

AFRICAN FLUTES

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4230



Recorded in The Gambia by Samuel Charters



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Side A

Flute Music of the Fula

1. BENG SIMBE 3:08
2. YERGO 4:35
3. PRODIATION 2:55
4. SARSANG 3:22
5. SEREBA 4:37

Side B

Flute Music of the Serrehule

1. DUNG N KAHENG 3:27
2. SEMBELU 4:21
3. SANDALI 3:57
4. SOKHADANGE 3:37
5. TAMA JUNG JUNG 3:32

Recorded in the villages of Basse and Diabugu Tenda in
the upper Gambia basin in November, 1976.

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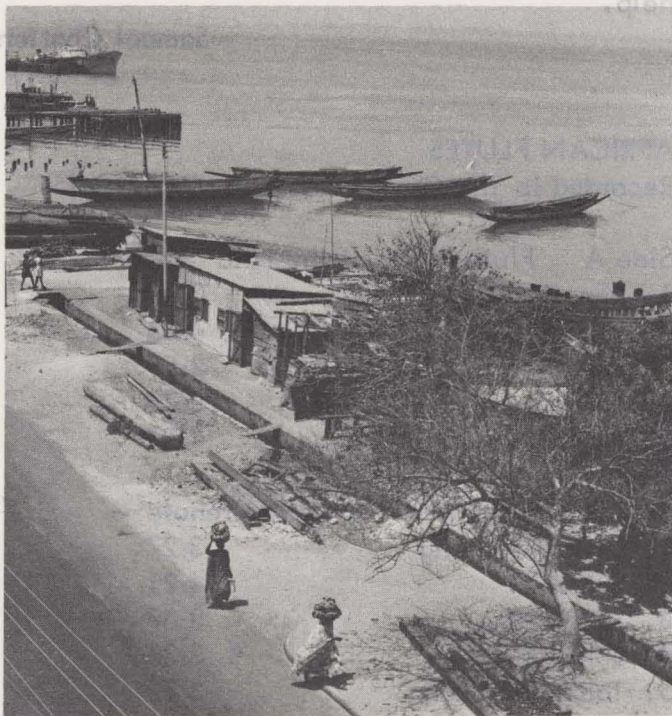
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The Gambia River

Photo by Sam Charters

For many of us hearing Ed Young's fife and drum band from Mississippi at the Newport Folk Festival was a startling experience. Some things in the music - especially in the playing of the snare drum - seemed to be clearly linked to Anglo-American fife and drum corps traditions. But what Ed was playing on his hand made fife was certainly different, and his dancing and shouting also seemed to be part of some other tradition. Could it be African? At that time we didn't know enough about African music and about the African tribes who had come to America to say, but the first time I heard a group of Fula flute players from Guinea playing in Banjul in The Gambia I realized that it was music like this that was the root for Ed's playing.

Since so much of the early Afro-American culture descended from the basin of the Senegal, Gambia and Niger Rivers - a large interior area of West Africa where thousands of American slaves came from - it seemed that here would be the place to look for flute music. Fula musicians can be elusive and difficult, and I was never able to

find musicians who would come to one of the coastal villages to play. I finally had to travel along the Gambia River to the small, hot river town of Basse and look for the flute music there. Basse is a trading town, a collection of one story whitewashed buildings straggling along the river. It is a place for the farmers to bring peanuts at harvest time, but I had come at the beginning of the dry season and most of the buildings were empty. The musicians were out in a smaller village, but word was sent out to them, and they got to Basse in the midday heat. There were two flute players, and a third man playing a Fula rattle and singing.

The Fula rattle is a crashingly loud instrument, and when someone is playing it's almost impossible to hear anything else over the din. It's made of pieces of dried calabash shell strung together on a kind of small hand bow with a wound handle. The flutes are handmade wooden instruments about two feet long. They are bound together with colorful strips of tape, with four holes for the player. Most Fula music is harsh and repetitive, and the flute music has this same characteristic. Both flutes play the melody over and over - more of a melodic phrase than a melody - with the lead flute adding growled tones, breath effects, and insistent embellishments to the repeated phrase. It is played with fierce energy, and the effect, with the flute players dancing as they play and the rattles crashing behind them, is unforgettable.

The pieces are a mixture of solos, duets, and songs with the rattle. In the first piece, "Bengsimbe," the flutist demonstrates the resources of his instrument and voice, and in "Prodition" and "Sarsang" the duet style is predominant.

The Fula are traditionally cattle herders and - following their conversion to Mohammedanism - warriors, and they still live in scattered villages in the bush, their cattle grazing close to their small huts. The Serrehule, who mingle with the other tribes in the interior basin, have long been traders, and they are known for their business acumen. The Serrehule were busy in the slave

trade and in some Serrehule villages there are still numbers of slaves tending the fields and doing the rough work in the compounds. These pieces were played by a group of village musicians at Diabugu Tenda, on the north bank of the Gambia River. They were playing for the village chief Sefo Seihoo Darammeh. The music makes more use of drums than the Fula flute music. There were three drummers, as well as women who sang and danced.

The three drums were played with sticks and they differed in size. The largest drum was called jung jung, there was a small hour-glass drum called tama, and there was a middle-sized round drum called either jung jung or fule. The flute player was using an instrument similar to the Fula flute, but without the colorful binding tape. It was also a four hole flute. The pieces are a mixture of instrumental selections and songs, with the women often jumping into the ring surrounding the musicians to sing and dance. The sound of the rattles on their wrists and ankles, as well as the excited handclapping of the villagers can be heard through the drums and the flute.

It should be emphasized that with the music of both the Fula and the Serrehule flutist's solos and instrumental pieces aren't the usual style, and the musicians played them only when they were requested, as a demonstration of the instruments' range and techniques. In the villages music isn't considered complete unless there is singing and

dancing. The pieces with full ensemble and the noise of dancing and village singing show the usual sound of the flutes.

I was assisted in these recordings by Mr. Aliu S. Dabo of Radio Gambia who traveled with me and worked as translator for the musicians. I couldn't have worked in the area without his help.

—Samuel Charters

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