

RECORDED AND ANNOTATED BY WILLIAM E. MITCHELL

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4269



The Living, Dead & Dying

Music of the New Guinea Wape



One by one, the soaring Spirit Fish masks enter Otei village accompanied by dancing women.

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SIDE I

Band 1 - Call to the Forest
Band 2 - Parade of the NIYL Masks
Band 3 - Maikase Chant
Band 4 - Mani Demon Chants
Band 5 - Mani Demon Chants
Band 6 - Wene Demon Chants
Band 7 - Poril Demon Chants

SIDE II

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Band 6 - A Lonely Wife's Lament
Band 7 - The Reluctant Bride's Lament
Band 8 - Lament of the Ugly Men and the Brother-in-Law
Lament
Band 9 - Lament of a Parisko Maiden
Band 10 - Lament of a Compromised Maiden
Band 11 - Night Laughter
Band 12 - Call to the Forest

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Dead & Dying
Music of the
New Guinea Wape**

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WILLIAM E. MITCHELL

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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One by one, the soaring Spirit Fish masks enter Otei village accompanied by chanting and dancing women.

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The Cultural Context of Wape Music

My introduction to Wape music was at night. Lying awake after my first day in Wapeland, the deep-throated booming of log drums, a ridge away, reverberated through the damp night air. In the village of Otei, the people were celebrating a Spirit Fish curing festival, the most important of the many Wape ceremonials. The Spirit Fish festival is celebrated in each Wape village every few years and, through a related series of interlocking economic exchanges, loosely binds the Wape people together as a cultural, if not a political, group.

A few evenings later I visited Otei's festival. By the gleam of torch light I watched the towering Spirit Fish

masks, gaily festooned with fur, feathers, and multi-colored leaves, prance around the dance ground followed by hundreds of elaborately decorated celebrants. Roaming among the spectators who lined the dance area were several groups of ridiculously costumed young men performing cynical skits to the appreciative laughter of their audiences. The festival was the climax of many months of planning and hard work; everyone who could come was there.

The approximately 9,000 Wape people inhabit the mountains and interior foothills of the Torricelli Range in the remote West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea and speak a common language called "Olo." A gentle people who cherish their personal freedom as they do their children, the Wape believe that all men are created equal--and should stay that way! A man should not advance above his relatives and neighbors but remain roughly equal in terms of power and material goods. Although the Wape

are loosely organized into patrilineal lineages and clans, there are no indigenous political statuses to which a man may aspire and the rigorous exchange system--much of it associated with curing festivals like the Spirit Fish--makes it impossible to amass economic wealth and lord it over others.

I lived with the Wape as an anthropologist for eighteen months in 1970-1971. My home base was Taute Village (pop. 220) located on a ridge above the Sibi River several hours walk south of Lumi, the principal station for the government and missions. When my work with the Wape was finished, I had tape recorded over 150,000 feet of Wape music, conversation and environmental sounds. Most of the music recorded was related to curing, for Wape society is organized defensively around the threats and actualities of sickness. An under-nourished and small people--a man standing five and a half feet high is considered tall--they are afflicted with many tropical and respiratory illness. Even with access to modern medicine dispensed by village aide posts and a small government bush hospital, the people seldom survive beyond their mid-forties. And in spite of active infant and maternal medical patrols, many die as babies and toddlers. The birthweight of the Wape baby is one of the lowest in the world and the growth of a child to adulthood is a slow attenuated process. The mean age for a girl's first menses is over 18 years.

A major problem with profound implications for individual health and growth and the organization of Wape culture is the people's poor diet. After centuries of bow and arrow hunting, the forest's game consisting of pigs, cassowaries, small marsupials and birds is severely depleted. The introduction of the shotgun in the early 1960's further intensified this protein crisis with some areas completely "shot-out." And the small mountain rivers and streams are inadequate for providing a

compensating high yield of fish protein. So the Wape subsist on sago, a starchy substance made from the pith of the sago palm, eaten with boiled greens. A meal with a bit of meat is a special treat. The Wape also practice slash and burn gardening but their heart isn't in it. The men plant taro, sweet potatoes, bananas, and leafy greens but they neither tend nor fence their gardens and the hungry village pigs are constantly raiding them.

In most ways the Wape live as their ancestors did. They remain a sedentary forest people whose primary source of available energy is their own bodily strength. Wape villages are usually located from one to two hours walk apart along root-strewn twisting trails of ankle-deep mud. Each village is strategically placed atop a ridge. Before the Australians brought a secure peace to the area after World War II, some villages were still encircled with protective stockades against enemy raids. In those days each Wape village was a sovereign unit--a miniature nation unto itself--but today the villages are linked together as communities of the new nation of Papua New Guinea. Wape houses, however, still are built on the ground of native materials and occupied by a husband, wife and their children. And at puberty, sons still move to a common bachelor's house until their eventual marriage. Wape architecture is functionally simple and devoid of artistic embellishments. The only distinctive feature of the important ceremonial house where the men gather to plan their communal ritual activities is its relatively taller and roomier size.

Wape material culture is also exceedingly plain. The only esthetically extravagant Wape objects are the many types of ephemeral masks constructed for curing festivals. These exotic and beautiful masks are each associated with a particular forest demon and its related curing society whose members perform curing rites for individuals the demon has afflicted. The ritual details of each society's curing festival vary, but most include a male chorus



Two young men disguised as old women sing and perform a humorous skit at the Spirit Fish festival in Taute village.



Within a sacred enclosure, men sing the *mani* song cycle to the accompaniment of drums.

chanting in unison and informally led by older men who know the lengthy text. Joined by other men, the members sing throughout the night accompanied by hand-held skin drums and booming log drums (slit-gongs) while the demon-mask prances around the dance ground. When day breaks, the curing ceremony is performed for the sick then the demon is ritually dispatched back to his forest home. These curing chants are the sacred songs and music of Wape culture. Some of the chants are untranslatable while others contain a short intelligible phrase symbolizing some important past event, now often forgotten.

The Wape also have secular songs or chants that are sung and hummed by villagers as they go about their everyday tasks of finding and preparing food, lulling a crying baby or relaxing after an arduous hike through their rugged mountain land. These secular songs are usually expressive of deep emotions and frequently sad. Often they are laments attributed to women expressing dissatisfaction with some aspect of their circumspect lives.

The Wape landscape is a hauntingly musical one. The brittle rattle of wind-tossed coconut palms is swept along with the melodious calls of unseen birds, a rooster's hearty crow, a woman's warm laughter, and through it all the cicadas sing on and on and on. The log drums echo messages of death and daring across the forested ridges while a sick old man, sitting alone and quietly nodding, softly sings a popular lament from his youth. At the cliff's edge a young father stands in the late afternoon sun with his fretful infant son and calls in a rich full voice to his wife making sago in the forest below. A far away whoop tells him she is safe and coming home. But the most desolate cry is that of the mourner--a mother whose baby has died in the night or a man who has come to grieve the death of his mother's brother.

Living in Wapeland, one becomes accustomed to the extensive use of a limited tonal scale and gradually succumbs to the soothing hypnotic effect of Wape music. As I moved deeper into an understanding of the culture, the secular and religious chants also began to impose themselves upon me with stronger and stronger emotive power. As you play these selections of Wape music close your eyes and, breathing in the damp forest air tinged with

the smoke of village fires, listen to the new sounds that surround you. It is music for the Wape living, dead and dying.

Descriptive Notes

SIDE ONE

Band 1: CALL TO THE FOREST

The late afternoon sun is falling toward the horizon. Night will soon come and Yamtulu calls to her young sister, Sengu, who is still in the forest (Taute Village, Sept. 30, 1971).

Band 2: PARADE OF THE SPIRIT FISH MASKS

The thundering beat of log drums announces the majestic entry of the Spirit Fish (*niyl*) masks into the village. It is a dramatic high point of Wape ceremonial life. In honor of the *niyl* spirits, women dance to and fro around the prancing masks, chanting and waving great bouquets of croton leaves while other celebrants fill the arena with their voices and welcoming presence (Wilkili Village, Aug. 8, 1970).

Band 3 MAIKASI CHANT

Dancing to the emphatic beat of hand-drums, young people sing through the night, over and over, the *maikasi* chant, the most revered chant associated with the Spirit Fish festival. The ending of a chant, as here, is often signaled by an increased tempo of the drums (Otemgi Village, Jan, 24, 1971).

Band 4 and 5 MANI DEMON CHANTS

The *mani* demon, personified by a soaring conical mask bedecked with bird-of-paradise feathers and crowned with cassowary plumes, is the only Wape demon who has both a bad and good side to his personality. Although *mani* causes illness and death, he can be appealed to aide in the hunt. In Taute village, *mani's* small stone heart was

enshrined at the ceremonial house in the fork of a large branch thrust into the ground. By warming his stone heart with the bodies of many chanting men and the blood of the kill, *mani* is persuaded to turn game toward the hunter's arrows and shells. The *mani* festival is usually celebrated for both healing and hunting or, occasionally, for hunting alone (Band 4, Taute Village, Apr. 23, 1971; Band 5, Wilkili Village, Jan. 12, 1971).

Band 6: WENE DEMON CHANTS

When Sauwin, a Taute man, became sick with persistent stomach pains, the *wene* demon was marked as the cause of his distress. Sauwen, by chopping down a large sago palm in the area inhabited by *wene*, had angered the demon who, in revenge, stole his spirit. To cure Sauwin's symptoms the demon must be enticed into the village and rites of supplication performed to persuade him to release the sick man's spirit.

This taping was made at the beginning of the *wene* festival in *wene's* forest domain. Near the spot where the offending palm had been cut, several men fashioned *wene's* handsome diamond shaped mask while twenty others sang the commanding a capella chants heard here (Taute Village, May 27, 1971).

Band 7: PORIL DEMON CHANTS

The strangest Wape mask belongs to the *poril* demon. Unlike the other masks that are carried on a man's shoulders, the *poril* mask is an impressive architectural structure that resembles a tailless and legless *Diplodocus* dinosaur. The framework for the mask is constructed of bent saplings and covered with a fortune of embroidered shell panels and ropes of lustrous shell money. The mask's ample girth fills the center of the ceremonial house, then gradually tapers to a slender neck that slides along the ground to slope upwards and out a windodw to a tiny head decorated with a halo of dog's teeth and plumes.

The men, crowded together on either side of the extravagant mask, sing *poril* chants through the night. When the sun is high in the sky the following morning, *poril's* son, a man whose face is blackened and hidden by flowers and whose hands are disguised by stiff leaves and circlets of shells, is slipped into his mother's large, but carefully concealed, vaginal opening. From this position his upper body emerges to perform the curing rites that terminate the festival (Wilkili Village, Dec. 15, 1970).

SIDE TWO

Band 1: DEATH OF WAIBU

Waibu, a man from Talbibi village has died. On the opposite ridge across the Sibi River, Waibu's two sisters wail his death in Taute village. Amid the cries of insects and birds, their husbands relay the tragic news by signal drum. Kapul, Waibu's nephew, is called to return to the village from the forest to mourn the death of his mother's brother, his *faf* (Taute Village, Jan. 26, 1971).

Band 2: EPILO'S FUNERAL

Epilo, a Taute batchelor, is laid out in death at his house as relatives come to mourn. As the women mourners enter the village, they raise their voices in a wail of sadness and regret calling him by his kinship term. The descending

melody of the women is similar to the one sung by women at curing festivals but the text is changed to the occasion (Taute Village, Jan. 6, 1971).

Band 3: ENTRANCE OF THE MANI MASK

As the *mani* demon mask prances into the village from the forest, women welcome him with a vigorous chant. Here, as in most of the large curing festivals, women have an important ceremonial and musical role (Wilkili village, Jan. 9, 1971).

Band 4: MANI DEMON CHANTS (SOLO)

Suwe, my neighbor and an expert on the *mani* song cycle, performs for me a "concert" version of some of the *mani* chants self-accompanied with a hand drum (Taute Village Sept. 15, 1970).

Band 5: BAMBOO FIRE RITUAL

The Wape don't like it when heavy mountain fog and mist settles upon their village ridge and refuses to rise. Sometimes one of the men goes to a bamboo thicket and sets it ablaze. The bamboo explodes in loud reports and, driving the fog away, brings out a welcomed sun (Taute Village, Jan. 28, 1971).

Band 6: A LONELY WIFE'S LAMENT

The song tells of a woman who is lonely for her husband who has gone to the coast to work as a contract-laborer for the whiteman (So'ope, a woman of Taute Village, Sept 14, 1970).

Band 7: THE RELUCTANT BRIDE'S LAMENT

A young Mauwi village woman is to be married to a man of Otemgi village. Before being reluctantly escorted away from her village, she asks to return home and put on a new string skirt (Kuruwai, a man of Taute Village, Aug. 26, 1970).

Band 8: LAMENT OF THE UGLY MEN AND A BROTHER-IN-LAW'S LAMENT

In the first song two men, their skins disfigured with ringworm, tell of the beauty within their bodies. In the second song, a man meets his brother-in-law just returned from laboring on a costal plantation and exclaims he did not recognize him so strong and sleek has he become on the whiteman's food (Waiape, a man of Taute Village, Sept. 13, 1970).

Band 9: LAMENT OF A PARISKO MAIDEN

A young woman from neighboring Parisko village is to be married to a Taute man. In her language, which is similar to the Wape's, she calls out to her father and mother at the beginning of each phrase and voices her reluctance. The "reluctant bride" is one of the most common themes of the Wape laments. Yenge, the Taute boy heard here, learned the song from a Parisko boy who often came to Taute to visit relatives (Yenge, a boy of Taute Village, Sept. 11, 1970).

Band 10: LAMENT OF A COMPROMISED MAIDEN

A young woman has made love with a man then,

dismayed, she pulls out a banana from her vagina. To the Wape, the emotion evoked is a mixture of humor and pathos (Kumoi, a man of Taute Village, Sept. 12, 1970).

Band 11: NIGHT LAUGHTER

When the moon is bright, the Wape sit up late lounging and visiting together on their verandas. Sitting in my work tent, I made this long distance recording of women and young people laughing as Bilu, an older man, tells a funny story (Taute Village, Dec. 8, 1970).

Band 12: CALL TO THE FOREST

Standing at the cliff's edge, Suwe calls out over the forest for his daughter's to return home (Taute Village, Jan. 14, 1971).

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Credits

Recorded and edited by William E. Mitchell

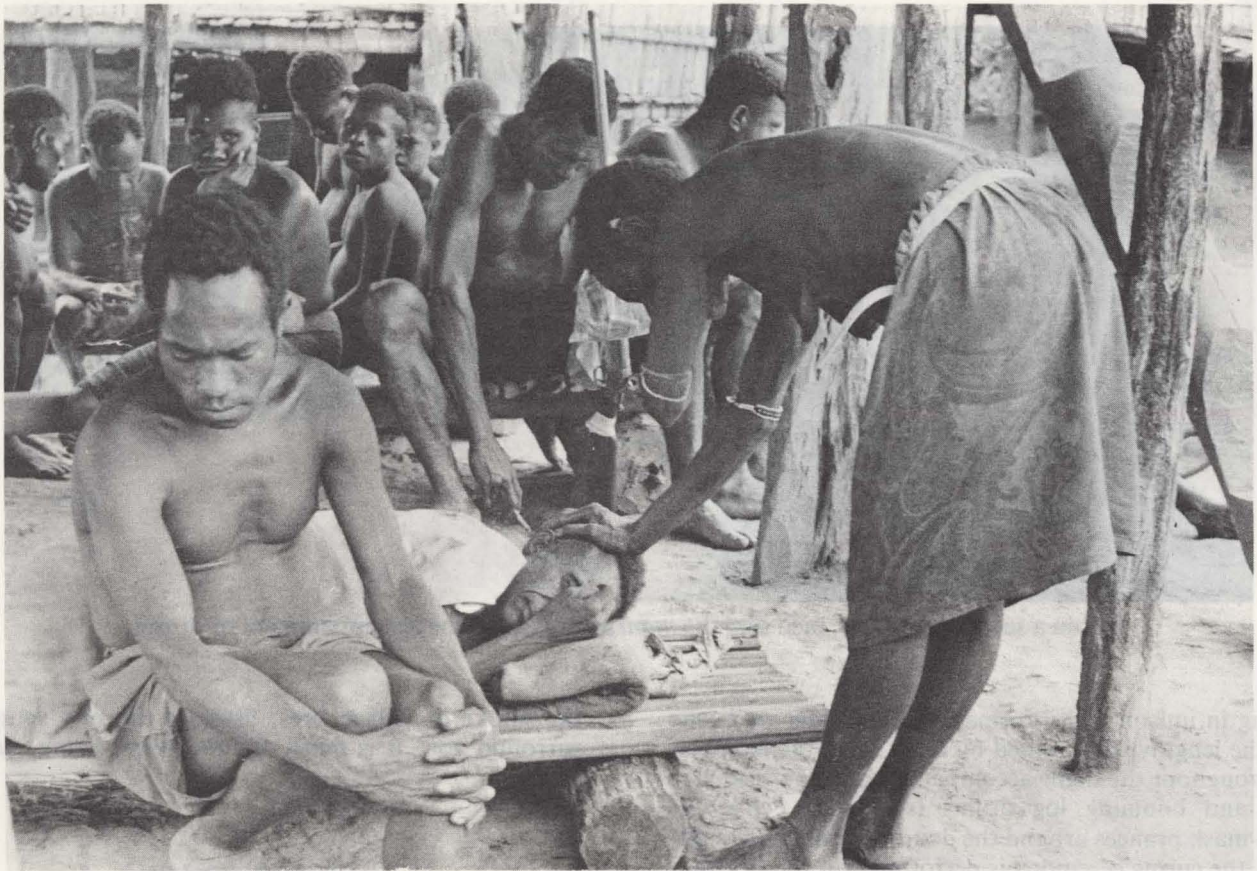
Master tape by Roy Hatch

Record notes and photographs by William E. Mitchell

William E. Mitchell is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Anthropology, University of Vermont. These recordings of Wape music were made by him as Principal Investigator for the research project, "Studies of Culturally Contrasting Therapeutic Systems," United States Public Health Service grant No. 1 RO1 MH 18039 SSR.



In Wilkili village, the son of the *poril* demon, his face veiled by red Hybiscus flowers and wearing a headress of plumes, emerges from his mother's body to begin his curing rites.



At the death of Epilo, his relatives come to Taute village to wail and mourn his passing.

Band 1: CALL TO THE FOREST
The late afternoon sun is falling toward the horizon. Night will soon come and Yamaulu calls to her young sister, Segan, who is still in the forest (Taute Village, Sept. 30, 1931).

Band 2: PARADE OF THE SPIRIT FISH MASKS
The thundering beat of log drums announces the majestic entry of the Spirit Fish (maki) masks into the village. It is a dramatic high point of Waqa ceremonial life. In honor of the night spirits, women dance to and the sound of the prancing masks, chanting and waving great bougainvillea leaves while other celebrants fill the arena with their voices and welcoming presence (Wakile Village, Aug. 2, 1930).

Band 3: MAIRASICHANT
Dancing to the emphatic beat of hand-drums, young people sing through the night, over and over, the mairasichant, the most revered chant associated with the Spirit Fish festival. The ending of a chant, as here, is often signified by an increased tempo of the drums (Otagiri Village, Jan. 24, 1931).

Band 4 and 5: MANDIDEMON CHANTS
The mandemon, personified by a scaring conical mask bedecked with bird-of-paradise feathers and crowned with a woven garland, is the only Waqa demon who has both a "good" and "evil" side to his personality. Although mandemon causes illness and death, he can be appeased to side in the hunt. In Taute village, mandemon's small stone heart was

the demon is ritual. These crying chants are the most moving and beautiful. Waqa culture. Some of the chants are understandable while others contain a sort of incantatory phrase symbolizing some important past event, now often forgotten. The Waqa also have secular songs or chants that are sung and hummed by villagers as they go about their everyday tasks of finding and preparing food, tending a crying baby or relaxing after an arduous hike through their rugged mountain land. These secular songs are usually expressive of deep emotion and frequently sad. Often they are laments attributed to women expressing dissatisfaction with some aspect of their circumstances. The Waqa landscape is a hauntingly musical one. The shrill music of wind-tossed coconut palms is swept along with the melodious calls of unseen birds, a rooster's hearty crow, a woman's warm laughter, and through it all the leaden sing on and on and on. The log drums echo messages of death and danger across the forest ridge while a sick old man, sitting alone and quietly nodding, softly sings a popular lament from his youth. At the cliff's edge a young father stands in the late afternoon sun with his fretful infant son and calls in a rich full voice to his wife making sago in the forest below. A far away whoop tells him she is safe and coming home. But the most desolate cry is that of the mother—a mother whose baby has died in the night or a man who has come to grieve the death of his mother's brother.

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