The Invisible Social Body: Experience and Poro Ritual in Northern Côte d'Ivoire

Till Förster

Abstract: Secrecy and its performative display have been privileged perspectives in the study of *poro* and similar power associations in West Africa. I develop an alternative understanding of the Senufo poro as an institution that fosters and sustains bodily experience, establishing an all-embracing sensory regime for members as well as non-members in their villages. Participation in nighttime funerary rites creates the image of an invisible social body, and shared bodily experience informs collective intentionality towards the social. Serving as a stable nodal point in everyday discourse, this function contributes to the recent revitalization of poro associations in Côte d'Ivoire's post-conflict society.

Résumé: Le secret et sa démonstration performative ont été des perspectives privilégiées dans l'étude du *poro* et des associations semblables de pouvoir en Afrique de l'Ouest. Dans cet article, Je développe une compréhension autre du Sénoufo *poro* comme une institution qui favorise et soutien l'expérience corporelle, en établissant un régime sensoriel universel pour les membres et non membres des villages. La participation aux rites funéraires nocturnes crée l'image d'un corps social invisible et l'expérience corporelle partagée informe l'intentionnalité collective et sociale. Servant de point central stable dans le discours quotidien, cette fonction contribue à la revitalisation récente des associations *poro* dans la société après le conflit de la Côte d'Ivoire.

Keywords: ritual; experience; intentionality; Senufo; poro

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Introduction

Few power associations in the hinterland of the West African coast attracted the attention of Europeans as early as "secret societies." Already in the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper (1668:413–16) had compiled some information on the "Belli-Paaro," most likely the association known today as *poro* along the Upper Guinea coast. Dapper mentions initiation in a copse, masquerades and other arts, and the higher social status of its members, but he does not mention what the activities of the association are about. His account remained one of the few sources until the nineteenth century, when a body of colonial literature on secret societies emerged—now full of derogatory judgments. This literature lingered between interpreting the rites as products of irrational superstition, savage brutality (e.g., Hurd 1814:437) and later crime, backwardness, and underdevelopment (Beatty 1915). Such characterizations attested more to colonial imaginations and to the resistance of secret societies to domination than to what such power associations achieved for society.

Partly as a reaction to such colonial tropes, many anthropologists described and analyzed poro in different terms, but they focused on the same theme: secrecy and how it is displayed. Three interrelated themes evolved, and all produced insightful ethnographies: first, from a functionalist perspective, the social and political role of secret societies (Harley 1941; Little 1965; Fulton 1972; Jedrej 1990); second, the religious dimension of its rites and ceremonies (Arewa & Hale 1975; Højbjerg 2004); and third, the arts of poro, and in particular its masks and dances (Jamin 1979; Glaze 1981; Vandenhoute 1989; Förster 1993).

Beryl Bellman's (1984) brilliant work on secrecy as a societal paradox offered an alternative view: He argued that the secrets of poro among the Kpele of Liberia represented concealed information that everybody knows but pretends not to know. He thus adopted Georg Simmel's (1950:315ff.) classical conceptualization of secrecy as a necessary societal differentiation in Africa. In line with Simmel, Bellman argued that secrecy is not so much about concealing or revealing knowledge, but much more about attributing social positions and eventually status to those who are assumed and entitled to know and those who ought not to know. Through the way in which such knowledge is communicated, he wrote, it is constituted either as secret or as public and, in turn, it defines social roles and attitudes.

More recent studies of secrecy in West African everyday life have confirmed that communication is indeed central to the constitution of social difference. The fact that there is little actual insight into the lives of others is what allows individuals or collective actors to actively sustain a sphere that cannot be penetrated, as Eric Gable (1997) has argued with respect to the Manjaco of Guinea-Bissau. Masks and performances may also serve as means for creating an opacity that blurs social identities, creating situations where actors appear as themselves and as not themselves

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(Piot 1993; Gabail 2012). In general, research shows that actors "consequently use the strategic ambiguity of the public secret as a mechanism of social control" (Jones 2014:55).

This article attempts to enlarge these perspectives by looking at poro and its activities as a sensory regime, as a way in which a society organizes experience. What such shared experience does to the actors' understanding of the social is what could be understood as the discrete content of the poro ritual. The main argument is that secrecy is not based either on oaths or on the concealment of cognitive knowledge. Secrecy is rather based on the non-predicative, "unspeakable" knowledge that one acquires over many years. Non-members may know about it but are not entitled to participate in the rites, and hence lack the experience that members acquire over time. As this experience is rarely concealed but rather embedded in a bodily ritual practice, it is non-discursive and hence discrete rather than secret. This article argues that sharing bodily experience creates a collective intentionality toward the social and eventually constitutes it as an intentional object. By examining how bodily experience relates to social life, two questions are addressed: first, what is the significance of tacit bodily knowledge for social integration; and second, are "secret" power associations relevant to contemporary society?

This article will examine these questions in the context of the northernmost area where poro exists: the Senufo of Côte d'Ivoire.[1] Unlike poro associations along the upper Guinean coast, the Senufo poro has no direct say in judicial affairs and punishment. It can impose fees only when its own rules are violated. It has no jurisdiction over ordinary crime, and it also does not make use of violence or "magical" means to control the behavior of its members or of outsiders. The Senufo poro very rarely engages in everyday affairs. It has social significance because it conveys societal values indirectly and not by intervening overtly into the social lives of others, as Liberian poro associations do. This hidden life-worldly presence has been its strength throughout the long Ivorian crisis, which forced many towns to govern themselves, devoid of any state administration and sometimes also of rebel governance.

Prior to this crisis, it seemed that the questions raised here would become irrelevant, as many villages gave up poro during the 1980s and 1990s. Rural-urban migration, spread of wage labor, the disintegration of descent groups, and conversion to Islam or Christianity—almost everything spoke against the perpetuation of poro. It seemed that poro would either be reduced to a tourist attraction or die out. That has changed. Tourism is no more, as Côte d'Ivoire is still affected by the many years of civil unrest and violence. In many areas where poro had faded out, villages are currently restoring former sacred groves, rebuilding the association's facilities, and inviting elders of poro lodges from other villages to help them with the ritual's regalia and rites. Hence the ethnographic questions: what do poro associations achieve? Or, in local terms: how does poro endure in Senufo villages today?

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A village society

As an ethnic name, Senufo was primarily coined by the French colonial administrator, ethnographer, and linguist Maurice Delafosse. Commissioned by the General Government of French West Africa to contribute an ethnic inventory of northern Côte d'Ivoire to the catalogue of the colonial exhibition in Marseille 1906, he wrote concerning the Senari-speaking peasants "que les Malinkés appellent *Sénouf* ou *Sénofos*" that they had no generic name for themselves and eventually adopted the surname "'Bambara', lequel correspond un peu à la désignation de 'Barbares' … [d]es grecs" (Delafosse 1906:312, italics in original). And since they had no ethnic name, Delafosse suggested "On pourrait maintenir le vocable *Sénoufo*" (Delafosse 1908:17, italics in original; Förster 1997:86–96). However, Delafosse did not realize that the lack of a generic ethnic name mirrored two features of "the Senufo": they had a profoundly segmental social organization, and occupational identities were more important than ethnic ones.

By the end of the nineteenth century, most Senari-speaking settlements in what would later become French West Africa had no central political institutions. Exceptions were a few bigger towns that interacted with neighboring kingdoms. Most Senufo stuck to acephalous political regimes—despite the remarkable size of their settlements. During the wars of Samori Touré, many villages became even bigger, as they accommodated refugees from their vicinities. Senufo villages were compact, densely inhabited, and bred a social reality of their own. Neither lineages nor landscapes defined the horizon of cultural practice; it was the village and its other, the wilderness (Förster 1990; also Cartry 1979; Jackson 1982). To this day, provenance is seldom stated in terms of landscape or ethnic belonging, but rather by coming from a particular village. Perhaps more than ever, the village is the main reference point for the social imagination of those who live in or migrated to the city—even if they had never lived in that village (Geschiere 2014).

Unlike their neighbors to the East and North, who were less affected by the war of Samori and who lived in small hamlets (Fortes 1949; Rouville 1987), Senufo society was a "village society" (Capron 1973:65–69; Terray 1985:107–9). Though the web of kinship played a pivotal role, there was a need for institutions to crosscut the bonds of amity and reciprocity without instituting centralized political domination. Young men were integrated into age grades where they were obliged to cooperate across lineage boundaries. Eventually, they would be initiated into poro, the men's power association. Actually, "village association" would have been a more appropriate term. Its members carried out communal works. In pre-colonial times, they were in charge of the defense of their community, carried weapons, and built palisades or even solid fortifications around the village. Later, they still constructed bridges, cleared roads and market squares, and provided heavy building material.

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That villages and even towns of several thousand inhabitants remained acephalous was a challenge to the colonial administration and later to the post-colonial state. First, many French administrators simply ignored such social realities and presupposed that "chiefs" would always exist. Perhaps they were difficult to identify, but acephalous political regimes were largely inconceivable: each village had to have a headman, and this expectation heavily affected the colonizers' perception of the villages and their political regimes. The descendants of the first settlers were often perceived as politically dominant and declared *chef de village* [village headman], though their influence on village politics was mostly fairly limited (Coquéry-Vidrovitch 1992:88–90). Second, the French adapted the social reality to their imagination by installing administrative chieftaincies (von Trotha 1994; Bierschenk 1997). The new *chefs de canton* [cantonal chiefs], who became intermediary rulers of the colonial empire, carried a Manding title: *jamanatigi* [owner of the land] (von Trotha 1997; also Beck 1989; Miles 1993).[2] By giving them a local name, the new position was framed as a "traditional" institution. Only a few jamanatigi in Senufoland could look back at a longer history. Most of them owed their position to the French.

Over the years, however, administrative practice produced its own reality. Because the intermediary rulers collected head taxes and co-organized the provision of forced labor (Spittler 1981), they became more powerful. Village headmen and cantonal chiefs unwittingly transformed the acephalous political regime of Senufo villages. Many towns developed a double institutional structure: older institutions, in particular the age grade system, were increasingly marginalized while new institutions filled that vacancy. Members of poro were no longer allowed to carry weapons and had to replace them for ritual purposes with mock wooden rifles. Some communal works fell into the sphere of forced labor, for instance overland roads. The more the villages were integrated into the (post)colonial state, the more poro was reduced to its religious and ritual dimensions. Even more devastating was the effect of rural-urban migration, which reached unprecedented and unanticipated levels following independence. As a social institution in charge of communal work, poro relied on the continuous participation of the village youth. The more young men moved to the city, the less poro was able to fulfill its communal tasks. By the end of the twentieth century, many villages, in particular smaller ones, were unable to set up new age grades—there were simply not enough young men left.

That changed with the political and military crisis that rocked the country from the mid–1990s through 2011. Its latent effects are still felt today, and one of the unexpected corollaries is that various Senufo villages have resorted to institutions and social practices that once sustained their resilience, simultaneously re-creating them in a way that has made them more appropriate for the lingering no-war–no-peace situation (Förster 2010, 2015; in general, Richards 2005; MacGinty 2006). Through the 1990s, many villages set up vigilante groups of young men who built barricades and controlled access to their towns at night. Most of these groups were not

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related to poro, but they adopted its basic principles of age grades and group solidarity. The longer the crisis lasted, the more these spontaneous formations developed into institutionalized, corporate groups. As many villages were left to fend for themselves, they actively sought to find lasting solutions to security issues and other social problems.

A remarkable number of the villages that had given up poro actively sought help to re-install it when the lingering crisis mutated into civil war (see Ellis 2010 for Liberia and Sierra Leone). In particular, in the West of Senufoland, many villages re-founded poro societies and converted wooded areas into sacred groves. Even larger market towns re-established the association, for instance Kouto and Gbon, both sub-prefectures with some 30,000 inhabitants. The new groves and the installations therein were set up under the surveillance of experienced elders who were invited from long-standing poro lodges in other villages. These outsiders attended and monitored the rites performed by the neophytes of the new initiation centers. Such partnerships often led to a lasting ritual exchange between the old and the new lodges. During funerals, such partners continue to send delegations to join and support their bereaved "brothers." What makes poro attractive today is not so much its former military function, but rather, its contribution to the integration of village societies. Its subtle but efficient ways of creating social bonds has two complementary sides; one visible, the other invisible. Poro did not resurface because it adapted to the conflict setting; it was revitalized because it was less reactive than other institutions.

For military purposes, many villages adopted and transformed other institutions, in particular the (in)famous hunters' association, the *dozoton*.[3] Originally a Manding institution (Person 1968; Cissé 1994), hunter associations were (re)founded across the entire North of Côte d'Ivoire and to a lesser degree also in other parts of the country. The recruitment of dozo members as well as its internal organization was, however, very different. The two organizations, dozoton and poro, have different histories, different structures, and also different purposes. Dozoton became a powerful political actor which cooperated and later overtly competed with government bodies. Eventually, the dozos became allied with the rebel forces (Bassett 2003, 2004; Förster 2015) against the police and gendarmerie. Though drawing its forces from the untamed wilderness (Hellweg 2006), dozoton has adopted a political role, displaying its power proudly as an immediate response to the necessities of social life. Poro, on the other side, has always remained in the background, and it was by far less reactive to the violent crisis.[4] Its contribution to social order is much subtler and hence more difficult to qualify than the overt and often daring manifestations against the state that the hunters eagerly engaged in. Poro works at another level and in a way that calls for an analysis of the subtleties of its discrete rites. Most of these rites build on the everyday practices of Senufo villages and require long-term participation in them. The two institutions, dozoton and poro, are distinct, but may complement each other in times of crisis.

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Poro as a sensory regime

Though the recruitment of new members of poro became increasingly difficult following independence, the aspects that did not demand much collaborative labor remained stable. If rites were not given up, they were and still are performed according to a more or less compulsory script. Because of the orthopraxy of poro rites, beliefs are "rarely formulated … as they do not need to be" (Bell 1997:191). Neither myths nor etiological narratives play a role, and there are almost no instructions by elders as to why a rite is performed in a particular way. Rites of poro must therefore make a difference to everyday practice while simultaneously building on the embodied knowledge of those who perform them. For the same reason, creating a distance from the transient circumstances of daily political games is a central aspect of poro rites and practices—else they would lose their self-understanding orthopractical character. This distance is reproduced by the way the association shapes the experience of members and non-members.

At first sight, the presence of poro in a Senufo village is easily discernible by what is usually called its sacred grove, a wooded area at the margins of the settlement. Old-growth trees, thick copse, and the stark disparity with the open savannah grassland testify to its primordial status as wilderness. Three paths lead to the interior and a clearing, where poro as a power association has its seat. Becoming a member means to be led along these paths into the woods, deep into the night under a new moon when heavy rain clouds darken the sky. The neophytes will not see where they are going. They can only feel the densely-rooted soil below their feet and the boughs of shrubs that close over them the deeper they creep into the forest. It is an act of spatial as well as social separation.

Poro determines who is an actor and who is a spectator, who is a participant and who is an outsider. It separates members from non-members and simultaneously binds them to each other. Poro defines who can assist during rites and ceremonies, who has a right to perform ritual acts, and who is expected to execute the mundane activities that will follow them, who may hear but not see them, and who may not even hear such sounds. Poro shapes collective experience by creating a sensory regime that addresses all the senses from sight and hearing to taste, olfaction, and touch.[5] This regime is perceived as a sequence of situations that all actors will experience in a similar way—situations organized along a fine line separating the visible from the invisible, the intelligible from noise and silence, the perceptible from the indiscernible.

Poro thus institutes sensory environments that are created by the repeated, strong interactions of the members and non-members, binding them to one another. The public, the visible and audible side of poro, is as important as what is usually called its secrets. Putting secrecy first and declaring it the aim of poro (Jamin 1979) would miss the intrinsically related dimensions of sensory experience that the association creates. As elsewhere in

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West Africa, hiding and revealing are two sides of the same coin (Gable 1997; Davidson 2010). Most inhabitants of Senufo villages know about the "secrets" of poro. Secrecy is more a marker that separates legitimate from unauthorized participation in particular practices—it is not about ignorance.

The lines that run through this sensory regime serve as nodal points of a discursive formation concerning what village life is about: How should a deceased elder be buried? What must be done to fill the gap that his death produces in the village's social web?[6] Who is in charge of conducting the rites? Through ritual orthopraxy, poro institutes rules and regulations that the different groups in a village will experience in a "natural" way and that thus order village life. Hence, the meaning of the Senari word poro depends on the context of its use; on how and when it is used and by whom. Ordinary and ritual settings make a difference, and so do status, gender, and tacit knowledge. Insiders who have a thorough knowledge of poro rites would use it in a different way than uninitiated villagers or Muslim traders who have only a fuzzy, outsider's knowledge of the institution—even if they have witnessed poro rites many times.

In referring to poro detached from its ritual context, non-initiated Senufo would use the term mainly to refer to the power association in an unspecific, large sense. To speak of poro in everyday life means to point at an institutional context with unclear boundaries and an opaque inner structure (see Gabail 2012 on the Bassari). In such situations, one would mainly refer to its visible constituents: All villagers are able to identify members of poro when they wear the loincloth that they must put on when passing the first six-year ritual cycle. These young neophytes are called *colo* (pl. *colobele*), and the six-year cycle *cologo*.[7] Young men who have not been to the grove yet but who will be initiated in the next cycle will carefully observe what their "elder brothers" do—not least because there is a lot of gossip about how arduous it is "to work for the old woman," as members of poro would say. Walking deep into the wilderness, not being allowed to wear shoes, cutting down trees and bringing them back into the sacred forest is exhausting. Seeing three or four colobele balancing a trunk on their heads, marching slowly under its burden, "sweating like beasts" and later "crying like hyenas" is sometimes what catches their attention as it tells "the younger ones" what they will have to go through.

Elders look at the young men more with a feeling of satisfaction—a satisfaction that the youth will labor as they once did. For the elders, it is a sign that they will still be the recipients of what the young men owe to poro. During the first six years, the colobele have to shoulder many burdens, also in a literal sense. Being a colo means paying tribute to poro and its elders. They have to provide food, in particular rice and a special groundnut sauce that a woman has to cook for the initiated young man. Though not members of poro, these women enjoy a high status. The fact that a woman has helped the man during the initiation creates a strong bond between them. Many men will compose songs of praise for their women when they are

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promoted to the next age grade years later. However, the best food is not for the colobele but for the elders. "Poro is a restaurant for the elders," a young colo said. Of course, the elders would put it in different words, and from a scholarly perspective, the redistribution of fees and tributes is an essential element of segmentary village society.

The most spectacular side of poro is, however, the ritual performance at funerals and the arts associated with it. Unsurprisingly, a large part of the literature on poro is about its arts that, contradictory as it sounds, make secrecy visible (e.g., Jamin 1979; Glaze 1981; Gagliardi 2015). Though not all masks and dances should be visible to uninitiated people, most young men will have witnessed poro masks and dances long before they become colobele. Though many women claim that they do not "see" poro, they are usually familiar with its masks and performances as well. In such situations and in a narrow sense, poro *is* the main mask of the association, as every initiation center has such a mask with a unique iconography. The colobele learn about the specificities of "their poro"—both in the sense of the power association and the mask as an acting character—during their initiation. They are expected to renew the mask and its costume over the course of the six-year cycle. Each age grade has to iterate the mask into the present by finding a balance between new and old iconographies and styles. They have to update it without allowing it to lose its character. It is no surprise that poro is associated with its mask as an object among those who have to take care of the object.

The poro mask will perform at funerals of initiated elders, guaranteeing their ritual transformation into benevolent ancestors (Förster 1993, 1997:329–405). During such funerals, all members will judge the mask and its performance according to their own sedimented knowledge. It repeats acts that should follow the orthopractical model—though they seldom do so; the mask's performance is never exactly the same, and many elders later argue whether the rites were accurate enough for the purpose or whether the colobele did it in a way that would later "cause problems." For these elder members, poro *is* orthopraxy and more a way of doing things than the object, the mask, and its visible manifestation, or the association of its members.

Women, who are allowed to become members after menopause, articulate their views of poro in a different way. They often have a thorough knowledge of poro but prefer to pretend that they do not—very much as Bellman (1984) has argued. In public, younger women would not admit that they had ever seen poro. Behind closed doors, they easily acknowledge that they have seen and even attentively and repeatedly observed poro. However, from the perspective of a member that has completed the six-year cologo cycle, this knowledge would not be enough to claim that one "knows poro," as it does not imply participation in ritual performances. For the elders, "knowing poro" means to have acquired the tacit knowledge that only orthopraxy conveys. And that requires thick participation in poro rites over the course of the six years until the final tribute to the elders is paid.

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In a phenomenological understanding, these perspectives mirror the actors' intentionality: the way that they relate to poro as an institution, as an object, or as a practice. The different perspectives are not exclusive, and it depends on the situation whether one meaning or the other surfaces. The predicative meaning of poro is constituted in these discursive acts, but it does not exhaust the intentionality of the actors. Making sense of poro requires participation in ritual practice. As an institution, poro creates, through obligatory participation in orthopraxy, a social space that is exempted from the usual conflict-laden discursive articulations of daily life. Poro is not a secluded space where political affairs are discussed and eventually solved (Zempleni 2003)—it rather offers steady nodal points of societal meaning that political actors can refer to. So poro is not an apolitical institution, but its non-reactive character is what provides its strength—in particular in the post-conflict setting of northern Côte d'Ivoire. The tacit knowledge that it conveys is not meaningless but rather non-predicative and therefore not subject to discursive contestations (Staal 1979). But how, then, is such tacit knowledge produced? This question will be addressed in two steps: first, by looking at everyday practices that serve as background to poro rites, and second, by describing a rite of poro that illustrates the production of such tacit knowledge.

Daily work and solidarity

Walking and working together is a daily practice among agrarian Senufo. As fertile soil is seldom found close to human settlements, men and women often have to walk deep into the wilderness. The paths are narrow, and may cross streams and thorny thickets. It would be impossible to walk side by side. Senufo farmers walk in a line, and they walk fast. One has to pay attention to the uneven ground and to all sorts of obstacles that one might face—swampy places during the rainy season, perhaps a sleeping snake during the dry season. The senses are tightly focused on one's companions and on the natural environment.

When the farmers invite neighbors to work with them, they would use the term *kpere*, literally "to come close," "to line up," or "to make a line." In such contexts, it means that the others will join them and will walk together with them to the fields where they will work. Working together also means to form a line, in particular when the new yam fields are prepared for the coming rainy season. The act of forming the mounds is often a contest. The strongest young man works at the front of the line, and the others follow him. When the day is done, the winner will receive, as a sign of his victory, a hat made of black and white monkey fur.[8] Joining in the line working the field is also expressed by the word kpere, regardless of whether it is a hoeing contest or just daily agricultural work. In an extended sense, it means "to help somebody," connoting respect for reciprocal obligations to support one another, for not trying to avoid social duties.

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The visuality of lines is the core of kpere as an abstract idea. As such, helping means to accept a position within a line. Not to accept one's duties is expressed in mental imaginaries of violating such lines, of bending or interrupting them. A man who is trying to live without building on the support of others is called *kperebye*, literally a person "who refuses to align with others." The line is a powerful image of support and solidarity (see Ingold 2007, 2015), but it can also stand for other practices of exchange. The support of God is an example. If the farmers are uncertain about the outcome of a difficult situation or if some disaster threatens them, they would ask God for help, expressing it by saying "may God join us"; literally, they say "may God be in a line with us," "be close to us," or simply "align with us"—very much as one would ask neighbors and relatives "to align" with those who have to carry a heavy burden.

Finally, kpere is a visual metaphor, a verb based on the practice of putting something together, of walking together, of not interrupting a line. In a largely segmentary society such as that of the Senufo, kpere is more than an expression of an idea. It has strong normative connotations, as the term kperebye illustrates. Being called by this term is not a compliment or recognition of one's individuality—it is rather a constant reminder of what is expected from a member of a kin group and a resident of "the village," as Senari speakers put it. Bringing people in a line and walking together is both a practice and a metaphor that stands for sociality and solidarity, expressed by the term kpere: the moving person and the line become one.[9] Though Senufo farmers walk from the village to their fields—and want to reach a destination—walking together is much more than mere transport. As Ingold writes, they are actively engaging with their environment, "always looking out for useful plant materials, and for the spoors and traces of animals" (Ingold 2007:76), while simultaneously engaging with each other as life-worldly contemporaries. This attitude is further enhanced by a specific rite of poro.

The invisible poro

There are no bigger events in a Senufo town than funerals. They bring relatives together, even those who live far away, and if it is a commemorative funeral for the dead of the past couple of years, the village population can easily double during the event, which often lasts for almost a week. Funerals are a meticulously orchestrated sequence of private, communal, and hidden acts and performances that take place in the courtyards, in the open spaces between them, and in public market squares, but also deep in the grove where poro has its seat. Their complexity exceeds that of Wagner's operas, though there is no central agency that organizes the many parallel events. As a sensory environment, a funeral ceremony overwhelms the senses. In such a setting, it is not easy to create an island of sensory experience, to make a voice heard, to shape the experience of those who would love to participate in the dances that commemorate their deceased relatives and at the same time celebrate the living.

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If one does not pay attention, one may not hear the hushed voices in the grove, nor would one notice the absence of one poro man or another, who might also stroll from one group of xylophone players to the next, or who might have left to "find a girl," as his peers would smilingly say. There are rites that nobody will talk about—not only because they seem to be irrelevant to those who are laughing, dancing, and singing, but also because they do not have a proper name. Some call them "night things," others "hidden poro," as poro may stand, in an extended sense, for anything secret. Only men are allowed to participate, but many would not know who will perform the rite. Yet such "night things" are not necessarily secret in the sense that one must not know or talk about them—they are rather discrete rites that remain under the surface of discursive articulations. The rite is rare and "not performed for everybody," the elders of poro would say. They would rarely talk about it, though some might use a special term, "midnight staff," without explaining it.[10] The term does not make much sense, except to those who have already participated in the rite. What follows remains as obscure as the words that stand for it. One does not learn about it through instruction or observation—only by participating.

Sometime after midnight, messengers of poro show up in the village. Though some elder members of poro expected them to come, their arrival is sudden and a surprise to those who have little experience of such funerals. The messengers are wearing the narrow loincloth of the colobele. They hold long torches of bundled straw, illuminating the yards with flickering light. They go wherever they hear music, singing, or chatting people. When they come, they do not look around, the messengers walk right into the middle of the yard where the musicians are playing and where young men and women are dancing, throw their torches on the ground, interrupting the performance. Instantly, the drummers stop, while the xylophones, driven by the swaying hands of the musicians, still send some isolated but fluttery tones into the dust of the dance floor.

The messengers are short-spoken and comply with the image of poro men who do not say more than they need. "No fire must burn," the messengers say. They walk again and again through the narrow passageways between the compounds. When they discover glowing charcoal, they tell bystanders to fetch water and to pour it over the ashes. And they wait until someone does. It has to be dark, completely dark. "You must clear the path of poro," they add, "don't sit outdoors where poro passes—move to another compound or hide inside the house." Or simply "You'd better leave. Poro will pass." Whoever was sitting there will disappear into the neighborhood. They lower their voices as they go—not complaining, rather accepting it as they would accept rain, which would have the same effect of making them stay inside. Everybody must go. It is not a question of whether one is a member or not, even poro elders have to leave.

Finally, the sensory regime of poro takes root. The innocent sounds of the everyday fade into the deep and impenetrable thicket of nightly darkness. Only when the village is silent, when the last whispering voices

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dissipate in the smoke of the extinguished fires will the messengers finally stand still and leave or join the others behind the walls. The village silently awaits the night staff.

In that moment of silence, men in the grove will lower their voices, too. If they were not from that initiation center, they would have walked back to their own centers to fetch wooden staffs. The staffs are raw objects, their surface hardly abraded, painted over ridges with a spiral of vegetable color. Everybody knows these staffs in the village. They are used during public ceremonies that celebrate the first three years of the cologo cycle. The men then sang songs about the hardships of their initiation and their "work for the old woman" in a language that ordinary people would not understand but that everybody is invited to listen to. Now, nobody will see the staffs. Most people do not even know that they are around and are used for another purpose than the one that they are familiar with.

A couple of colobele and elders come together in the dark grove. Every man must have a staff when leaving the grove through the big gate where the narrow path to the village begins. They have to focus entirely on non-visual perception; on what they can feel on the ground, the wooden staffs, and the regalia of the grove (see Vergunst 2008). There is no fire, and torches are not allowed either—tall trees even cover the sparse starlight. The men are limited to the little sensation that they are able to get. They have to form a line at the gate, one singer at the front and another at the end of the line. Some whisper as they are trying to find their position in the line, but nobody talks aloud. Silence finally covers the figures when they have found their place in the line that is about to leave the deep darkness of the grove.

When the line comes alive, it is one body. The singers at the front and the end frame the line. They have a mirliton in their mouth that distorts their voices. The anonymous singing of the verses describes their suffering when they were initiated—almost the same verses that they were singing with their ordinary, individual voices when they performed with their staffs in the village. Now, however, it is impossible to identify an individual voice, and only those who know the verses well will be able to make sense of the songs. The singers alternate with the rest of the line. After each verse, the men answer with a deep resonating groaning as an emotional expression of their suffering "for the old woman."

The men move steadily through the silenced darkness between the dwellings. The muffled thrusts of the sticks on the ground order the movements of the men. It is not easy to walk as they do. The first steps after leaving the grove are still uncoordinated. Some touch the men in front of them, and sometimes and unexpectedly, the knees of the men behind may touch the skin of those who are in front. But they quickly learn how to walk together. Walking in that line means to focus more and more on the few remaining senses—on somatic modes of attention (Csordas 1993). One smells the sweat of the man in front and becomes increasingly aware how it fades into the air when he moves faster than oneself. A fresh breeze from

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the left or the right makes one feel that one is losing touch with the others. The rhythm of the song, the thrusts of the staffs on the ground is what literally informs and moves the bodies, coordinates the feet and legs, and thus how each man walks. "They are to act as members of a single body, the body comprising them all," writes Margaret Gilbert (1990:186) on walking together. But the rite is a radical way of walking as one single body: step by step, the men move more as one, placing their feet at the very same moment on the clammy soil, lifting them together with the others in the line, slowly pushing forward towards the *kpaala,* the wooden structure of trunks and branches that poro associations erect in every village. There, they will slow down until the line nearly comes to a halt, and then they will encircle the wooden structure three times before they slowly walk back again towards the blackness of the grove.

The line is an extreme experience of sensory deprivation—but it is precisely this deprivation that the rite requires. The participants do not see nor are they allowed to see. By extinguishing all fires in the village, by reducing the village as a physical space to the state of wilderness, poro creates an environment where the men are forced to coordinate their bodies in other ways. They must make use of what they can hear, touch, and smell. It is the closeness of their bodies that allows them to form the line, to move as one, to become one social body. The line is composed of individuals, but they cannot move as individuals—only by making themselves part of the line will they be able to orient themselves, to act in the deep darkness after midnight.

The invisible social body

The rites of the invisible poro raise several questions. Some of them relate to the historical situation of segmentary societies in African post-conflict settings, others to basic problems in social theory, while still others are of a methodological and epistemological nature. They all revolve around the question of how the actors themselves make sense of their participation in the rites. This analysis will begin by asking how, whether, or to what degree an ethnographic account of the rite can capture the experience of the actors or, more narrowly, how they make sense of it. Based on these reflections, it will look at the nature of that sociality in terms of the formation of collective intentionality. Finally, it will ask whether the collective intentionality that the participants experience and jointly create during the ritual acts has an influence on how they engage in the social life of the village society more broadly.

As all other participants, anthropologists face a problem when engaging in these acts. They will not know what the ritual acts consist of. These poro rites are not only hidden or even "secret" like many other rites of the association—they are performed in a void. This void is neither "sacred" nor is it a sort of "collective centre against which individual[s] … measure their own sense of being, suffering, destiny, and achievement"

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(Parkin 1991:216). It is simply a space beyond the daily discursive horizon of the village. Very few people will talk about the rites, and the few who mention them will use generic terms that do not hint at any specific practices. Asked by an outsider, elder poro members would not give any answer, and when asked by a young colo (as I was when I participated for the first time in the rite), they would use the generic term "work for the old woman," which stands for any poro activity. "Work" here means that the participants act upon something: a material or an imagined object—or that their acts shape the world around them. There is only one way to learn more about the rite: participation.

The refusal to talk about the rite means that the participants are thrown back on their sensory and bodily experience without having a predication, a ready-made meaning at hand. And so also is the anthropologist. As the participants will also not talk about their experience when the rite is over, most conversations, let alone interviews, will lead to nothing. If they get anywhere, it is not more than a couple of superficial and largely futile phrases such as: "We were pounding the soil." Or: "We walked." Urging other participants to comment on the rite and their own experience means to impose a predication where there is none. They would have to articulate an experience that is not supposed to be articulated. The rites are not meant to be communicated by words. They rather communicate through the performance itself—as orthopraxy always does. An ethnographer inevitably will have to build on his own experience, which entails the presumption that it will resemble that of the other participants.

Such a presumption can be problematic, as any ethnographer knows. First, one might object that the ethnographer's experience can never be the same as that of a young man who was brought up in a Senufo village. This is, of course, a truism (Kesselring 2015:13). Already the daily experience of walking to the fields is something that an ethnographer would lack. While Senufo men would have a habitual knowledge and mastery of walking in the dark on uneven soil, most anthropologists would need to focus more or less consciously on their own bodily practice. It is not something they would have needed in a university building, and it is unlikely that their attention to their moves resembles that of the others. Yet, there is no other way to learn about the rite than through participation.

Second, it is not clear whether the words that an ethnographer will find to describe and characterize his experience can mirror it appropriately. The language that he uses, most likely a European language, may not allow the same connotations as the local language. To believe that the practice of walking together is but a Geertzian (1973) cultural text that one could read and translate into any other language is as naïve as the presumption that the ethnographer's way of walking will be the same as that of the others in the line. Of course, an ethnographer may try to circumvent these difficulties by using local terms and lengthy explanations of what they mean, but that may also not mirror bodily experience if there is no practice of predication for it, which may finally render

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ethnographic description incomprehensible. Culture as a text is based on the debatable presumption that all practice has a predicative dimension or that it is "meaningful" in Clifford Geertz's sense. However, if a social practice is not predicatively or cognitively meaningful, it may make sense in what it actually is: as bodily experience per se.

It also means that contractual understandings of social practice (e.g., Gilbert 1990) will not suffice to understand such rites. The participants do not declare or clarify by words what they want to do, nor do they articulate such plans to others. The rite seems to be more appropriately characterized as a moment of what Emile Durkheim (1912:301–2) once called "collective effervescence." This is, for Durkheim, a precarious balance between the desirable and the obligatory, which eventually leads to the reconfirmation of moral order. But his statements about this tension are opaque. He claims that this experience is irreducible and therefore speaks of "energy," even "electricity"—the sacred that one cannot put into words. However, instead of acknowledging the non-predicative character of such an experience, Durkheim (1912, Ch. VI & VII) objectifies it as a totemic principle—insinuating that the people who were still thought of as primitives would think as he believes they would (Durkheim 1912:339). Paraphrasing Durkheim, Hans Joas (2013) suggests that "interpretation" grows directly out of effervescent experience. In other words, such acts would have a meaning that depends only marginally on individual experience.

Is there a way of assessing collective experiences without projecting presumptions or even desired outcomes on such social practices? This discussion raises basic epistemological questions. Restating the problem, it is clear that the anthropologist, in walking together, will engage in the practice in a different way than others. Second, he cannot rely on predication or meaning that he could use as a sort of confirmation that his experience and interpretation is "right." These problems exist in everyday life as well, as nobody on the way to the fields or in any other line, including that of the poro rite, can be sure that his experience will not be different from that of others. They raise general human and hence anthropological questions of mutual understanding. The problems of the anthropologist are basically those of the others—though probably to a different degree. All men may relate to the practice in different ways. Yet, they still do coordinate their bodies, and when walking in the dark, they must make an intensive use of the same senses in very similar ways in order to move. Their sensory deprivation profoundly affects their ability to situate themselves in such a context.

The question could be restated as follows: the actors walking together might and probably will have a different intentionality toward the ritual practice. However, as a social act, walking together in a line requires that the bodily and sensory experiences of the participants overlap to some degree—or else they would be unable to coordinate their movements. So, there must be some sort of collective intentionality. Apparently, it is created by the bodily practice itself. It lets the individuals depend on each other

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and, by extension, creates that collective intentionality (Miller 1992). This neither implies that the actors are consciously agreeing on what they do together nor does it mean that they will need to articulate collective intentionality in any way. Indeed, the discursive void that surrounds the rite is a precondition, as it emerges through the bodily practice only. It fosters the emergence of a particular kind of collective intentionality toward the social—an intentionality that is created by the actors.

It is useful to distinguish two kinds of collective intentionality here. The first, the one that Gilbert (1990) treats in her article on walking together, is based on becoming aware of the intentionality of others; for instance, by articulating one's interest in doing something together. The actors hence *share* their intentionality. The second, of which the poro rite is an example, emerges out of direct participation in a social practice, in which the actors *join* in. There are two ways of creating collective intentionality: by sharing or by joining in.

Still, the initial question remains unanswered: why would poro urge the men to join in the line and walk together? As a social practice, the rite builds on habits of the everyday. A dichotomy of sacred versus profane (Durkheim 1912; Parkin 1991) would not make much sense in the life-world of the Senufo—though Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence would remain untouched by such a critique. It could still play a role in the social production of moral order. Hence also the renewed interest in this neglected part of his work (e.g., Shilling & Mellor 1998; Olaveson 2001).

What characterizes this case is more a tension between loosely structured intentionality that may serve different purposes and a joint intentionality that reduces the experience of the actors to the basics of social practice. The invisible poro obliges the men to walk together in a specific way that is instituted by its sensory regime. It thus creates an ability "…to get on with someone through a shared rhythm of movement" (Vergunst 2012:135). This ritualized sociality implicitly refers to its everyday counterpart; habitual ways of walking. In other words, the rite *modulates* the everyday. It is not opposing it—it rather makes its form a model for the social at large. By making this sociality a model for the social, it constitutes it as an intentional object, as one social body. They learned how to imagine the social as one body—as an invisible social body that they experienced through participation.

The focus on non-predicative bodily experience, enclosed in a protected space, also ensures that it remains excluded from discursive formations. It is impossible to articulate the meaning of the rite in ordinary language. The experience of walking together rather serves as a stable reference point, or, more accurately, as a nodal point in everyday discourse. If nodal points are taken as "privileged discursive points of … partial fixation" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001:112), the non-predicative character of ritual experience may best be thought of as a way to fix their meaning—namely, through joint intentionality as a social fact. In that sense, such rites of poro tie the actors to a non-discursive realm of direct and unmediated experience

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of the social, while simultaneously underpinning everyday discourse with a normative, morally laden understanding of collectivity that cannot be questioned as other discursive articulations might be questioned.

Two points need to be highlighted. First, Durkheim's vague notion of collective effervescence as the spontaneous source of moral order is replaced by an empirically open understanding of corporeal interaction that coordinates and shapes the participants' experience as one social body. Second, such a bodily experience does not exist in a societal vacuum. Its non-predicative character makes it a nodal point in larger discursive formations that may use its normative dimension to produce a more stable moral order. Such rites do not constitute a finite realm of meaning, as one may assume. They are part of everyday discursive formations, but they have a specific role to play therein.

Is this relevant for the recent revitalization of poro lodges? If this interpretation holds, one would assume that nothing would have changed during the many years of the Ivorian crisis. However, the big commemorative funerals where "things of the night" were most often performed almost came to an end when the military situation deteriorated and traveling became more and more dangerous. Some poro lodges therefore reduced these rites to insignificant relics or gave them up altogether. Others, however, continued to perform them in less elaborate contexts, such as, for instance funerals for individual elders. They embodied societal memories without developing a narrative or a predicative account of them (Connerton 1989:72–82). It is no accident that these lodges were often situated in segmental villages that tried to emancipate themselves from the state or rather from what was left over from the centralized state administration under rebel domination. Being largely independent, they actively sought an alternative to other ways of imagining the social—and poro offered such an alternative: an invisible but unquestionably existing social body.

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Notes

1. Since 1979, I have conducted ethnographic research for totaling about eight years. The current revival of poro was documented between December 2015 and February 2017.
2. Also *jamanakuntigi*, today also used for the post-colonial president, Dumestre 2011. See http://www.bambara.org/lexique/lexicon/main.htm, 07/22/2015.
3. Hellweg 2004, 2011, also Hellweg, Heitz-Tokpa, Ferrarini in this issue. Many Senufo pronounce *dozo*, “hunter” as *tozo*.
4. Unsurprisingly, it is not mentioned in the recent literature on the Ivorian crisis, e.g., McGovern 2011.
5. I understand regime as “repeated, strong interactions among major political actors” (Tilly 2006:19). On media and visual experience as regime Metz (1982) and Jay (1988).
6. When only men are meant, or allowed to participate in poro rites, I use the male pronoun only.
7. Many authors claim that the initiation cycle takes six and a half (Glaze 1981:96–97) or seven years (Jamin 1977:85–90). Having a lunar calendar, Senufo usually say that the neophytes enter the initiation camp “in the seventh year when the sky is dark,” that is, early or mid-September (Förster 1997:253–55).
8. These hoeing contests had disappeared for years but are now being organized again in many Senufo villages.
9. See the Inuits’ understanding of “wayfaring” as human thought and practice (Ingold 2007:75–80).
10. I participated in six of these rites in Nafoun, Odia, Tyelikaha, and Zanga—first as a colo in three between 1982 and 1984, and in the other three as an elder in 1990, 1996, and 2015.

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