

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4223



Music of Kuria & the Gusii of Western Kenya

RECORDED AND EDITED BY JOHN P. VARNUM



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1838
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1972

MUSIC LP

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4223

Side 1

Band 1: Entoni (Musical Bow) 5:08
Band 2: Iritingo (Bowl Lyre) 3:13
Band 3: Ekegogo (Spike Lute) 3:52
Band 4: Umwere (Closed Transverse Flute) 1:48
Band 5: Umwere 1:03
Band 6: Ikere (Open Transverse Flute) :52
Band 7: Ikibiswi (Closed Transverse Flute) :43
Band 8: Womens wedding song 1:40
Band 9: Mens beer drinking songs :41
Band 10: Mens beer drinking songs :55

Side 2

Band 1: Obokano (Bowl Lyre) 2:14
Band 2: Obokano 2:29
Band 3: Obokano 2:39
Band 4: Obokano 2:32
Band 5: Obokano 2:43
Band 6: Obokano 1:52
Band 7: Rirandi and Orogunchara :47
(End blown horn and side
blown trumpet)
Band 8: Rirandi and Orogunchara 1:09
Band 9: Song accompanied by Rirandi
and Orogunchara 1:18

Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. 72-750894

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701 SEVENTH AVE., N.Y.C., U.S.A.

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

*Music of Kuria
& the Gusi of
Western Kenya*

RECORDED AND EDITED BY
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COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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MUSIC OF THE KURIA AND THE GUSII OF WESTERN KENYA

The Kuria and the Gusii tribes are neighboring Bantu speaking tribes located in the south Nyanza district of south-western Kenya. The Gusii are by far the larger of the two tribes with an estimated population of 225,000 people as opposed to the estimated population of 27,000 for the Kuria.

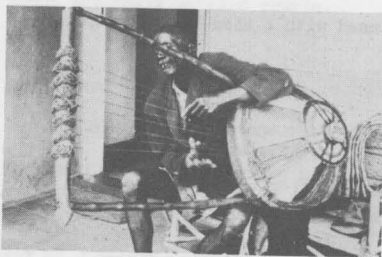
Even though the two tribes call each other "brothers" and the two languages are mutually intelligible, the tribes show rather sharp contrasts in their way of life. The Gusii have a folk story that the Kuria were originally a clan of the Gusii that were sold to a cannibalistic tribe during a time of extreme famine but who escaped their intended fate by running to the south. Another story is that the Kuria were separated from the main group of Gusii first by the Nandi tribes, then pushed further south by the invading Luo tribes, and lost contact with the main Gusii group for many years. Today, the interaction of the two tribes consists of an uneasy peace, marred by occasional outbreaks of cattle stealing raids and intertribal warfare.

The Gusii are essentially agriculturalists who also keep a few cattle while the Kuria are pastoralists who incidentally do a little farming. The Gusii live in an extremely fertile, hilly, highland area, whereas the Kuria live in a rolling, bush plains. The Gusii practice female circumcision while the Kuria do not. The Kuria mode of life is similar to that of the Masai, the famous nomadic Nilo-Hamitic warriors of East Africa, while the Gusii exhibit the characteristics of the Kikuyu, the dominant Bantu tribe of Kenya. Continuous contact with European society for both tribes has been only for a relatively short length of time as the first European came into the district in 1908 and the first governmental agencies were set up in 1911. Since that time, missionary societies and the governmental agencies have been active although not nearly to the degree of activity as in the area north of the Kavirindo Gulf in north-western Kenya and in the area surrounding Mt. Kenya in central Kenya.

Music in the two tribes, as is common throughout most

of Africa, is a conspicuous feature of their life. It is thought of as being indispensable and is present through most of the Kuria or Gusii tribesmen's lifetime. Virtually every ceremony is marked by the presence of musicians and music.

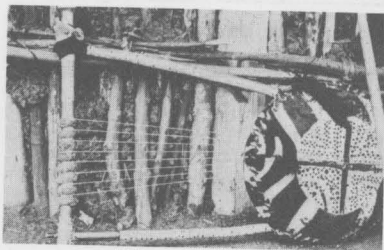
The two tribes have several instruments in common, although the method and style of playing these common instruments differ. The basic common instrument of the two tribes is the bowl lyre which is also the most common musical instrument of many tribes in western Kenya. The Gusii "Obokano" is a large eight string instrument, usually



Gusii
"Obokano"

standing over four feet high. It is played by balancing the instrument upon the seated performer's left thigh and plucking the strings with the fingers.

The "Iritingo", the Kuria bowl lyre, is not quite as



Kuria
"Iritingo"

large as the Gusii instrument, usually about three feet in maximum height, and is played balanced upon the ground and the performer leaning over the top of the instrument. In both cases of playing the instrument, the bowl lyre player also provides an accompaniment with leg rattles or bells. Usually the player of the instrument is also the main singer, although this is not invariable. Sometimes, the "master" singer will have a "student" accompany him while he is singing.

One very common usage of the bowl lyre, in addition to accompanying dancing and singing, is the "praise" song. The praise songs are used to glorify important personages or to commemorate important events such as successful cattle stealing raids. The praise songs are improvised on the spot although the accompaniment played on the bowl lyre is done to a set formulae. Usually the text of a praise song will run something like this:

"yea-aa, Nyamao is a good man,
 He has done a good work for us,
 We hope that he will continue to help the
 Gusii people,
 We wish him and his family a long life."

Every important gathering of either the Gusii or the Kuria will include a bowl lyre player to perform these praise songs.

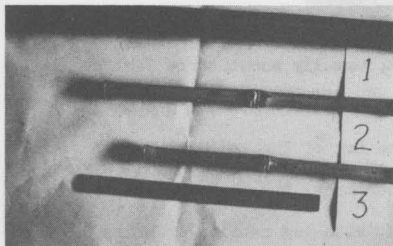
An instrument used by the Gusii but not by the Kuria is a gourd horn called the "Rirandi". This is a musical instrument that serves a double purpose in that it is also used as a signaling instrument to call the clans together as well as being used as a musical instrument at funerals. Very often, the gourd horn is also used with a side-blown trumpet



Gusii
 "Orogunchara"

made from the horn of a cow or a wild animal. This is most often seen during funeral usage. The most unique part of this usage is that it is one of the very few times that two "melodic" instruments are played together at the same time. Normally, only one melodic instrument, accompanied by rattles, is used at a given time.

One type of instrument unique to the Kuria are the cattle herding flutes, or "Iribogwe". Two types of the Kuria flutes



Kuria
 "Iribogwe"
 1 Umwere
 2 Ikere
 3 Ikibiswi

are unique in that they are transverse flutes and are stopped instruments. A stopped instrument has both ends of the flute closed with beeswax so that the instrument overblows to the 12th of the fundamental, rather than the octave as does the modern open flute. Another Kuria flute is an open, transverse instrument.

Surprisingly, drums take a very small part in either the Kurias or the Gusii's musical life. The Gusii's main usage of drums is during the female circumcision rituals. The drum used is a small, double headed drum that is played with either hands or sticks. The Kuria have a long, single head, tubular drum that is occasionally used to accompany dancing.

The main instrument used by the Kuria for dancing is a single string spike lute called the "Ekegogo". Usually the players of these instruments are considered to be "professionals"



Kuria "Ekegogo"
 and dancers



Kuria "Iritingo" and
 "Ekegogo" & musicians

in that they are paid substantially for their services although they do not derive their entire living from playing the Ekegogo. They are almost always present at weddings and other festive occasions. Unfortunately, the spike lute players are tending to take the guitar in favor of the spike lute so the art of playing the Ekegogo is slowly dying out.

One Kuria instrument that is rapidly dying out is the musical bow or "Entoni". One interesting factor as to why this instrument is disappearing is not because of the missionary influence that has effected so much of African music, but rather, because the elders of the tribe have decreed that the instrument is not to be used as the players, normally young men, use the instrument to entice young ladies out in the evening for dancing and singing. The musical bow is used for entertainment and dancing and is normally not for ceremonial usage.

NOTES ON THE INDIVIDUAL BANDS

BAND 1: The Kuria "Entoni" is a single string musical bow with attached four resonator. There is a tuning loop placed in the upper third of the bow that also attaches the gourd to the instrument. It is played by striking lightly with a small stick. The performer can add an additional note to the two normally available by stopping the string with a gourd ring that he wears on his middle finger of the left hand. There are some beads attached to

the upper part of the bow, giving a very soft rattling sound to accompany the string sound. The player can also vary the tone of the instrument by holding the open end of the gourd either close to his chest or away from his chest.

BAND 2: The Kuria "Iritingo" is a bowl lyre with eight strings. The particular instrument recorded uses tennis gut for strings giving the instrument a much mellower sound than is usually heard and lacks the characteristic "buzzing" sound of the Gusii "Obokano". The bowl is covered with zebra hide and is brightly decorated. The performer accompanies himself with vessel rattles that are attached to a stick. This song is a praise song in honor of a newly married couple.

BAND 3: The Kuria "Egegogo" is a single string spike lute used to accompany dancing and singing. The string is made from a piece of wire drawn from the bead of an automobile tire and the gourd resonator is covered with the skin of a lizard attached with thorns. The player places a daub of pitch on the side of the instrument to act as rosin for his bow which is made of sisal. This recording is unique in that the performer is singing the same melodic line that he is playing on the instrument.

BAND 4: The Kuria "Umwere" is a large transverse flute used in herding cattle. It is made from a single joint of bamboo. In addition to the embouchure hole, it has four finger holes which are controlled by the first two fingers of each hand. This recording was made at a mens beer drinking party where the "Umwere" player was entertaining his friends with his skill at playing his instrument. Some of the shouts heard in the recording are making reference to cattle herding, such as, "don't take the cattle too far from the boma".

BAND 5, 6 and 7: These three bands demonstrate the Kuria "Iribogwe", their generic term for all flutes. The Kuria use three flutes, the "Umwere", 22½ inches long, the "Ikere", 15¾ inches long, and the "Ikibiswi", 13½ inches long. These flutes are all transverse instruments and are essentially the same except that two of them, the "Umwere" and the "Ikere", are stopped instruments so that they overblow to the 12th rather than to the octave. The "Ikibiswi" is an open flute overblowing to the octave. All three instruments are used for herding cattle with the large

"Umwere" being the favorite instrument. The two smaller instruments are used mainly by young men and boys. When asked why the Kuria use flutes to herd cattle, one informant answered "it makes the cattle feel better". These flutes are also used for important ceremonies such as mens circumcision.

BAND 8: This is a song sung by Kuria women during a wedding feast. A special house, made from tree branches and leaves, is erected for the married couple and in which the wedding party is held. These women's songs are good natured teasing about the newly married couple.

BAND 9 and 10: During a Kuria wedding, one hut is put aside for the old men who attend the party for their beer drinking. No women are allowed in the hut with the exception of those who are bringing in a fresh supply of beer. The old men sit in a circle drinking beer out of a common pot with 6 to 8 foot long straws and sing songs. The songs are always started by the oldest man in attendance. The songs are usually narrative songs dealing with the past glories of the tribe.

GUSII MUSIC

BAND 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16: The following are all praise songs accompanied by the Gusii "Obokano", an extremely large bowl lyre. In addition to the "Obokano", a small set of vessel rattles are tied to the performers leg for rhythmic accompaniment. The "Obokano" has a false bridge located in the center of the skin covered bowl. The strings, when plucked strongly, rattle against the false bridge giving a characteristic "buzzing" sound which is considered to be the criterion of a well made and well played instrument. The "Obokano" tends to play an ostinato like rhythm while the singer improvises the poetry. One very noticeable difference in style is exhibited in band 13 where the player changes strings in the latter part of the song giving a very effective "lift" to the song. Most of these songs make a pointed reference to the singers lack of schooling and request the author for help in gaining admittance to the local teacher training college where the author was stationed.

BAND 17 and 18: This is the Gusii "Rirandi", a large end blown horn made from gourds and the "Orogunchara",

a side blown trumpet made from the horn of a cow. These songs illustrate one of the few times that "melodic" instruments are played together. These particular instrumentalists were performing at a funeral. Often, in funeral usage, these two instruments are heard as solo instruments and not in an accompanying role as most instrumental music of the gusii is heard. It is interesting to note that the bottom gourd of the "wirandi" must be filled with beer for it to sound properly.

BAND 19 and 20: Funeral songs accompanied by the "wirandi" and the "Qrogunchara". As in almost all instances of gusii music, the accompanying rattles or "kayamba" are present.

BAND 21 and 22: These are examples of songs sung during the women's circumcision ceremony. A special house next to a stream or river is made for the ceremony and mud statues representing men, women and children are erected. The songs are used to instruct the initiates in their new duties as adult women after the completion of the ceremony. During the recording of band 22, one of the singers, an old woman, picked up a clay doll representing a child and rocked it in tempo with the music.

design: michael mcswigan

Kuria "Lritingo" and
"Eregoo" Musicians