1808. On their resettlement in Sierra Leone,

the Recaptives maintained their original identities and practices, largely unadulterated (Peterson 1969: 162; Fyfe 1993 [1962]: 184–87, 292). The communing of these settlers from various parts of Africa – people with similar but also varied experiences – led to a fusion of identities ‘through a process of creolization’ (Knörr 2010: 206) and the formation of a new community, the Creole community.

An important aspect of that early Freetown Creole community was its secret societies and one of their public realizations, masquerades.¹ Peterson (1969), who chronicled Freetown’s early history, notes that upon its introduction to the colony around 1850, Agugu, a secret society with roots in Nigeria, was embraced by Creoles and other ethnic groups of Sierra Leone, and by Moslems and Christians alike (Peterson 1969: 267). He contends that it gained traction because of its ‘apparent efficacy’ (ibid.: 266–67). Yet that easy acceptance can also be explained by the fact that the Agugu fitted with already existing practices of both the composite groups of resettled slaves and other Sierra Leone ethnic groups. The apparent Agugu-created unity lasted as long as it was the only secret society of the new community’s members. Once another secret society with Nigerian bases, the Hunters secret society (formed mainly to hunt wild animals) had emerged, the latter and the Agugu entered into contestations about which was more representative of members of the new community (ibid.: 268–69). As a result, both societies increasingly leaned towards exclusivity. That tendency meant that large sections of the Freetown community, Creole and non-Creole, were unable to become members of either the Agugu or the Hunters. The latter’s members progressively portrayed themselves as superior and their society as their answer to Masonic Lodges (ibid.: 269).

Those contested claims catalysed reconstructions of ‘we’ and ‘they’ groupness, even in non-secret-society matters.² They also had implications for the formation of a new secret society, a cross between the two older societies that enfolded those they had rejected and marginalized: the Odelay. The first Odelay, a term that translates as ‘Lord a Mercy’, was formed between 1950 and 1952. It became the secret society of poor men, women and young people – long-term urban residents and migrants from Sierra Leone’s interior, members of the Creole group and members of other ethnic groups – who lacked the qualifications to become members of the then exclusive Agugu and Hunters. Today, more than 150 Odelay modelled on that first Odelay operate as independent organizations with their own executives. Odelay are still meeting places for the poor and marginalized in society, but they are now distinct from the first Odelay in that socio-economically and politically powerful Sierra Leoneans and non-Sierra Leoneans have become members.

In Sierra Leone, secret societies are organizations whose internal workings and activities tend to be closed to nonmembers. Members often say that their secrets are accessible only to members, and threaten harm to nonmembers who try to learn their secrets by stealth. Sierra Leone’s secret societies can be classified

into old urban societies (e.g. the Agugu and Hunters), new urban societies (like Odelay) and traditional secret societies. Except for Odelay, all of them are, for the most part, specific to a single sex. Some of them focus their activities on entertainment, some on medicine, some on prestige, and so on. However, many of these sodalities, at different times and to varying degrees, combine two or more such emphases. Odelay is mostly an urban phenomenon, peculiar to Freetown and the big towns of Sierra Leone's interior. While membership of traditional secret societies in the hinterland is compulsory, membership of Freetown's old and new urban secret societies is not compulsory; rather, it is a matter of strategic or tactical choice.

All Freetown-based secret societies with historical links to Yorubaland in Nigeria, notwithstanding their secrets-embedded core, have a public side in the form of their public masquerade performances. In this context, a 'masquerade' is a mask-wearing figure that symbolizes the spirit and essence of a secret society and leads its public performance. That masked figure is normally called a 'devil'.³ In addition, all members of Yoruba-based urban secret societies publicize their masquerades as embodying the medicine mystique. Therefore, masquerades are a nexus of visible and invisible powers and urban secret societies' public performances. As agreed between the providers of the information I discuss here and myself, I do not present pictures of these masquerades.⁴

The Formation of Odelay and the Linguistic Nigerian Connections

All of Freetown's older urban secret societies set minimal thresholds of socioeconomic attainment and appropriate family connections for aspiring members.⁵ When some of the urban poor succeeded in gaining membership in the Agugu and Hunters, their mobility within them was often limited by their un-illustrious backgrounds because placement and progress within those sodalities were effectively elitist (i.e. determined by affluence and family ties). Freetown's new secret societies responded to this exclusion and limitation by opening their membership to Freetown's disadvantaged, irrespective of geographical background, socioeconomic standing or family pedigree. Odelay is the most important of these sodalities. All of Freetown's Odelay share a common history of earlier exclusion and historical connection to the first Odelay, whose emergence I will recount below.

Modelled on the Agugu and Hunters societies, an Odelay is a cross between the two. In fact, my informants clarified that the term Odelay means 'small Ode': 'Ode' is the name of the Hunters' masquerade, and '-lay' is a diminutive suffix in the Yoruba argot that typifies Freetown's secret societies. Nunley asserts that Odelay came into being in mid-twentieth-century Freetown as a response to the demands of the time (Nunley 1987: 60). He goes on to present the realities of overpopulation in Freetown at the time due to a surge of migrants from Sierra Le-

one's interior, and the resulting poor economic and health conditions and vices. He also notes the rootlessness those migrants experienced and the need they felt for some sort of urban belonging. Abdullah Honwana and de Boeck (2005), acknowledging Nunley (1987: 176), say that 'the exclusionary cultural landscape in Freetown' occasioned the emergence of the Odelay as an alternative urban space to occupy and perform in.

Urban secret societies' role in granting social integration to Freetown's disadvantaged was attractive to prospective members of these newer secret societies. Odelay therefore developed into receptacles – as they still are – for (potential) rejects and marginalized members of the older Agugu and Hunters societies. Pertinently, as Low (1996: 384), discussing the significance of cities for differing claimants, points out, 'The city as a site for everyday practices provides valuable insights into the linkages of the macroprocesses with the texture and fabric of human experience'.

A major conflict sprang up between older urban secret societies and newer Odelay over active claims the latter's members made that their masquerades were 'devils'. Many members of the Agugu and Hunters were united in their view of Odelay as mere pretenders to secret society status, challengers to their secret society hegemony. These rhetorical, sometimes real conflicts persisted during my research.

Despite these conflicts, members of *Agugu*, *Hunters* and *Odelay* societies share a functional commonality: they all use a version of the (Nigerian) Yoruba language in both secret and nonsecret societal activities. (Yoruba are not one of Sierra Leone's ethnic groups, but words and expressions from the Yoruba language, traceable to the Recaptives, still exist in Sierra Leone's lingua franca, Creole.) My research showed that the use of Yoruba, often selective, increased the mystique of the new societies and was also a strategy that gave immediacy to their claims to have Nigerian origins. These selected words, phrases and expressions are different from the familiar ones in Sierra Leone's Creole language. Secret society members often – apparently consciously – switch from the easily understandable Creole to the Yoruba-charged variety in a purpose-dictated diglossia.⁶ I found out that the key possession was not knowledge of Yoruba (the donor language) itself, but rather mastery of important expressions used to index secret society exclusivity. I also noted that the secret society members within my study areas used Yoruba argot-laden Creole to make a social statement and maintain their group's boundary.

On balance, knowledge and use of Yoruba or some expressions and words from it, and claims to the Yoruba connection seem to give members of Odelay organizations a sense of rootedness in both Sierra Leone and one of the biggest ethnic groups in the 'big brother', Nigeria. It came across during my interviews that membership of these Yoruba-based organizations made up for deficits in individual members' social standing and relative lack of in-country socioeconomic success. Nigeria's comparative prosperity in the West Africa subregion seemingly

provides them with not only the roots of respectability, but, by default, a distant but present canopy of care. It is also important to note that the use of Yoruba makes the workings of these secret societies inscrutable to nonmembers, and that they found their esoteric medicinal power on those grounds. Yet, arguably, this ever-present possibility of establishing prestigious external roots through membership of these organizations is related to differing conceptualizations of Sierra Leone nationhood, which I examine next.

The Bifurcated Sierra Leone Nation(s)

Nationhood in Sierra Leone is an artefact of the country's history and present realities. Until 1896, the term Sierra Leone referred only to the area currently known as Freetown. From the late nineteenth century on, however, Sierra Leone consisted of two *de facto* nations: the colony and the hinterland. Today, membership of Odelays has become a bridge across these two 'nations'.

The organization that took over the running of the colony of ex-slaves and Recaptives from the humanitarians was called the Sierra Leone Company. Its main responsibility was to make the new settlement viable and the settler community self-sustaining in the long run. The Crown Colony declared by the British in 1808 lay over what is currently Freetown. One of the reasons given for the declaration was that the Sierra Leone Company 'could not succeed as a commercial venture' (Peterson 1969: 34). The declaration of the Crown Colony meant that the inhabitants of the colony were British subjects while the interior was a different sovereign sphere, with its own people and leaders. In reality, though, the interior functioned as an appendage to the declared Crown Colony. The hinterland's natural resources, like groundnuts, effectively financed the running of the smaller Crown Colony (Fyfe 1993 [1962]). That larger interior then was a nominal 'Protectorate', loosely and insidiously policed by the Frontier Police Force, which was charged with keeping watch over the British frontier in Sierra Leone. As Fyfe notes, 'The protected area, sometimes called the "Protectorate", though as yet no Protectorate was officially proclaimed, was not subject to British jurisdiction' (Fyfe 1993[1962]: 487).

Britain's formalization of control over the Protectorate was given impetus by France's hot pursuit of the warrior Samori Touré and his troops in the area that is present-day Guinea, after the marauding troops had entered an area of nominal British control. The wording of the resulting formalization points to the bifurcation of nation or nations referred to in the heading of this sub-section, arguing:

The Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890, consolidating a series of earlier acts, empowered the Crown to exercise any jurisdiction as if by right of cession or conquest. An Order-in-Council of August the 28th 1895 de-

clared that the Crown had acquired jurisdiction in foreign countries adjoining the Colony. On August the 31st 1896 a Protectorate was formally proclaimed, as ‘being best for the people’... (Fyfe 1993 [1962]: 541)

This shows that the distinction between Freetown on the one hand and Sierra Leone beyond Freetown on the other is a geopolitical and sociocultural division rooted in colonial history. This division informed realizations and constructions of exclusion, marginality and margins – with Sierra Leone’s interior being at the margins imaginary of the Sierra Leone nation (Richards 1996). Vivek Srivastava and Marco Larizza (2011), referring to Hanlon (2005) and Kieh (2005), have also observed that ‘the areas outside Freetown had traditionally been excluded and marginalized’.

The bifurcated nation not only shaped relationships between people in the city and people in (or from) the interior for a long time, but also tellingly bred discourses of ‘Freetonians’ versus ‘people from “up country”’ or ‘those who were here [Freetown]’ and ‘those who came’ (i.e. migrants from the interior). My research indicates that membership of an Odelay was a means for ‘people from up country’ to become ‘Freetonians’, and for marginal actors to identify as members of a Sierra Leonean nation. Freetown’s ‘secret society belt’ is and has been an area where these twin happenings occur.

The foregoing demonstrates that histories, official policies, lived realities and actors’ determination to exert their social relevance against many odds shaped the conceptions of and reactions to Sierra Leone’s nation imaginary. They also created stages where these issues were played out. Because resettled ex-slaves, Recaptives, migrants from the Sierra Leone’s interior and poor Freetown residents found it hard to succeed in broader society, I argue, they built backstage secret societies to gain a foothold on the frontstage of broader Freetown society. Therefore, we can understand the enduring significance of Yoruba-based secret societies, especially Odelay, by situating them in Goffman’s frame of stages.⁷

Abolition of the slave trade and slavery worked together with British colonial policy to bring people from many parts of Africa to what later became the Sierra Leone Colony. A shared history enabled them to draw on Yoruba-based secret societies as joint possessions (inherited common backstages). Yet, as time went on, these organizations’ inclusivity metamorphosed into exclusivity, prompting the formation of perceivably more inclusive ‘grass-roots’ organizations like Odelay. Many of Freetown’s poor and mainly migrant populations who lacked the backstages of family pedigree and bequeathed wealth, for example, became members of Odelay organizations and used them as backstages, fortified by secrets, to give themselves relevance on Freetown’s front stages. But actors on the newer urban secret society backstages also made use of other backstages of shared history and Yoruba origins to (re)connect with older urban secret societies such as the Agugu

and Hunters. That hindmost backstage, as we shall see in the next sections, gave members of the first Odelay grounds to contest the older secret societies.

Freetown's Secret Society Belt and the 'Lord a Mercy' Odelay Prototype Story

The area I refer to as the secret society belt covers some of the most heavily populated communities in Freetown, such as Fourah Bay, Kroo Bay and Foulah Town. Many of the belt's residents are migrants from other areas, including Sierra Leone's interior. It is instructive that these migrant-heavy areas have the highest concentration of Yoruba-modelled secret societies, especially Odelay organizations.

Many poor migrants from Sierra Leone's interior and less well-off Freetonians such as those marginalized in or from older urban secret societies used membership of Odelay secret societies jointly for urban social integration. It was also instrumental in generating fear-born respect and acceptance from other Sierra Leoneans whose status derived from sources other than Odelay secret societies. Membership of these societies offers places of abode, jobs, job promotions and support in times of pressing need. Now, the entertainment value of *Odelays* is becoming merely incidental.

Nunley (1987) refers to the post-World War II years as the period of Odelays' conception. Old members of Odelay societies and nonmembers alike corroborated this in my interviews. Nunley further regards Alikalis as the prototype of Odelays (Nunley 1987: 51). Alikalis were ragtag Freetown boys' societies of the 1940s and 1950s. Their members were noted for their proclivity for violence and crime, including theft. My informants held that Alikalis' defining image was that of their typically jobless members stealing from onlookers and residents in the areas their masquerades passed through. Nunley's (ibid.) observation that members of Alikalis were called 'wharf rats' illustrates the perceived general criminality of these groups' members. One of my informants summed up the Alikalis' objectives as 'wanting to mount a one-day show which raised eyebrows and some cash, mainly illicitly'. Importantly, old Alikali members whom I spoke to did not claim Alikalis were secret societies. I further learned that Alikalis never rose above being mainly disparate juvenile groups. Therefore, many of my informants argued against the view that Alikalis were potentially Odelays' prototype, as their objectives differed from the goals driving what evolved into Odelays. Alikalis were really forerunners to Odelays, not their prototype.

From my findings, I can deduce that the emergence of 'Lord a Mercy' was a summary of the issues, actions and actors that engendered the Odelay phenomenon. Formed in the 1950s, Lord a Mercy had a membership like that of the Alikalis: mainly unemployed young people and others living in precarious situations.⁸ Although Lord a Mercy had some 'wharf rats', it was a shade above Alikalis because its chief characteristic was not crime but its members' aspiration

to make it a creditable alternative to Agugu and Hunters societies in Freetown's secret society landscape. It was like an Alikali without the overt criminal content.

At its founding, Lord a Mercy was led by a Christian Creole who was a member of both Hunters and Agugu secret societies but came from a poor family and thus had little chance of attaining a controlling role in them. That Creole leader had the respect of many young men, especially non-Creole migrants from the country's interior who hoped to become members of a secret society in Freetown. The majority of these young men were unqualified for membership into the two older Yoruba-modelled societies because they were poor and jobless, and lacked reputable backgrounds or the requisite metaphorical backstages. Some carried the baggage of being past members of the hugely discreditable Alikalis. They therefore rallied around the Christian Creole man to 'build their own devil' in the Brookfields and Saint John areas of central Freetown. The Lord a Mercy masquerade's maiden public appearance by itself contested the established order and was thus a source of tension between the members of this group and those of the Agugu and Hunters societies.

This first Lord a Mercy public performance took place on a public holiday when other established urban secret societies also performed.⁹ More challengingly, the Lord a Mercy masquerade looked just like the older Hunters' masquerade. Members had themselves composed most of their songs for that first public outing, but they also sang some Yoruba songs more commonly associated with the Hunters. More, the group incensed the older societies by calling their masquerade a 'devil'. Clearly, the new group was tapping the resources of a Creole secret society insider (their leader), albeit a marginalized one, to make itself recognized. Members of the Agugu and Hunters saw this new reality as an affront to their medicine-mystique hegemony. Consequently, they made a stand to chasten the perceived dangerous idlers and discourage Lord a Mercy's continuance. It is rumoured that during that first performance, members of the Agugu and Hunters, drawing on their common Yoruba origins, united and used magical powers to unsettle the new masquerade and its followers; but the Creole leader of the group, who stood in front of the masquerade drawing on that same Yoruba backstage, rendered the assaulting powers ineffectual on the frontstage of social contestation for urban recognition. Subsequently the challenge became physical, as young members of the older societies fought with those of the new group.

Lord a Mercy was not the group's original name. One informant said it had carried the name of its Creole founder. Two others said the group had not had a name, adding that its name came from the physical violence of the street fights in that first outing, in which members of both sides sustained serious injuries. Reportedly, supporters of the older secret societies came off worse. Reprisals continued throughout central Freetown as members of the new group attacked the older sodalities' perceived members and sympathizers with sticks and broken bottles. It was reported that during the fighting, some Freetown residents who

had been traumatized by the just-ended Second World War and the many violent economic-stringency-related strikes in Freetown shouted in desperation and resignation from their verandas and behind trellised windows, ‘Lord a mercy! Lord a mercy O!’ (i.e. May the Lord have mercy on us!). That was how the group got its name – which it maintained, because of the fear and attendant forced recognition that accidental moniker had generated.

Lord a Mercy’s story shows that violence is a resource used by claimants of rights to space in the city, especially when other means are obviated. This gives credence to Holston’s view that ‘people use violence to make claims on the city and use the city to make violent claims’ (1999: 16). On today’s Freetown secret societies stage, Lord a Mercy is not one of the five largest Odeley organizations. Still, many of its members and members of other Odeley organizations believe that Lord a Mercy, by mounting an alternative trans-secret societal outfit, aesthetically so similar yet compositionally so different from the established secret societies in the city, was seminal to the now flourishing Odeley phenomenon.

I argue that widespread poverty among society’s disadvantaged had weakened the national embrace. This informed the formation of Odeleys and inspired the disadvantaged to draw on backstages of secret societies and transnational connections to succeed on the frontstage of open society in Freetown and even Sierra Leone. The thesis of the weak national embrace could be linked to what I consider to be a community of shared lived realities and circumstances, considered next.

Urban Secret Societies and the Community of Shared Lived Realities

Guided by my findings, I analyse nationhood from a perspective of shared lived realities and circumstances. A community of shared lived realities and circumstances, I maintain, bonded members of the early Creole community that evolved from freed slaves. Odeleys emerged in the 1950s, when the divide between the interior and the capital had not yet been bridged. Since Sierra Leone was still putatively understood as Freetown, I argue that the emergence of Odeleys was a route to the nation imaginary.¹⁰ Young migrants from the provinces and the urban unemployed and unemployable became members of Odeleys. Pointedly, many of the first executive members of Freetown Odeleys were not Creoles but came from ethnic groups of the hinterland.¹¹

Sometimes, membership of Odeleys has been a platform from which some members launched bids to be inducted into the relatively high-standing Agugu and Hunters societies. Currently, all three sodalities share complementarities of mutual memberships, aesthetics and songs, and use the same Yoruba argot. In addition, all three organizations’ members refer to their societies using the Yoruba generic term *Awo*, which has two meanings: (1) an esoteric-medicinal brotherhood/community, and (2) the spirit that all Yoruba-modelled secret societies jointly lay claim to.

A community of shared lived realities and circumstances feeds on, and is in turn fed by, a community of history. The resulting mutual reinforcements inform the fellow-feeling that Odelay members show to one another and to members of other Yoruba-modelled secret societies like the Agugu and Hunters. This fellow-feeling for a secret society member, I maintain, cuts across political party and ethnic sensibilities in Freetown in particular and Sierra Leone in general. Awo is thus the transnational, invoked to valorize the Sierra Leonean. Yoruba-modelled secret society fellow-feeling is thus an infrastructure that could be argued to (1) promote nationhood, (2) undermine nationhood or (3) (re)present an alternative to nationhood.

Because membership of Yoruba-modelled urban secret societies binds Sierra Leoneans from across varied divides, this membership summons a fervour that the official nation does not necessarily muster. To test the strength of an urban secret society's fellow-feeling for its own members in relation to others, I asked fifty-five members of Odelay the following question: 'If you were in a public position of trust and you had a job to offer, whom would you give it to: a member of your secret society or a non-member?' All of the respondents answered that they would give the job to a fellow Yoruba-based secret society member. The responses to follow-up questions were also remarkable. I asked, 'If you found out that two people came forward for this same job and that the person who was not a member of your secret society was qualified, while your fellow secret society member was not, whom would you give the job to?' Forty-seven said they would give the job to the unqualified secret society member – male or female. Many of them clarified that they would feel safe(r) working with a fellow secret society member, adding that they saw it as a moral imperative 'to help a society brother or sister'. Respondents also said that they 'would qualify' the fellow secret society member once he or she got the job. All of this shows that shared secret society memberships substitute other considerations like merit, ability and ethnic background.

An Odelay elder told me the following story, which could explain the fastness of the bond. In the 1960s a highly placed member of the then ruling political party in Sierra Leone was finding it difficult to gain enough support for his party in the secret society belt. Though he was a member of the exclusive Agugu, he was not a member of any Odelay. Still, though, the politician calculatedly sought to gain the support his party badly needed in that contested, votes-rich area through Odelay and other Yoruba-modelled secret societies by liberally preaching the common histories of the secret societies and the mutually possessed Awo.

The relative ease of gaining membership of Odelay – which is not based on socioeconomic or family status – meant that this politician would benefit from the huge 'vote banks' (Das and Poole 2005) in the secret society belt. The government official's political party was not, according to the elder who narrated this story to me, the party that many members of the Odelay had been

supporting. But he and his fellow members of Odelay eventually supported the highly-placed government official, the elder explained, summarizing why Odelay and cognate Yoruba societies had made common cause with fellow secret society members: ‘We supported the “highly-placed official” because Awo does not know difference in party or tribe; it demands that we support a fellow secret society brother and fight for him as a body. Everywhere he cries, we cry with him [whenever he has a need of whatever sort, we rush to his aid]’.

This ‘common cause with kind’ feature of urban secret societies marks a strand of association that transcends the generally recognized group identities of ethnic group and nationality in Freetown. Importantly, the strength and utility of that bond go against the state’s refrain of the nation being the prime source of mobilization. Members of Odelay do not eschew the nation; they craft mechanisms below the level of the nation to invigorate their claim to nationhood in Sierra Leone. Because Odelay are transethnic, trans-social and transnational groups in both their origins and their current standings, they embrace members across countries and across nationalities as well. Odelay’s pastiche-like character gives the organizations roots, trunks and branches in many places and makes them simultaneously a local and global phenomenon. They are resources that bear fruit as well.

How the Transnational Awo Affects Family Ties and Unifies Perceived Enemies

How does the Awo bond affect the biological family? To find answers, I asked relatives of diasporans who had returned to Sierra Leone in 2008 for public performances of their Odelay organizations for their views on diasporans’ relationship with the Odelay they belonged to. This view, from a sister of one of the diasporans, was typical:¹² ‘My brother has been with his Odelay [meaning, the organization and/or its masquerade] since he was a boy. So, when he went overseas he never forgot about it. He supports his Odelay. From what I understand, his Odelay brothers helped him to become strong [successful] over there [in the United States]’.¹³

However, some relatives of diasporans expressed concern that their relatives in the diaspora paid more attention to their Odelay than they did to their families in Sierra Leone. One respondent could not hide his distress and pointed to his and his younger brother’s poverty. Calling that younger brother forward so that I could see him, he said, ‘Just look at us. He does not pay attention to us. When he comes to Sierra Leone, he gives all his money to his “devil”’. The younger brother nodded his head in agreement, interjecting, ‘That is how he treats us, his own blood’. At the end of my interview, I asked the older brother whether he and his indigent brother planned to become members of the Odelay organization their brother in

the diaspora belonged to. After some reflection, he concluded, 'Maybe. We will think about it. Maybe that is the way we can benefit from our brother.'

The discussions above show that in Freetown and even in Sierra Leone at large, membership of secret societies, including Odelay, is increasingly the basis on which material and nonmaterial resources are mobilized, negotiated and allocated. It is below the nation, but it shapes the official nation and the traditionally familial.

Because Odelay memberships are mainly founded on shared lived experiences and informed spaces, Odelay can also be spaces of transnational interaction, where similarity can be fabricated out of or in spite of difference, even difference from perceived enemies. In the following I examine how an Odelay performance became a platform on which allies in Sierra Leone's civil war, including Nigerian soldiers, 'danced devil' with their adversaries – rebels they had been fighting against for years.

The Sierra Leonean Foday Sankoh was head of the Revolutionary United Front rebels that launched Sierra Leone's civil war from Liberia in 1991. Decades before he started the war, Sankoh reportedly became a member of a Freetown Odelay, Civili Rule, though apparently not a very active member. In the mid 1990s, when Sierra Leone's soldiers proved incapable of thwarting the rebels' advance, the government requested help from a regional West African body, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The majority of soldiers in that intervention force were Nigerian. Many of the Nigerian contingent of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) became members of Freetown's Yoruba-modelled secret societies like the Agugu, Hunters and Odelay, including Civili Rule. I was told that the Yoruba soldiers had been impressed by some of the urban secret society members' use of Yoruba words and expressions, and actually spoke pidgin Yoruba, so to speak, with them.

On 27 April 2000, Foday Sankoh paid to carry the Civili Rule Odelay's symbolic gun – the *bila* gun – just outside the Odelay's headquarters.¹⁴ Informants told me that Sankoh effectively played the socioeconomic youth card to carry the gun, arguing that he had started the civil war to empower youth and now wanted to use a mass youth phenomenon, the Civili Rule Odelay masquerade's performance, to announce his intentions to end the civil war.¹⁵

During that Civili Rule public performance, soldiers of Sierra Leone's national army and the regional fighting group wore coloured clothes – a secret society requirement for taking part in the masquerade's public performance. In this festive atmosphere, the soldiers mixed with the chief protagonist of the war, Sankoh, and his fighters – with whom they were technically still at war. The masquerade's dance was a national ceasefire dance performed on urban grounds to make a statement to the nation. Foday Sankoh made use of the magnetism of a youth performance-based occasion to appeal to Sierra Leoneans as a man

of peace. It could have been mere theatrics, but followers of that masquerade performance recalled that while handling the shotgun, he announced, ‘Young people of Sierra Leone, we are all one; the fighting is over’. The onlookers and the followers of the masquerade performance shouted and clapped, in anticipation of the prolonged war’s end.

Sankoh had sensed the ethnic diversity and size of the masquerade’s following and attempted to rally the nation – from the grassroots up – to the peaceful intentions he advertised on that platform. The drama could not have been lost on some Sierra Leoneans. The day of the masquerade’s performance, 27 April 2000, was the country’s Independence Day, a national holiday. The then president of Sierra Leone, Alhaji Ahmad Tejan-Kabbah, had made his Independence Day speech on national radio that morning, assuring all that he was working towards the consolidation of peace. His was a call to the official nation; Sankoh’s was an attempt to speak to the nation from below with a multiform Odelay licence. But after the ‘devil dance’ later that evening, the ECOWAS and Sierra Leone Army soldiers returned to their battalions, regiments and companies; and some rebel fighters who had come to town for the masquerade’s performance returned to their temporarily abandoned bastions. The war was back on. Brothers and sisters in performance once more became adversaries on the bigger national stage. When the civil war officially ended in 2002, many Nigerian Yoruba soldiers reportedly danced a farewell ‘devil dance’ before departing for the Nigerian homeland. Some still support the Nigerian/Yoruba secret society diaspora in Sierra Leone.

Conclusions

Odelay secret societies serve as interethnic, transethnic and transnational links as well as encapsulations of perceived enemies. These organizations’ relevance traverses Sierra Leone’s history – from slavery and the slave trade to the prewar era, war years and postwar period.

Memberships of and across Yoruba-modelled secret societies and the excavation of the Nigerian connection in an urban field of ways and means have become roots and routes to the Freetown cityscape and Sierra Leone, at large. Because the official nation is a weak and ineffective enfolding, a large group of the socioeconomically disadvantaged has been situationally fused in a community of shared lived experiences and circumstances that substitutes the official nation in everyday interactions and calculations. That community has history as a key dimension, making it possible for Freetown’s new secret societies to cultivate, tap and uncover their Nigerian Yoruba origins.

Odelays and allied secret societies are living transnational, transethnic and, increasingly, trans-status transactional organisms with roots, trunks, shoots and branches – all nurtured by water from (trans)Atlantic history and the fertilizer of current circumstances.

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Notes

1. These are different from Brazilian masquerades, which tend to be related to carnival. Unfortunately, the secret society members who provided the bulk of the information I discuss and analyse here did not permit me to take or reproduce pictures of their masquerades.
2. On 'we' and 'they' groupness, see Elwert (1997).
3. 'Devil' here refers to a secret society's masquerades. Nunley (1987: xv), writing about the aesthetics of Odelay, points out that the 'devil' characterization goes back to early missionary activities in Sierra Leone. Christian missionaries wanted to present masquerades to new converts as symbols of Satan, the antithesis of the Almighty God. This was meant to discourage them from becoming members of sodalities that had/have masquerades as one of their manifestations. Secret societies use(d) this negative appellation to their advantage to generate fear among nonmembers. The term 'devil' is now also used to mean the secret societies themselves.
4. Like other secret sodalities, Freetown's secret societies, including Odelay, privilege their secrets. I noticed this in the organized isolation of one elderly member of an Odelay organization who was deemed to have been too cooperative with a foreign researcher. The man informed me that his status in the society had been significantly reduced because he had given information and pictures to the researcher, who went on to publish a book containing the disclosed information and images. Other older members, he said, had accused him of speaking and showing too much, especially to a white man: 'They said that I had brought the inside to the outside; but I know I did not say or give anything to the researcher which would have made our society less-respected or less-feared. God forbid', he concluded. Yet his relative isolation, based on that perceived indiscretion from about thirty years ago, persists unto the present.
5. Those preclusions, this study found, were the primary reason for the formation of Odelay, though it is popularly thought instead to be that some disrespectful young people in Freetown felt a need to challenge older secret societies' status quo.
6. Ottenheimer (2012: 317) defines diglossia as occurring 'when the varieties of language that coexist are different versions of the same language than different languages ... [and] a situation in which two or more varieties of the same language [are used] by speakers in

different kinds of settings ... for differential access to power and prestige, or intimacy and authenticity'.

7. See Goffman (1994 [1959]: 107–14).
8. My informants, some of whom were not members of Lord a Mercy, supplied the dates 1950, around 1951 and 1952. There did not seem to be a record of Lord a Mercy coming into being. This is probably the reason it is not considered the first Odelay. Paddle Odelay's members contend that Paddle was the first. Some of Paddle's older members describe Paddle as the first approved and registered Odelay. Many older non-Lord a Mercy interviewees argued that Lord a Mercy was a mere imitation, an unruly challenge to the secret society status quo.
9. One of my insider informants said Boxing Day; two others said Easter Monday.
10. Faulks observes that 'poverty, discrimination and exclusion can all undermine the benefits of citizenship. Thus a consideration of citizenship must also involve an examination of the conditions that make it meaningful' (Faulks 2000: 3).
11. Recently, the trend has been that Creoles feature prominently in the executives.
12. From interviews carried out from 16 December 2008 to 8 February 2009.
13. The use of 'brother' here is metaphorical.
14. A *bila* is a hunting gun, symbolically used by its carrier to shepherd the masquerade and its followers during public performances. Informants told me that *bila* was a Yoruba argot word for the imperative 'go away' (by implication driving enemies away from the masquerade) or the verb 'to shepherd'. In an exemplification of what Højbjerg (2005: 148) calls 'the political use of symbolism', politicians believe that carrying the *bila* gun is equal to marshalling and controlling the support of participants in masquerades' public performances, and is hence a prized political statement. People already in politics and those intending to go into it thus clamour to wield it.
15. I distinguish between youth in age terms and socioeconomic youth in King (2007) and King (2012).

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