



## COI QUERY

<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>LIBERIA</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>Poro secret society</b>
<b>Reference period</b>	January 2020 to 24 May 2024
<b>Topic(s)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <a href="#">Background information</a></li><li>2. <a href="#">Recruitment practices</a></li><li>3. <a href="#">Treatment of individuals who refused to join or defected</a></li></ol>
<b>Date of completion</b>	28 May 2024
<b>Query Code</b>	Q31-2024
<b>Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)</b>	N/A



---

## Disclaimer

---

This response to a COI query has been elaborated according to the [EUAA COI Report Methodology](#) and [EUAA Writing and Referencing Guide](#).

Query responses are produced in response to COI information requests received from asylum authorities within EU+ countries or initiated by EUAA based on COI information needs. Query responses are produced within a limited time period, typically within 5 to 10 days. Within these time constraints, the information provided in this response has been researched, evaluated and processed with utmost care.

All sources used are referenced and cited in the bibliography section. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned COI methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive or conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The information in the response does not necessarily reflect the opinion of EUAA and makes no political statement whatsoever. The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision-making authorities. Any event taking place after the reference period is not included in this query response.



## COI QUERY RESPONSE – Liberia

### Poros secret society

#### 1. Background information

According to a December 2015 report<sup>1</sup> on traditional practices in Liberia by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), a UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia that completed its mandate in 2018,<sup>2</sup> cultural societies, such as the Poro society (for men) and its equivalent Sande society (for women), are considered ‘the trusted custodians of “culture”’ in much of Liberia and have been present in the region for centuries.<sup>3</sup> These societies, which are often referred to as “bush” or secret societies,<sup>4</sup> have presence in the northern, western, and central regions of the country.<sup>5</sup>

Secret societies, including Poro, use traditional religious and cultural practices<sup>6</sup> and are ‘traditionally believed to inculcate values and teach skills conducive to communal harmony’<sup>7</sup> and to initiate children into adulthood.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) noted that these societies ‘have historically provided training for young adults in the absence of formal education structures and in more modern times, they have become places to pass on traditional knowledge’.<sup>9</sup>

According to the New Dawn, a local newspaper based in Monrovia, Liberia, these societies, including the Poro, ‘operate bush schools where girls and boys as young as three to five years, are enrolled and taught issues of life, including war lessons’.<sup>10</sup> According to the same source, these ‘schools’ provide ‘traditional education’, and ‘[l]essons taught among others include hunting, farming, caring and defending the family – for males, and cooking, caring for future husbands, babies, and family members – for females, respectively’.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, sources report that initiation of women and girls into the Sande society includes female genital

---

<sup>1</sup> This source has been included due to its relevance despite being published prior to the reference period of the query response.

<sup>2</sup> UNMIL, UNMIL Fact sheet, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> UNMIL, An Assessment of Human Rights Issues Emanating from Traditional Practices in Liberia, December 2015, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>4</sup> USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>5</sup> USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2; UNMIL, An Assessment of Human Rights Issues Emanating from Traditional Practices in Liberia, December 2015, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>6</sup> USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>7</sup> UNMIL, An Assessment of Human Rights Issues Emanating from Traditional Practices in Liberia, December 2015, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>8</sup> Spotlight Initiative, An end to bush school human rights violations in Liberia, 6 August 2020, [url](#); UNMIL, An Assessment of Human Rights Issues Emanating from Traditional Practices in Liberia, December 2015, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>9</sup> OHCHR, Liberian mother calls for end to forced initiations and secret harmful practices, 26 November 2021, [url](#)

<sup>10</sup> New Dawn (The), Bong Supt. ordered bush school closed!, 2 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>11</sup> New Dawn (The), Bong Supt. ordered bush school closed!, 2 December 2021, [url](#)



mutilation (FGM).<sup>12</sup> Reporting on the issue of gender-based violence, and especially prevalence of FGM, the 2024 country report by Bertelsmann Stiftung on Liberia, noted that '[a]s membership in secret societies is decreasing because people are more often resisting female genital mutilation, abductions and forced initiations into secret societies have been on the rise' during the reporting period of the report [1 February 2021 to 31 January 2023].<sup>13</sup>

According to sources, practices and activities of the secret societies, including the Poro society, were considered sacred and couldn't be openly discussed.<sup>14</sup> According to the above-mentioned 2015 UNMIL report, practices and rituals of these societies adhere to 'strict cultural rules', and their observation by non-members is deemed as 'a transgression of the sanctity of these practices'.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Recruitment practices

The US Department of State (USDOS) in its report on religious freedom in Liberia, covering 2022, noted that several religious organizations, including Christian and Muslim groups and the Baha'i Spiritual Assembly, continued to raise their concerns over 'forced initiation of their members' by leaders of secret societies, including the Poro society.<sup>16</sup>

Incidents relating to recruitment practices by the Poro secret society, as reported by sources, include:

- On 9 January 2024, an article by the New Republic reported, citing local sources, that a 22-year-old man was allegedly taken against his will by members of the Poro society in Lofa County and was forcibly initiated.<sup>17</sup> The man's grandfather was reportedly beaten by members of the Poro society during the incident.<sup>18</sup> The same news source reported that on 11 January 2024 the man was released in Foya district, Lofa County, following the 'intervention of some traditional leaders'.<sup>19</sup> According to the source, the man's family confirmed that he was in good health.<sup>20</sup>
- USDOS noted that, according to NICOL (National Imam Council of Liberia), in October 2022, at two separate incidents a 60-year-old man and two teenage boys were abducted in Zuaah and Sumo respectively, two predominantly Muslim towns in Seuhn Mecca

---

<sup>12</sup> OHCHR, Following a moratorium on FGM in Liberia, victims are still seeking justice, 9 June 2022, [url](#); Spotlight Initiative, An end to bush school human rights violations in Liberia, 6 August 2020, [url](#); Advocates for Human Rights (The), Liberia: Stakeholder Report for the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, 3 October 2019, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>13</sup> Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2024 Country Report: Liberia, 19 March 2024, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>14</sup> New Dawn (The), Government fines Poro Society 10,000 LRD, 22 August 2018, [url](#); UNMIL, An Assessment of Human Rights Issues Emanating from Traditional Practices in Liberia, December 2015, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>15</sup> UNMIL, An Assessment of Human Rights Issues Emanating from Traditional Practices in Liberia, December 2015, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>16</sup> USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>17</sup> New Republic, Man, 22, Forced In Poro Society, 11 January 2024, [url](#)

<sup>18</sup> New Republic, Man, 22, Forced In Poro Society, 11 January 2024, [url](#)

<sup>19</sup> New Republic, Man, 22, Finally Released From Poro Bush, 18 January 2024, [url](#)

<sup>20</sup> New Republic, Man, 22, Finally Released From Poro Bush, 18 January 2024, [url](#)



District, in Bomi County, by members of ‘traditional secret societies’ and forcibly initiated.<sup>21</sup> Concerning the latter incident, it was reported that the two boys were released after two months approximately, in late November to early December 2022, whereas the source does not include any additional information on the first incident.<sup>22</sup>

- The local newspaper Independent Probe reported in an article that on 24 September 2022, an officer of the Liberia Immigration Service was abducted by the Poro Society while on duty in Sanniquellie, Nimba County.<sup>23</sup> The victim, who was Christian and a member of the United Liberia Inland church, was released a few days later, on 3 October 2022. According to the article, his release occurred following a protest by the church and an intervention of the Sanniquellie Christian Fellowship and national leaders of the United Liberia Inland Church, who ‘engaged the Nimba County Administration and leaders of the Poro Society in a closed-door meeting’ demanding his release.<sup>24</sup> It was also reported that during this meeting the ‘leaders of the Poro Society apologized for their actions and asked for the period of two weeks’ to release him.<sup>25</sup>
- According to OHCHR, in October 2021, a member of the UN personnel was abducted and forcibly initiated into Poro society, while traveling. The man was released after a week, following intervention by the UN.<sup>26</sup> In November 2021, a local news source, Front Page Africa, reported that the Minister of Internal Affairs suspended a traditional chief in Panta District, Bong County for ‘illegally operating a Poro Bush’ and for the forceful abduction and initiation of a personnel of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).<sup>27</sup> Corroborating information on whether the information mentioned above referred to the same incident could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints.
- On 5 October 2021, it was reported that 11 members of the Saint Assembly Ministries International Church were detained by leaders of the secret Poro Society in Gbartala, Bong County.<sup>28</sup> According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, local community leaders claimed that they have detained all 11 men, who were reportedly on a preaching mission, with the intention to turn them over to the local authority, because they have criticized the culture violating the traditional cultural norms of the community, provoking negative reactions among the local residents.<sup>29</sup> The 11 men were released on 7 October 2021, following the intervention of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and protests by Church

---

<sup>21</sup> USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>22</sup> USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>23</sup> Independent Probe, Poro Society Releases Christian after Severe Pressure, 4 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>24</sup> Independent Probe, Poro Society Releases Christian after Severe Pressure, 4 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> Independent Probe, Poro Society Releases Christian after Severe Pressure, 4 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>26</sup> OHCHR, Liberian mother calls for end to forced initiations and secret harmful practices, 26 November 2021, [url](#)

<sup>27</sup> FPA, Liberia: Paramount Chief Suspended For Alleged Forceful Adoption And Illegal Operations, 9 November 2021, [url](#)

<sup>28</sup> USDOS, 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 2 June 2022, [url](#), pp. 1, 7

<sup>29</sup> USDOS, 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 2 June 2022, [url](#), p. 8; FPA, Liberia: Ministry of Internal Affairs Secures Release of 11 Men Held in Traditional Leaders in Bong County after Going on a Preaching Expedition, 8 October 2021, [url](#)



members at the ministry in Monrovia.<sup>30</sup> The men were allegedly initiated by force into the Poro society before their release,<sup>31</sup> an allegation that the traditional leaders denied.<sup>32</sup>

- USDOS noted that according to the NMCL (National Muslim Council of Liberia), two men of Mandingo ethnicity were forcibly initiated into the Poro society by traditional leaders in Bong County during October 2021.<sup>33</sup>

Further specific information on recruitment practices of the Poro secret society in Liberia could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

### **3. Treatment of individuals who refused to join or defected**

Information on the treatment of individuals who refuse to join or defected from the Poro secret society in Liberia could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

---

<sup>30</sup> USDOS, 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 2 June 2022, [url](#), p. 8; Inquirer Newspaper (The), Traditional Leaders Free Saints Assembly Pastors, 11 October 2021, [url](#)

<sup>31</sup> USDOS, 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 2 June 2022, [url](#), p. 8; FPA, Liberia: Ministry of Internal Affairs Secures Release of 11 Men Held in Traditional Leaders in Bong County after Going on a Preaching Expedition, 8 October 2021, [url](#)

<sup>32</sup> FPA, Liberia: Ministry of Internal Affairs Secures Release of 11 Men Held in Traditional Leaders in Bong County after Going on a Preaching Expedition, 8 October 2021, [url](#)

<sup>33</sup> USDOS, 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 2 June 2022, [url](#), p. 9



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Advocates for Human Rights (The), Liberia: Stakeholder Report for the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, 3 October 2019, [https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Res/liberia\\_upr\\_harmful\\_practices\\_and\\_lgbti\\_rights.pdf](https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Res/liberia_upr_harmful_practices_and_lgbti_rights.pdf), accessed 22 May 2024

Bertelsmann Stiftung: BTI (Bertelsmann Transformation Index) 2024 Country Report: Liberia, 19 March 2024, [https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2024\\_LBR.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2024_LBR.pdf), accessed 21 May 2024

FPA (Front Page Africa), Liberia: Ministry of Internal Affairs Secures Release of 11 Men Held in Traditional Leaders in Bong County after Going on a Preaching Expedition, 8 October 2021, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-ministry-of-internal-affairs-secures-release-of-11-men-held-in-traditional-leaders-in-bong-county-after-going-on-a-preaching-expedition/>, accessed 24 May 2024

FPA (Front Page Africa), Liberia: Paramount Chief Suspended For Alleged Forceful Adoption And Illegal Operations, 9 November 2021, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-paramount-chief-suspended-for-alleged-forceful-adoption-and-illegal-operations/>, accessed 23 May 2024

FPA (Front Page Africa), Liberia: Supreme Court Denies Bong County officials' Request To Pardon Seven Local County Officials In Six Detention for Criminal Contempt, 26 January 2023, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-supreme-court-denies-bong-county-officials-request-to-pardon-seven-local-county-officials-in-six-detention-for-criminal-contempt/>, accessed 22 May 2024

FPA (Front Page Africa), Liberia: Supreme Court Grants Seven Local Bong County Officials Parole, Following Documented Appeal, 13 April 2023, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-supreme-court-grants-seven-local-bong-county-officials-parole-following-documented-appeal/>, accessed 23 May 2024

FPA (Front Page Africa), Liberia: Supreme Court Jails Six Traditional Leaders for Abducting A Judge over Land Dispute, 19 December 2022, <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-supreme-court-jails-six-traditional-leaders-for-abducting-a-judge-over-land-dispute/>, accessed 22 May 2024

Independent Probe, Poro Society Releases Christian after Severe Pressure, 4 October 2022, <https://independentprobe.com/2022/10/04/poro-society-releases-christian-after-severe-pressure/>, accessed 23 May 2024

Inquirer Newspaper (The), "Stop Interfering In Court Matters" -Bong Supt. Walker Warns Traditional Leaders, 24 February 2024, <https://inquirernewspaper.com/stop-interfering-in-court-matters-bong-supt-walker-warns-traditional-leaders/>, accessed 23 May 2024



Inquirer Newspaper (The), S/Court Places Traditional Leaders On Parole, 17 April 2023, <https://inquirernewspaper.com/s-court-places-traditional-leaders-on-parole/>, accessed 23 May 2024

Inquirer Newspaper (The), Traditional Leaders Free Saints Assembly Pastors, 11 October 2021, <https://inquirernewspaper.com/traditional-leaders-free-saints-assembly-pastors/>, accessed 24 May 2024

New Dawn (The), Bong Supt. ordered bush school closed!, 2 December 2021, <https://thenewdawnliberia.com/bong-supt-ordered-bush-school-closed/>, accessed 23 May 2024

New Dawn (The), Government fines Poro Society 10,000 LRD, 22 August 2018, <https://thenewdawnliberia.com/government-fines-poro-society-10000-lrd/>, accessed 23 May 2024

New Republic, Man, 22, Finally Released From Poro Bush, 18 January 2024, <https://www.newrepublicliberia.com/man-22-finally-released-from-poro-bush/>, accessed 23 May 2024

New Republic, Man, 22, Forced In Poro Society, 11 January 2024, <https://www.newrepublicliberia.com/man-22-forced-in-poro-society/>, accessed 23 May 2024

OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), Following a moratorium on FGM in Liberia, victims are still seeking justice, 9 June 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/06/following-moratorium-fgm-liberia-victims-are-still-seeking-justice>, accessed 22 May 2024

OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), Liberian mother calls for end to forced initiations and secret harmful practices, 26 November 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/11/liberian-mother-calls-end-forced-initiations-and-secret-harmful-practices>, accessed 22 May 2024

Spotlight Initiative, An end to bush school human rights violations in Liberia, 6 August 2020, <https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/news/end-bush-school-human-rights-violations-liberia>, accessed 21 May 2024

UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia), An Assessment of Human Rights Issues Emanating from Traditional Practices in Liberia, December 2015, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/LR/Harmful\\_traditional\\_practices18Dec.2015.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/LR/Harmful_traditional_practices18Dec.2015.pdf), accessed 21 May 2024

UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia), UNMIL Fact sheet, n.d., <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/unmil>, accessed 27 May 2024





USDOS (US Department of State), 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 2 June 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/LIBERIA-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>, accessed 21 May 2024

USDOS (US Department of State), 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 15 May 2023, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/441219-LIBERIA-2022-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>, accessed 21 May 2024

## **ADDITIONAL SOURCES CONSULTED**

African Commission on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR); All Africa; Amnesty International (AI); Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD); BBC News; Belgium – Centre for Documentation and Research (CEDOCA); Canada – Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB); Deutsche Welle; ECOL.net; European Union – EUAA COI Portal; Finland – Finnish Immigration Service; France – Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA); Freedom House; Germany - Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF); Human Rights Watch (HRW); International Crisis Group; Jeune Afrique; Liberian Observer; Norway – Landinfo; Refworld; Reuters; Spotlight Initiative; Thomson Reuters Foundation; United Nations – Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)