# DRH | THE DATABASE OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY

# Mende

Data source: eHRAF
Secondary source
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*Data Source entry, prepared based on data sourced from an external project.*
*Secondary Source entry, prepared from a literature review by a Ph.D. RA*

Entry tags: African Religion, Religious Group

The Mende have historically lived in Western Africa; this entry focuses on the Mende living in the vicinity of the town of Bo, Sierra Leone around the time of 1945. At this time, a section was the basic political unit and consisted of several towns and villages. A section chief held political leadership of each section, and a paramount chief led the chiefdom as a whole. Secret societies, namely the Poro and Sande, served crucial roles in transmitting social norms, rules of conduct, and performance of ritual activity. The secret societies held a close connection with certain spirits and rituals, and embodied supernatural power. The chief, although a secular figure, "acted as general patron of the more important secret societies, such as the Poro and the Sande, and was expected to sponsor the various ceremonies called for in connection with the ancestral cult and related forms of worship and propitiation" (Little, 1951:182). Supernatural beings, in addition to ancestral spirits, included non-human spirits, and a supreme high god who created the world but is said to not have an active role in the day-to-day life of humans. Because religion permeated almost all aspects of life and culture, this entry considers the religious group to be coterminous with society itself.

Date Range: 1920 CE - 1950 CE

Region: Vicinity of the town of Bo, Sierra Leone

Region tags: Africa, Western Africa, Sierra Leone

Vicinity of the town of Bo, Sierra Leone, ca. 1945

## Status of Participants:

✓ Elite      ✓ Religious Specialists      ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

# Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

—Source 1: Divale, W. (2004). Codebook of Variables for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. World Cultures: The Journal of Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research.

—Source 2: Murdock, G.P. (1967). Ethnographic Atlas. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

—Source 3: Tuden, A. & Marshall, C. (Oct., 1972). Political organization: Cross-cultural codes 4. Ethnology, 11(4), 436-464.

—Source 1: Murdock, G.P. & Wilson, S.F. (Jul., 1972). Settlement patterns and community organization: Cross-Cultural Codes 3. Ethnology, 11(3), 254-295.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

—Source 1 URL: https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=fc07-002

—Source 1 Description: Little, K. L. (1951). The Mende of Sierra Leone. In International library of sociology and social reconstruction (p. 307). Routledge and Kegan Paul.

# General Variables

## Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

—Yes

Notes: "Although the Sierra Leone settlement was taken over as a Crown colony in 1806, the British appear to have made little or no political contact with the Mende until quite well on in the latter half of the century" (Little, 1951:43). Catholic and Methodist missions were mentioned by the principal ethnographic authority (Little, 1951:172) but traditional beliefs appear to have remained in place. "More significant, therefore, than any religious idea which the missionaries, both European and Creole, have carried to the Protectorate, is the desire which attendance at a mission school arouses for social acceptance in a world governed by part-European, part-Creole notions of civilized behaviour" (Little, 1951:262). "...persons professing some connection with Islam play quite an important part in the general organization of Mende religious and magical life" (Little, 1951:273).

　　Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

　　—Yes

　　Notes: According to SCCS Variable 1649, Frequency of Internal Warfare (resolved rating), the Mende were coded 3, which is between 1 (internal warfare seems to be absent or rare) and 5 (internal warfare seems to occur once every 3 to 10 years) (Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

　　Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

　　—Yes

　　Notes: According to SCCS Variable 1650, Frequency of External Warfare (resolved rating), the Mende were coded 3, which is between 1 (external warfare seems to be absent or rare) and 5 (external warfare seems to occur once every 3 to 10 years) (Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

—Yes

Notes: Because religion did not exist within a distinct sphere of life, this entry considers the Mende religious group to be coterminous with society itself. Therefore, membership is default for this society. However, initiation rites around the time of puberty bring young men and women fully into Mende adult life, including religious aspects of life. See questions below for more information.

　　Assigned at birth (membership is default for this society):

　　—Yes

　　Notes: Because religion did not exist within a distinct sphere of life, this entry considers the

Mende religious group to be coterminous with society itself. Therefore, membership is default for this society. However, initiation rites around the time of puberty bring young men and women fully into Mende adult life, including religious aspects of life. See questions below for more information.

↳ Assigned by participation in a particular ritual:

— Yes

Notes: "The [boys'] initiation rite and the whole time spent in the bush which follows it symbolize the change of status. The young initiate is supposed to be 'swallowed' by the (Poro) spirit when he enters, and separation from his parents and kinsfolk signifies his death. The marks on his back are evidence of the spirit's teeth. At the end of his time, he is 'delivered' by the spirit and 'reborn'. Thus, the period in the bush marks his transition from boyhood to manhood, and as a result of the experience he emerges a fully fledged member of Mende society" (Little, 1951:120). "The Sande [women's society] is convened for initiation purposes about the same time as the Poro, but in a less formal way" (Little, 1951:126).

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the Mende would actively proselytize and recruit new members.

Does the religion have official political support

— Yes

Notes: Because religion did not exist within a distinct sphere of life, but rather permeated almost all aspects of life, this entry considers the religious group to be coterminous with the society itself. Consequently, it can be said that the religion has political support. One example of the overlap between religion and politics is demonstrated by the following example: "Indeed, the Poro society was, in all likelihood, the means by which a uniform system of government and set of customs was possible among the large number of politically separate and remotely scattered communities of Mende country. The society instilled general awe of a religious kind, and derived its power entirely through the intercourse which its senior officials claimed to have with the world of spirits. They impersonated the latter with the aid of masks and other paraphernalia" (Little, 1951: 183).

↳ Polity legal code is roughly coterminous with religious code:

— Yes

Notes: "Through their staff of hereditary officials, masked 'spirits', and rituals, the secret societies canalize and embody supernatural power. Collectively, they provide an institutional structure which bears resemblance to the medieval church in Europe; but with one or two important differences. Like the medieval church, they lay down various rules of conduct, prescribe certain forms of behaviour, and are the sole agency capable of remitting certain sins. On the other hand, both their control over supernatural power and their regulation of lay conduct and behaviour is, to some extent, departmental and even a matter of specialization. That is to say, particular fields of the cultural life and their regulation tend to fall within the exclusive province of specific societies. The combined effect, however, is a pattern of life which is influenced very largely by the secret societies" (Little, 1951:240).

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

— No

Notes: It appears that aspects of Islam and Christianity were practiced by some individuals; these individuals do not appear to be viewed as apostates. "On account of these and similar reasons, it is a mark of prestige in non-literate Mende society to profess Islam. Among the small European-educated group, however, Christianity usually comes first in this. Of those chiefs who are Christians, most find it politically expedient to support Moslem practices in various ways and to treat the Moslem Imam and 'Alfas' with the greatest respect" (Little, 1951:274).

## Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

— Estimated population, numeric: 10000

Notes: "A very rough estimate from the previous (1931) census is that there were nearly forty towns with a population in each case of more than 1,000 inhabitants. In most of these the population probably did not exceed that figure by more than a few hundreds. The three largest towns are given as Kailahun with 2,545 inhabitants, and Bo and Bumpe (Middle Mende), each with 2,200. Obviously, since 1931 many towns on the railway line, such as Bo and Moyamba, have grown quite considerably. The present writer estimates that modern Bo has at least 10,000 inhabitants" (Little, 1951:65).

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

— Yes

Notes: The principal chief, although not a formal priest, coordinated closely with the Poro society. "[the chief] acted as general patron of the more important secret societies, such as the Poro and the Sande, and was expected to sponsor the various ceremonies called for in connection with the ancestral cult and related forms of worship and propitiation" (Little, 1951:182). "Indeed, in so far as the Mende chief is a purely secular figure, lacking the ritual sanctions with which chiefly authority is associated among the neighbouring Timne people, it might well be held that the Poro is his religious counterpart in the field of government" (ibid, p.184).

⤷ Are leaders believed to possess supernatural powers or qualities:

— No

Notes: "Indeed, in so far as the Mende chief is a purely secular figure, lacking the ritual sanctions with which chiefly authority is associated among the neighbouring Timne people, it might well be held that the Poro is his religious counterpart in the field of government" (Little, 1951:184).

⤷ Are religious leaders chosen:

— Yes

Notes: See questions below for more information regarding religious leadership.

⤷ Other members of the leader's congregation choose the leader:

— Yes

Notes: "It is evident, today, also that the 'election' (see next chapter) of the new chief is previously deliberated in the Poro [men's secret society] bush and may finally be decided there by swearing members of the Tribal (chiefdom) Authority, who constitute the 'electoral' body, on Poro medicine" (Little, 1951:185).

⌐ Are leaders considered fallible:

— I don't know

⌐ Are close followers or disciples of a religious leader required to obediently and unquestionably accept the leader's pronouncements on all matters:

— I don't know

## Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of scripture.

## Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

— No

Notes: Presumably, monumental religious architecture is absent; according to Murdock and Wilson (1972, Column 6: Large or Impressive Structures), "there are no structures in the community that are appreciably larger or more impressive than the usual residential dwellings."

Are there specific sites dedicated to sacred practice or considered sacred:

— Yes

Notes: "Ceremonies in connection with the ancestors, or approaches to them, are carried out by the head of the family or its oldest member. Very often, there are special places, such as the foot of a large cotton tree between whose roots a small wooden shelter is placed. Such a spot is known as hɛma—praying place—and it is here that the hɛmui—praying man—and the other members of the family congregate in order to make their offering" (Little, 1951:219).

⌐ Are sacred site oriented to environmental features:

"Environmental features" refers to features in the landscape, mountains, rivers, cardinal directions etc...

— Yes

Notes: "The sacred bush of the [Poro] society is usually adjacent to the town, and is invariably surrounded by high cotton trees which give to the place an appearance of both majesty and mystery. This spot, as already mentioned, is known as the kameihun, and it is here that members meet to discuss society business" (Little, 1951:247).

Are pilgrimages present:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of pilgrimages.

# Beliefs

## Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

— Yes

Notes: "It is fairly clear, nevertheless, that the conditions of the natural world are continued in the hereafter. In addition to their tutelary role, the life of the ancestral spirits, as Hofstra indicates, seems in many respects to be similar to that of the people on earth. They are held to cultivate rice-farms, build towns, etc. In other words, the spirits retain their anthropomorphic character" (Little, 1951:138).

Belief in afterlife:

— Yes

Notes: "Generally, conceptions of the next world are of a rather vague kind. It is pictured, sometimes, as a clean town with white sand. Notions which are more specific are obviously influenced by Islamic teaching and cosmology. It is fairly clear, nevertheless, that the conditions of the natural world are continued in the hereafter" (Little, 1951:138).

Reincarnation in this world:

— Yes

Notes: "An ancestor's status lasts as long as the dead are remembered, and this varies with social and political standing. After this, the dead seemingly retire into their own limbo, though there is also some evidence to suggest a popular belief in re-birth and reincarnation" (Little, 1951:138).

↳ In a human form:

— Yes

Notes: Little, 1951:138

↳ In animal/plant form:

— No

> Notes: Human forms of reincarnation are the only types of reincarnation described by the principal ethnographic authority (see Little, 1951:138).

⮡ In form of an inanimate object(s):

— No

> Notes: Human forms of reincarnation are the only types of reincarnation described by the principal ethnographic authority (see Little, 1951:138).

⮡ In non-individual form (i.e. some form of corporate rebirth, tribe, lineage. etc.):

— No

> Notes: Human forms of reincarnation are the only types of reincarnation described by the principal ethnographic authority (see Little, 1951:138).

⮡ Reincarnation linked to notion of life-transcending causality (e.g. karma):

— I don't know

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

— Yes

> Notes: The principal ethnographic authority (Little, 1951) does not describe burial practices in extensive detail. See questions below for available information.

⮡ Cremation:

— No

> Notes: Graves are described (Little, 1951:138), indicating interment is practiced. No ethnographic evidence indicates the presence of cremation.

⮡ Mummification:

— No

> Notes: Graves are described (Little, 1951:138), indicating interment is practiced. No ethnographic evidence indicates the presence of mummification.

⮡ Interment:

— Yes

> Notes: Graves are described (Little, 1951:138), indicating interment is practiced. A burial for a Chief is described by the principal ethnographic authority, Little (1951). The burial position is described as flat, with the head upright (see Little, 1951:192).

⮡ Corpse is flexed (legs are bent or body is crouched):

> > —I don't know

> > ↳ Corpse is extended (lying flat on front or back):
> >
> > —Yes
> >
> > > Notes: A burial for a Chief is described by the principal ethnographic authority, Little (1951). The burial position is described as flat, with the head upright (see Little, 1951:192).
> > >
> > > Specific to this answer:
> > > Status of Participants: ✓ Elite

> > ↳ Corpse is upright (where body is interred in standing position):
> >
> > —I don't know

> ↳ Cannibalism:
>
> —No
>
> > Notes: Graves are described (Little, 1951:138), indicating interment is practiced. No ethnographic evidence indicates the presence of cannibalism.

> ↳ Exposure to elements (e.g. air drying):
>
> —No
>
> > Notes: Graves are described (Little, 1951:138), indicating interment is practiced. No ethnographic evidence indicates the presence of exposure to elements.

> ↳ Feeding to animals:
>
> —No
>
> > Notes: Graves are described (Little, 1951:138), indicating interment is practiced. No ethnographic evidence indicates the presence of feeding corpses to animals.

> ↳ Secondary burial:
>
> —No
>
> > Notes: According to SCCS Variable 1850, Secondary bone/body treatment, original scale (Schroeder, 2001; Retrieved from Divale, 2004), "secondary contact with the body or bones of the deceased does not occur."

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

—I don't know

> Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicates the presence of co-sacrifices in burials. However, burial practices are described in limited detail.

Are grave goods present:

—Yes

Notes: "It is equally necessary that the deceased should be sent on his way with ceremonies appropriate to his earthly rank. He should also carry with him some token of his position. This explains, no doubt, the more elaborate rites performed at the death of a chief (see Chapter IX), and the custom of depositing money and other personal articles in the grave" (Little, 1951:137).

↳ Personal effects:

—Yes

Notes: "It is equally necessary that the deceased should be sent on his way with ceremonies appropriate to his earthly rank. He should also carry with him some token of his position. This explains, no doubt, the more elaborate rites performed at the death of a chief (see Chapter IX), and the custom of depositing money and other personal articles in the grave" (Little, 1951:137).

↳ Valuable items:

—I don't know

↳ Other grave goods:

—I don't know

Are formal burials present:

—Yes

Notes: A description of a formal burial can be found in Little, 1951, pp. 192-193. "The final rites de passage leading to ancestorhood are celebrated in a person's funeral ceremonies. The most important of these—Tindyamei, i.e. 'crossing the water'—are to enable him to make the journey into the new land. To enter it he is said to cross a river" (Little, 1951:137). The principal ethnographic authority (Little, 1951) references graves, but does not specify the location of such graves.

↳ In cemetery:

—I don't know

Notes: Not explicitly specified by the principal ethnographic authority (Little, 1951).

↳ Other formal burial type:

—Yes [specify]: Burial on family land

Notes: "The ancestors are buried on family land, and they continue to inhabit it" (Little, 1951:87).

## Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

—Yes

Notes: "'Spirit' is a generic concept which can be specified broadly in terms of four categories, namely,

ancestral spirits; 'genii' (dyinyanga); secret society spirits; and miscellaneous spirits" (Little, 1951:218).

↳ A supreme high god is present:

— Yes

Notes: "In the beginning, there was Leve, spoken of nowadays as Ngew(ɔ). Leve, or Ngew(ɔ), may be directly translated as (Supreme) God. All life and activity, in both a material and non-material sense, derives from him. Ngew(ɔ) created the world and everything in it...He is the ultimate source and symbol of that power and influence, but though all-powerful, he is not an immanent being. Like most African Supreme Gods, having made the world, he retired far into the sky. He has little immediate contact with the affairs of human beings, though he still sends the rain to fall on his 'wife', the Earth (Ndoi)" (Little, 1951:217).

   ↳ The supreme high god is anthropomorphic:

   — Yes

   Notes: See Little, 1951:217

   ↳ The supreme high god is a sky deity:

   — Yes

   Notes: "Like most African Supreme Gods, having made the world, he retired far into the sky" (Little, 1951:217).

   ↳ The supreme high god is chthonic (of the underworld):

   — No

   Notes: "Like most African Supreme Gods, having made the world, he retired far into the sky" (Little, 1951:217).

   ↳ The supreme high god is fused with the monarch (king=high god):

   — No

   Notes: Ethnographic evidence suggests a monarchy was not present.

   ↳ The monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god:

   — No

   Notes: Ethnographic evidence suggests a monarchy was not present.

   ↳ The supreme high god has deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

   — No

   Notes: "Like most African Supreme Gods, having made the world, he retired far into the sky. He has little immediate contact with the affairs of human beings, though he still sends the rain to fall on his 'wife', the Earth (Ndoi)" (Little, 1951:217).

⮕ The supreme high god has indirect causal efficacy in the world:

— Yes

Notes: "Like most African Supreme Gods, having made the world, he retired far into the sky. He has little immediate contact with the affairs of human beings, though he still sends the rain to fall on his 'wife', the Earth (Ndoi)" (Little, 1951:217).

⮕ The supreme high god communicates with the living:

— Yes

Notes: "But contact [with Ngew(ɔ)] is made more often through the medium of a 'spirit', in Mende ngafa (pl. ngafanga)" (Little, 1951:218).

⮕ Only through monarch

— No

Notes: Ethnographic evidence suggests a monarchy was not present.

⮕ Other form of communication with living:

— Yes [specify]: Through other spirits

Notes: "But contact [with Ngew(ɔ)] is made more often through the medium of a 'spirit', in Mende ngafa (pl. ngafanga). 'Spirit' is a generic concept which can be specified broadly in terms of four categories, namely, ancestral spirits; 'genii' (dyinyanga); secret society spirits; and miscellaneous spirits" (Little, 1951:218).

⮕ Previously human spirits are present:

— Yes

Notes: "The ancestors are buried on family land, and they continue to inhabit it. They are in constant touch with the living group of kinsmen through its senior members, and they look to their descendants to preserve the mutual heritage, which is the tangible link between the past, present, and future generations of the line" (Little, 1951:87).

⮕ Human spirits can be seen:

— No

Notes: "As a general rule, ancestral presence is not materially visible, but as already mentioned, they appear in dreams and are readily recognized" (Little, 1951:218).

⮕ Previously human spirits have knowledge of this world:

— Yes

Notes: "As members of a particular family, or descent group, [ancestral spirits] retain a strong and continuous interest of a proprietary kind in property belonging to the family, and in family affairs and activities. In consequence, and because they rank as the family's most senior members, they expect to be consulted about any important matter of family business" (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Human spirits have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

— Yes

Notes: "In family relations, [ancestral spirits] have the status of grandfather, and are addressed by that term. They punlish the neglectful and disobedient, and are particularly severe on breaches of discipline and of the duties which members of the family owe each other and its head" (Little, 1951:219).

⤷ Human spirits can reward:

— Yes

Notes: The ancestral spirits appear to have indirect involvement with regards to rewards, providing blessings, and general welfare if respected. "As senior members, [ancestral spirits] also expect a share of the respect and affection due to all older living members of the family, and also to partake to some extent in its material prosperity. In return, they extend their blessing on its members and are generally responsible for their welfare" (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Human spirits can punish:

— Yes

Notes: "In family relations, [ancestral spirits] have the status of grandfather, and are addressed by that term. They punish the neglectful and disobedient, and are particularly severe on breaches of discipline and of the duties which members of the family owe each other and its head" (Little, 1951:219).

⤷ Human spirits have indirect causal efficacy in the world:

— Yes

Notes: "As senior members, [ancestral spirits] also expect a share of the respect and affection due to all older living members of the family, and also to partake to some extent in its material prosperity. In return, they extend their blessing on its members and are generally responsible for their welfare" (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Human spirits have memory of life:

— Yes

Notes: "As senior members, [ancestral spirits] also expect a share of the respect and affection due to all older living members of the family, and also to partake to some extent in its material prosperity. In return, they extend their blessing on its members and are generally responsible for their welfare" (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Human spirits exhibit negative emotion:

— Yes

Notes: "The howei ceremony is performed when the graves of the ancestors are at an inconvenient distance away. Similar prayers are recited, but the rice is usually put on two crossed leaves (the howei), and placed on the public pathway. In order to ascertain if the angry spirit is appeased some rice is placed on the offender's tongue, or palm of

his hand, and a fowl is brought to peck it. If the fowl declines the grains, it is a sign that the spirit is still angry, and the offender has to provide further presents and his elders to make further intercession on his behalf" (Little, 1951:221).

⤷ Human spirits communicate with the living:

— Yes

Notes: "[Ancestral spirits] are regarded as members of the families concerned, and for this reason, if for no other, are the spirits with whom there is the most universal and common contact. For a similar reason, and because communication with them is comparatively easy, they are the most general link between human beings and the supernatural world." (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ In waking, everyday life:

— I don't know

⤷ In dreams:

— Yes

Notes: "Occasionally, however, they [ancestral spirits] appear in a dream to a person even when he is away from home" (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ In trance possession:

— I don't know

⤷ Through divination processes:

— I don't know

⤷ Only through monarch:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the presence of a monarchy.

⤷ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

— Yes

Notes: "The genii, or dyinyinga, may be described, for the most part, as nature spirits. They are usually associated quite definitely with natural phenomena, such as rivers, the bush, etc. They are specifically recognizable in anthropomorphic terms and possess, very often, well marked human tastes, emotions, and passions" (Little, 1951:221).

⤷ These supernatural beings can be seen:

— Yes

Notes: "Though the genie is conceived of spiritually, it can turn itself into a human

being and is often perceived in such a form by the person who encounters it" (Little, 1951:222).

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit positive emotion:

— Yes

Notes: The description below indicates the genii (dyinyinga) have human emotions. Presumably, this indicates these supernatural beings exhibit positive emotions. "The genii, or dyinyinga, may be described, for the most part, as nature spirits. They are usually associated quite definitely with natural phenomena, such as rivers, the bush, etc. They are specifically recognizable in anthropomorphic terms and possess, very often, well marked human tastes, emotions, and passions" (Little, 1951:221).

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion:

— Yes

Notes: The description below indicates the genii (dyinyinga) have human emotions. Presumably, this indicates these supernatural beings exhibit negative emotions. "The genii, or dyinyinga, may be described, for the most part, as nature spirits. They are usually associated quite definitely with natural phenomena, such as rivers, the bush, etc. They are specifically recognizable in anthropomorphic terms and possess, very often, well marked human tastes, emotions, and passions" (Little, 1951:221).

↳ Mixed human-divine beings are present:

— I don't know

↳ Does the religious group possess a variety of supernatural beings:

— Yes

Notes: In addition to the high god, Ngew(ɔ), are a variety of spirits. "'Spirit' is a generic concept which can be specified broadly in terms of four categories, namely, ancestral spirits; 'genii' (dyinyanga); secret society spirits; and miscellaneous spirits" (Little, 1951:218).

↳ Organized by kinship based on a family model:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating that supernatural beings are organized by kinship based on a family model.

↳ Organized hierarchically:

— Yes

Notes: Supernatural beings are organized somewhat hierarchically, as the high god, Ngew(ɔ), "is the ultimate source and symbol of that power and influence, but though all-powerful, he is not an immanent being" (Little, 1951:217). After the high god is a variety of spirits, which appear to be differentiated by category. "'Spirit' is a generic concept which can be specified broadly in terms of four categories, namely, ancestral spirits; 'genii' (dyinyanga); secret society spirits; and miscellaneous spirits" (Little,

1951:218).

> Other organization for pantheon:

—Yes [specify]: Type of spirit

Notes: Supernatural beings are somewhat organized hierarchically, as the high god, Ngew(ɔ), "is the ultimate source and symbol of that power and influence, but though all-powerful, he is not an immanent being" (Little, 1951:217). After the high god are a variety of spirits, which appear to be differentiated by category. "'Spirit' is a generic concept which can be specified broadly in terms of four categories, namely, ancestral spirits; 'genii' (dyinyanga); secret society spirits; and miscellaneous spirits" (Little, 1951:218).

## Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

—Yes

Notes: "In family relations, [ancestral spirits] have the status of grandfather, and are addressed by that term. They punlish the neglectful and disobedient, and are particularly severe on breaches of discipline and of the duties which members of the family owe each other and its head" (Little, 1951:219).

> There is supernatural monitoring of prosocial norm adherence in particular:

Prosocial norms are norms that enhance cooperation among members of the group, including obviously "moral" or "ethical" norms, but also extending to norms concerning honouring contracts and oaths, providing hospitality, coming to mutual aid in emergencies, etc.

—Yes

Notes: "In family relations, [ancestral spirits] have the status of grandfather, and are addressed by that term. They punlish the neglectful and disobedient, and are particularly severe on breaches of discipline and of the duties which members of the family owe each other and its head" (Little, 1951:219).

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

—Yes

Notes: "In family relations, [ancestral spirits] have the status of grandfather, and are addressed by that term. They punlish the neglectful and disobedient, and are particularly severe on breaches of discipline and of the duties which members of the family owe each other and its head" (Little, 1951:219).

> Is the cause or agent of supernatural punishment known:

—Yes

Notes: Ancestral spirits are described as the agents of supernatural punishment (see Little, 1951:219).

&#x21B3; Done only by high god:

— No

Notes: Ancestral spirits are described as the agents of supernatural punishment (see Little, 1951:219).

&#x21B3; Done by many supernatural beings:

— Yes

Notes: Ancestral spirits are described as the agents of supernatural punishment (see Little, 1951:219).

&#x21B3; Is the reason for supernatural punishment known:

— Yes

Notes: See questions below for more information regarding reasons for supernatural punishment.

&#x21B3; Done to enforce religious ritual-devotional adherence:

— Yes

Notes: "In the old days, this 'greeting present' [when asking a neighbor to borrow land] would take the form of a fowl and some rice to enable the people owning the bush to make a small sacrifice and thus inform their ancestors of the presence of a stranger. To omit the rite might offend the spirits and bring harm both to the owner and his temporary 'tenant'" (Little, 1951:91).

&#x21B3; Done to inhibit selfishness:

— Yes

Notes: "In family relations, [ancestral spirits] have the status of grandfather, and are addressed by that term. They punish the neglectful and disobedient, and are particularly severe on breaches of discipline and of the duties which members of the family owe each other and its head" (Little, 1951:219).

&#x21B3; Supernatural punishments are meted out in the afterlife:

— I don't know

&#x21B3; Supernatural punishments are meted out in this lifetime:

— Yes

Notes: Supernatural punishment is described as occurring in this lifetime. However, the specific punishments are not described. Instead, supernatural beings are said to "bring harm" (Little, 1951:91), or simply to punish (ibid, p.219).

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

— Yes

Notes: The ancestral spirits appear to have indirect involvement with regards to rewards, providing blessings, and general welfare if respected. "As senior members, [ancestral spirits] also expect a share of the respect and affection due to all older living members of the family, and also to partake to some extent in its material prosperity. In return, they extend their blessing on its members and are generally responsible for their welfare" (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known:

— Yes

Notes: The ancestral spirits appear to have indirect involvement with regards to rewards, providing blessings, and general welfare if respected. See questions below for more information.

⤷ Done only by high god:

— No

Notes: The ancestral spirits appear to have indirect involvement with regards to rewards, providing blessings, and general welfare if respected. "As senior members, [ancestral spirits] also expect a share of the respect and affection due to all older living members of the family, and also to partake to some extent in its material prosperity. In return, they extend their blessing on its members and are generally responsible for their welfare" (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Done by many supernatural beings:

— Yes

Notes: The ancestral spirits appear to have indirect involvement with regards to rewards, providing blessings, and general welfare if respected (see Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Done to enforce religious ritual-devotional adherence:

— Yes

Notes: "As senior members, [ancestral spirits] also expect a share of the respect and affection due to all older living members of the family, and also to partake to some extent in its material prosperity. In return, they extend their blessing on its members and are generally responsible for their welfare" (Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Done randomly:

— No

Notes: The ancestral spirits appear to have indirect involvement with regards to rewards, providing blessings, and general welfare if respected (see Little, 1951:218).

⤷ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife:

— I don't know

⤷ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime:

— Yes

Notes: The ancestral spirits appear to have indirect involvement with regards to rewards, providing blessings, and general welfare if respected. However, more specific details are not provided by the principal ethnographic authority (Little, 1951). "As senior members, [ancestral spirits] also expect a share of the respect and affection due to all older living members of the family, and also to partake to some extent in its material prosperity. In return, they extend their blessing on its members and are generally responsible for their welfare" (Little, 1951:218).

## Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

— Yes

Notes: General social norms are transmitted through the secret societies (with the two primary societies being Poro for men and Sande for women). Formal training occurs around the time of puberty. See Little, 1951, pg. 120, 126, 248.

# Practices

## Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the presence of required celibacy.

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

— Yes

Notes: "There are a number of social prerequisites of various kinds before a marriage can be made and consummated. Marriage may be contracted at any age, but a man may not consummate it until he has been initiated into the Poro society. Prior to this he is not regarded as a man, in the adult sense, and, strictly speaking, is prohibited from sexual intercourse with any member of the opposite sex. A woman must have been initiated in the Sande society, and must have passed her first menstruation. To have intercourse with an uninitiated girl is both an offense against the Sande and a form of 'woman damage'" (Little, 1951:144).

↳ Monogamy (males):

— No

Notes: "Additional wives are important because they increase considerably the social prestige of the husband and to some extent, also, that of his present wife. Indeed, socially, they may be essential" (Little, 1951:140).

↳ Monogamy (females):

— I don't know

   ↳   Other sexual constraints (males):

— Yes

   Notes: Both males and females are prohibited from sexual intercourse until initiation into their respective societies (the Poro society for males and Sande for females). See Little, 1951 p. 144 for more information.

   ↳   Other sexual constraints (females):

— Yes

   Notes: Both males and females are prohibited from sexual intercourse until initiation into their respective societies (the Poro society for males and Sande for females). See Little, 1951 p. 144 for more information.

## Does membership in this religious group require castration:

— No

   Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the presence of required castration.

## Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

— No

   Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the presence of required fasting. However, some individuals who followed the religion of Islam seem to have incorporated fasting during times such as Ramadan (see Little, 1951:275-276).

## Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

— No

   Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the presence of food taboos.

## Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

— No

   Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations.

## Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

— No

   Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of required human sacrifice.

## Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of required human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of required human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of required sacrifice of time.

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of required physical risk-taking.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

— Yes

Notes: "Traditional customs and ceremonies, particularly those related to the cult of the ancestors, are strictly enjoined. A special premium is placed on attendance at funerals and meetings which have the effect of bringing more widely scattered branches of the group together. Neglect of the latter obligations is met by censure, and may even be treated by disciplinary action" (Little, 1951:87).

⤷ On average, for large-scale rituals how many participants gather in one location:

— I don't know

⤷ What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):

Performances here refers to large-scale rituals.

— I don't know

# Society and Institutions

**Levels of Social Complexity**

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

— A chiefdom

Notes: The Mende had one level of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community, which is indicative of a petty chiefdom (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967). "...today, the basic political unit is a 'section', comprising a number of towns and villages; and a number of sections made up the modern chiefdom. Each section is headed by a section chief, or sub-chief, who is supposed to be the oldest and most suitable person in the male line from the original 'founders' of the territory in question. Similarly, the chiefdom is headed by a Paramount chief, who is supposed to be the oldest and most suitable person in the male line of the descent group claiming jurisdiction over the various sections contained within the chiefdom as a whole" (Little, 1951:175).

## Education

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

— Yes

Notes: "Western education for a boy is approved, nowadays, to an increasing extent, but it is regarded with mixed feelings in the case of a girl" (Little, 1951:115).

> Is extra-religious education open to both males and females:

> — Yes

> Notes: "Western education for a boy is approved, nowadays, to an increasing extent, but it is regarded with mixed feelings in the case of a girl" (Little, 1951:115).

## Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

— Yes

Notes: At the time this entry focuses on, the Mende interacted with the British government, which can be considered an institutional bureaucracy. For more information, see Little, 1951, p.206.

## Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

— No

Notes: According to SCCS Variable 20, Food Storage, food is stored in individual houses (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

Notes: According to SCCS Variable 20, Food Storage, food is stored in individual houses (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

— Yes

Notes: Routes of land transport are "paved roads", according to Murdock and Morrow (1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004; SCCS Variable 14).

## Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

— Yes

Notes: See Little, 1951, p. 203.

## Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

— No

Notes: Tuden and Marshall (1972) column 10, Police (note, equivalent to SCCS variable 90, Police) indicates that "police functions are not specialized or institutionalized at any level of political integration, the maintenance of law and order being left exclusively to informal mechanisms of social control, to private retaliation, or to sorcery."

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

— Yes

Notes: According to Tuden and Marshall (1972) Column 9, Judiciary (note, equivalent to SCCS Variable 89, Judiciary), "supreme judicial authority is exercised by the supreme executive, e.g., the king is also the supreme judge, the council is also the supreme court." "Officially, it is now the Tribal (Chiefdom) Authority, i.e. the former Chiefdom Council, and not the Chief, which is responsible for the administration of justice, public disbursements, etc. The chief himself is merely the principal executive officer and judicial authority in the chiefdom" (Little, 1951:203)

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— Yes

Notes: "...under the British Administration, the court is restricted to cases which, from the point of view of English law, are mainly 'civil' and which involve quite minor offences. Though a District Commissioner or a higher court can revise its judgements, the native court has complete jurisdiction over all cases involving native law and custom with a few specific exceptions, such as cases involving 'illegal societies' like the Human Leopards" (Little, 1951:186).

## Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

— No

Notes: According to SCCS Variable 149, Scale 1-Writing and Records, the Mende did not possess writing and records (Murdock and Provost, 1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

## Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

—Yes

Notes: The Mende predominantly rely on extensive or shifting agriculture for subsistence. Animal husbandry, fishing, and gathering supplement the diet. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.

⤷ Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:
—Gathering

—Fishing

—Pastoralism

—Small-scale agriculture / horticultural gardens or orchards

Notes: The Mende predominantly rely on extensive or shifting agriculture for subsistence. Animal husbandry, fishing, and gathering supplement the diet. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.