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MUSIC OF THE MENDE OF SIERRA LEONE

Recorded and Edited by Gary Schulze

FOLKWAYS FE 4322

MENDE SONG
MENDE WORK SONG
MENDE TALKING DRUM
MUSLIM PRAYERS
SALIA KOROMA
VILLAGE DANCING
MENDE MUSLIM SONG
MENDE SONG
VILLAGE CELEBRATION
NEFALI DANCE

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY SCHULZE

DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

MUSIC OF THE MENDE OF SIERRA LEONE

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FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. FE 4322

Music Of The Mende Of Sierra Leone

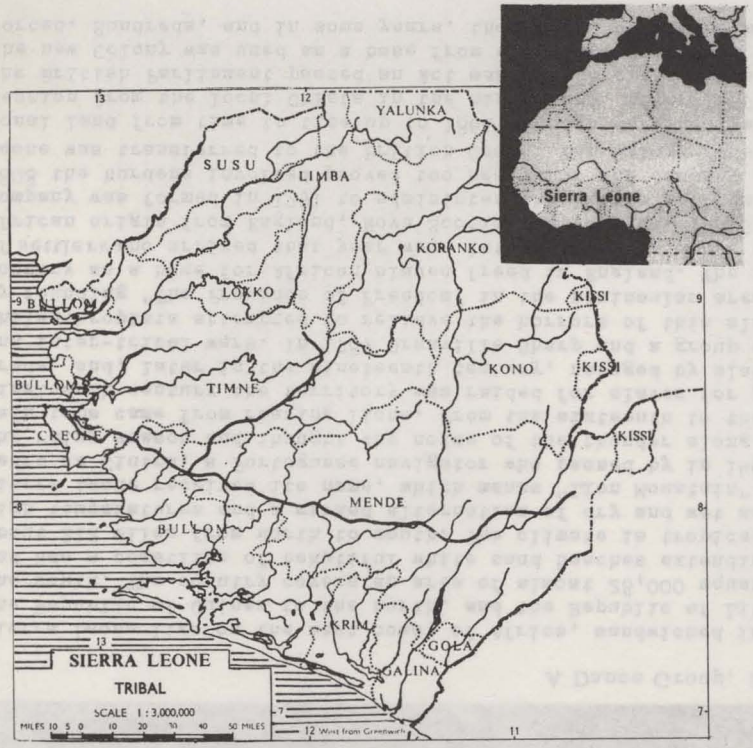
Introduction & Notes by Gary Schulze, former Museum Assistant, Sierra Leone Museum, Freetown.

A Dance Group, Bumpe Town

Sierra Leone lies on the west coast of Africa, sandwiched in between the Republic of Guinea to the north, and the Republic of Liberia to the south. The country covers an area of almost 28,000 square miles and has a coastline of beautiful white sand beaches extending for about 212 miles from north to south. The climate is tropical, with high temperatures and a marked alternation of dry and wet seasons. Sierra Leone received its name, which means "Lion Mountain", from Pedro da Cintra, a Portuguese navigator who passed by in 1460 during the rainy season and thought the noise of the thunder along the mountain tops came from roaring lions. From the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century the territory was raided for slaves for the Atlantic trade, and, later in the nineteenth century, ravaged by slave-traders and inter-tribal wars. In 1787 Granville Sharp and a group of British philanthropists attempted to relieve the horrors of this slave trade by founding "The Province of Freedom" in the peninsular area of the country as a home for African slaves freed in England. The first group of settlers who arrived that year were later joined by other settlers of African origin from England, Nova Scotia and Jamaica. The Sierra Leone Company was formed in 1791 to administer the little settlement but by 1808 the burdens involved proved too heavy for the company and Sierra Leone was transferred to the British Crown. The Colony received additional land from time to time up to 1861 through various treaties of cession from the local Chiefs in the hinterland. After 1807, when the British Parliament passed an Act making the slave trade illegal, the new Colony was used as a base from which the Act could be enforced. Hundreds, and in some years, thousands, of slaves were rescued each year from passing slave ships, most of them remaining in Sierra Leone. Together with the earlier groups of settlers, these people and their descendants became known as the Creoles. The Colony developed trade and mission connections with the tribes in the surrounding territory, which gradually became a British "sphere of influence".

In 1896 a British Protectorate was declared over the hinterland of Sierra Leone which made it judicially and administratively separate from the Colony. The Crown-in-Council was given authority to make laws for the Protectorate and the territory was divided into districts with a British District Commissioner in charge of each division. At the same time, the British policy of indirect rule left the traditional African institutions in each of these districts otherwise undisturbed and the Paramount Chiefs retained their power over their subjects. In 1924 three Paramount Chiefs were nominated by the Governor to sit in the Sierra Leone Legislative Council along with the Creole members and European officials. The 1951 Constitution gave recognition to the fact that the Protectorate peoples greatly outnumbered their brothers in the Colony and for the first time an unofficial elected African majority was introduced in the Legislature, heavily weighted in favor of the tribal peoples. The elections which followed were won by the Sierra Leone People's Party and the party's leader, Milton Margai, a Mende medical doctor, was invited to form the new government. In 1961 Sierra Leone achieved its Independence after nearly 150 years of British rule, the entire region becoming an independent state within the British Commonwealth, and Dr. Margai became the country's first Prime Minister. After his death three years later he was succeeded by his dynamic younger brother, Albert Margai, and today Sierra Leone enjoys the distinction of being one of the few truly democratic countries on the African continent.

Provisional figures after the 1963 census have placed the population of Sierra Leone at 2,183,000, including a population of 128,000 in the capitol city of Freetown. This figure includes a large number of tribes, Mendes, Temnes, Limbas, Lokos, Fulas, Korankos, Madingoes, Susus, Konos, Sherbros, Kissis, Yalunkas, Krims, Golas and Gallinas, each with its own language and customs. The largest of these are the Mende who inhabit an area of nearly 12,000 square miles in the south-eastern and south-western portions of the country, and also a part of the adjacent western corner of Liberia. The Mende chiefdoms, of which there are nearly 70, occupy the whole of the Administrative Districts Bo and Kenema and parts of Kailahun, Pujehun, and Moyamba. Although there is a complete absence of centralized government, the Mende can be regarded in the widest sense of the term as a nation since their cultural and linguistic characteristics are sufficiently distinctive to mark them off as a group, and they possess a very definite national



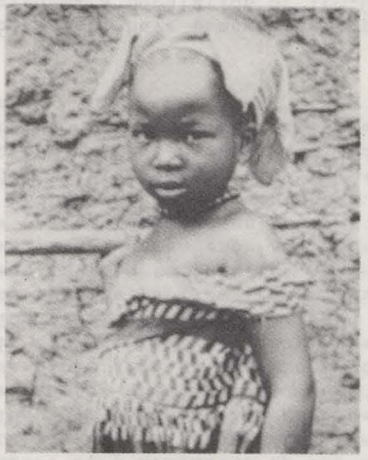
consciousness which is supported by tradition, legend, and folklore. The origin of the Mende people is uncertain. Linguistically they are related to the Mande-speaking peoples of Guinea and it has been suggested that they were driven south and west by the conquering Fulani peoples in the late Middle Ages. According to Mende tradition their original settlement of the country was a peaceful one and they probably made their first appearance in Sierra Leone about four hundred years ago in small bands of hunters. Small villages based on a combination of hunting and primitive agriculture were established under the leadership of the original pioneer and his relatives, and in time these were extended by the addition of small outlying hamlets, formed by the branching-out of younger members of the group and by the settlement of slaves to clear the bush.

A second phase of Mende settlement followed the arrival of warriors from the north who transformed the Mende into a war-like people. It is unknown how far they differed from the original settlers ethnically or culturally. With the arrival of the warrior people the earlier hunting and farming settlements were turned into fortresses, within which lived the local Chief and his company of "War boys" who acted as his bodyguard and private army in the event of a dispute with a neighboring Chief. In many cases the warrior Chiefs made agreements with the original settlers, offering protection in return for allegiance. Individual Chiefs were able to build up large confederacies in which the Paramount Chief exercised control of a variable kind over a number of petty chiefs. This has resulted in a significant differentiation into three major groups on the basis of local dialect and custom:

1) The kpa-Mende, inhabiting about sixteen chiefdoms in the west, and with a population estimated at about 20% of the total Mende figure, are the most clearly differentiated group. They have a distinct dialect, particularly strong military traditions, and several institutions, such as the Wunde Society, not found among other Mende.

2) The Sewa or "Middle" Mende, living near the Sewa River, and containing about 35% of the Mende population, regard themselves as the purest group linguistically.

3) The Ko-Mende (Kolo-Mende), who inhabit parts of several chiefdoms in the north, and provide the balance of the population.



Small Mende Child in the Village of Maisma

Sierra Leone is an agricultural country, mainly of smallholders, although the Government is now encouraging an active co-operative movement which is bringing mechanization and bulk selling. The main crops grown in Mendeland are rice, cassava, yams, guinea-corn, benniseed, palm-kernels, coffee, cocoa and ginger. Two types of cotton are also grown, spun into thread by the women, and then woven into beautiful country clothes or gbali by the men on wooden looms. Swamp rice is grown in hollows or depressions which remain partly or wholly under water for the entire season. This type of cultivation is less popular than that of upland rice but it is being encouraged by the Government to meet the increased shortage, due to erosion, of land suitable for upland cultivation. Upland rice is grown on rising ground from which the surface water drains or evaporates soon after it has fallen; its cultivation is made possible by three to four months of almost continuous heavy rain. Several varieties of oil-palm grow throughout Mende country in varying density. Oil pressed from the fruit forms an essential part of the people's diet and is used as a sauce with rice. The kernels are sold to traders for export and extraction of oil overseas. From the fibres ropes are twisted and used for hunting and fishing nets, for looms and brooms, while the whole leaf is used for roofing, fencing and making hampers.

Mende society is divided into two classes in relation to land, "landowners" and "landholders". The main legal distinction is that in the first case ultimate rights to the land are held and passed on as

property, while in the second case only certain rights to occupation and usufruct are held. Ownership of land derives from descent from those who first settled the locality. The "big men", who are the heads of the land-owning families, usually live in the towns. The land-owner exercises uninterrupted use of his estate, provided he observes the claims of his kinsfolk and the customary rights of the Paramount Chief. He receives applications at the beginning of each farming season from those of the group who wish to make their farms, and after consulting his brothers makes allocations according to their requirements. Preference is given to those residing with the group and according to age and status. Land rights are inherited in the patrilineal line like other property, wives and the title to headship with which overall control of land coincides. Today sons are often awarded their father's land in preference to his brothers. The Chief now retains the right to allocate virgin bush (of which very little remains), but his interest in land owned by other members of the chiefdom is restricted to rights of jurisdiction which he shares with other chiefdom officials who form the Tribal Authority. On their advice he may make regulations as to how land should be farmed, decreeing for example when the various operations should begin and end. But he cannot dispossess an individual or family from land which they have held and cultivated for a number of years.

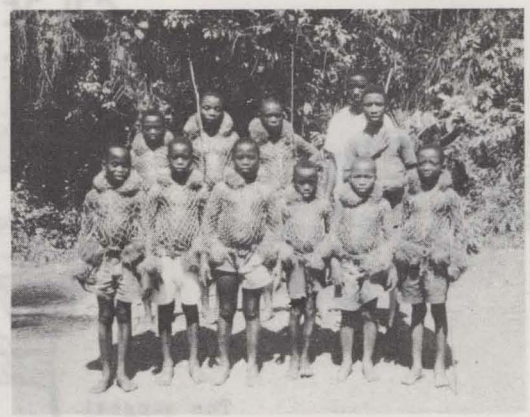
The basis of the farming group is the mawei or household, consisting of a man, his wives and children and frequently other relatives. Members of the mawei make the kpaa wa or family farm, collect palm-fruit and press palm-oil for the household head, build and rethatch his house, work his coffee, and hunt and fish for him. They may be allotted small plots on which to grow rice and cassava for themselves. The farmer expects help from the members of his mawei and also occasionally from the husbands of his daughters and the sons of his sisters.

Mende country is divided into over sixty independent chiefdoms, each ruled by a Paramount Chief or ndomahei, assisted by a tribal or chiefdom council on which sit the Chiefs of sections and of towns and other officials. The Chiefs are elected by the Tribal Authorities from among various "ruling families" which compete with each other for the positions. They receive their salaries from the Chiefdom Trasuries, the amount being approved by the Government. Women have traditionally been entitled to succeed to the chieftaincy among the Mende. At present, Paramount Chief Ella Koblo Gulama of the Moyamba District also holds a cabinet position in the Government.

In addition to subsistence and cash crop farming, small scale fishing is carried on in the villages. Men make weirs and dams, but hand net fishing is women's work, and small girls help to make and mend the nets. However, dried imported fish are the basis of the "soup" with which the Mende flavor their rice, and the main form of protein in the diet. Hunting plays a relatively minor role in the Mende economy. Traps and snares are set in the bush and occasionally a whole village will join together in a hunting expedition, driving the animals into large nets. But with the exception of bush pigs, guinea hens, a few small deer, monkeys and baboons, a diminishing number of crocodiles, civet cats, and an occasional leopard, there are few wild animals left in Sierra Leone. In addition to farming, most Mende villages have a blacksmith, goldsmith, wood-carver, carpenter, tailor, women who practice the art of dying cloth with garra, one or more petty traders who sell imported cloth, canned food, beverages, beer and other items, and in some cases, a native doctor specialising in healing with herbs. Nowadays a number of Mende farmers are leaving their villages to go and work in the diamond, iron ore and rutile mines where they can receive a steady cash salary. The younger intellectual class, educated abroad, are entering the civil service the medical, legal, engineering and teaching professions or pursuing careers in politics.

Traditionally women are usually married by the time they reach puberty Marriages are legitimised by the payment of a bride-price or mboya by the prospective husband and the public declaration of their agreement by the parents. For both men and women a necessary prerequisite to marriage is initiation in the Poro or Sande secret societies. Plural marriage confers prestige on a man and is a sign of affluence since the wives work on the farms, fish, spin cotton, and trade. Additional wives ensure an increased number of children, and a large group of kinsfolk adds to security. With modernization, education and the increasing number of Mendes marrying members of other tribal groups, these values are changing and the educated young Mende generally prefers to have only one wife.

The two most important institutions among the Mende are the men's Poro and women's Sande secret societies. Every important town or village has its own Poro lodge or meeting place or kameihun and the Chief may call together the Poro of the whole chiefdom, or a Section Chief that of his section. Initiation is virtually compulsory for males, since no Mende is considered mature or a full member of the tribe until he has become a member of the Poro. A boy usually enters at puberty, although younger boys as well as adults may be accepted, and the initiation lasts several weeks. During this period the boys live apart from their family and undergo ceremonies and disciplines, sometimes tame and sometimes rugged, including circumcision and scarification with tribal markings. They are taught songs, dances, crafts, secrets and a respect for old age and tribal traditions. Poro members take an oath to never reveal the secrets of the society. The Poro is still very powerful today and Mende schoolboys in Freetown and the up-country towns usually return to their villages during the vacation period to under-go their initiation period. The mysterious and terrifying powers of the "Poro Devil", which cannot be viewed by non-members, are linked with instruction, and at the same time the boys believe that they are absorbing some of the "devil's" own qualities, and through him have intercourse with the spirit world. A series of grades, representing specific attainments and experience, is generally recognised, advancement being open to those who undergo and pay for the necessary additional instruction.



Mende Poro initiates in the Kailahun District, 1962

For the women there is the Sande, or Bundu Society, which is widespread in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and closely resembles the Poro in both organization and function. It operates through independent lodges in most towns and villages, having as its headquarters enclosures which are out of bounds to men on pain of the working of the Sande medicine which also protects the girl initiates from molestation. Nearby is the Sande house, occupied by the leader of the lodge, and here the medicines and sacred objects of the association are kept. A girl can be initiated at any age, but most enter before puberty. Seclusion may last for three of four months, but today is often completed in a few weeks. During this period the girls learn cooking, care of the sick, fishing, spinning, and other women's tasks, including dancing and singing. They also undergo clitoridectomy. The Sande has been used with considerable success during the last decade as a means of inculcating western education. The Sande house is used as a classroom and teaching is done during the "open" stage of initiation, the instructresses being senior members of the lodge. Dr. Margai introduced courses in simple anatomy, physiology, mothercraft, nursing, sanitation, and first-aid. Domestic science and handicrafts are also included. Sowei, a "devil" wearing a large black wooden helmut-type mask and a garment of black fibres, comes out to dance on special occasions and is considered to be the embodiment of the Sande Society. The identity of the masquerader is kept a close secret and the "devil" deals with men who infringe society rules.

A Mende Sowei

Other Mende secret societies are the Humei, which regulates relations between the sexes, the Njayei, a male healing society, and the Wunde, found only in Kpa-Mende country and serving mainly as a dancing society with four grades corresponding to levels of advancement.

The vitality of the culture and traditions of the Mende people is reflected in their dances and music. The indigenous dancing, singing and drumming are, to a large extent, related to the Poro and Sande societies. The most common form of singing is the solo with refrain, carried on by both men and women. The refrain may be one word repeated by one singer, or it may be quite elaborate in harmony and rhythm, and it may include two separate refrains sung by two sets of people. Melodies are also sung in two-part harmony and a group of dancing people may sing a simple chorus in unison or in in harmony, without any leader. The quality of the singing varies from area to area and some villages have acquired reputations throughout Mendeland for their fine vocalists, the singers being invited by neighboring Chiefs to perform on special occasions. The women sometimes sing with an effected nasal style similar to the music heard in the Republic of Guinea. Verses are often composed extemporaneously with the lead vocalist inserting the names of people present. The songs often tell stories and, conversely, a story or drama will often break into song at the climax. Villagers sometimes learn new songs, popular in other areas, from the commercial Mende recordings sold throughout the country.

The Mende prefer percussion musical instruments, chiefly drums and gourd rattles. Some drums are made entirely from wood while others have heads of skin. There are also plucked instruments using strings of wire or vine and wooden sound boxes with bamboo keys attached. Sometimes simple little flutes or whistles are used, as are triangular-shaped percussion irons. A reed-like instrument with lizard skin attached, which vibrates when blown, is used by the secret Poro "devil" but is rarely heard by non-members. Various types of horns can be seen, including elaborately carved ivory Chiefs' horns, and these are used mainly for special ceremonial purposes. There are also musical bows made from a bent branch of wood with vine stretched from end to end, the tone of which can be varied by clenching the vine with the teeth while at the same time plucking it by hand. For some reason the Mende have not adopted the "bush piano", or balafon, used by neighboring tribes. A number of western-imported instruments are also used, including the guitar, mouth organ, plastic flute, and accordian. The late Ali Ganda and S.E. Rodgers have popularised Mende songs in the calypso and "high life" styles.

The selections in this collection were taken from tape recordings made in the Bo, Moyamba, Kenema, and Kailahun Districts and from recordings made available by Mr. John Akar, Director of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service.

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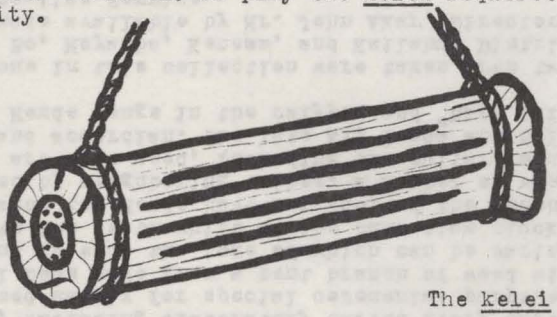
SIDE I, BAND 1: MENDE SONG. Recorded December, 1962 at Waiama, a small Kpa-Mende village in the Bumpe Chiefdom, Bo District, in the Southern Province of Sierra Leone. Waiama, with a population of less than a hundred people, is approximately twenty-five miles from Bo, the principal town in Mendeland, and the villagers are predominately engaged in agricultural pursuits. The village Headman, elected by the tribal elders, is responsible to the Paramount Chief residing at Bumpe, a town about five miles away. The women all belong to the Sande Society while the men belong to the Poro and Wunde Societies, and the traditional activities of country-cloth weaving and wood-carving are still in evidence.

At an early age the girls are taught the traditional songs of their people and these are in turn passed on to their children. The structure of the song presented here is antiphony, a common form among the Mende - alternate singing by the soloists and her eleven-woman chorus.

SIDE I, BAND 2: MENDE WORK SONG. Recorded at Waiama. Rice, prepared with the oil pressed out of palm-fruit pericarp, is the staple food of the Mende people and almost every man in this village is a farmer. Sowing is done between April and the middle of June, according to the time when the rainy season appears to be starting. The farmer scatters the seed over a series of separate strips which are then hand-harrowed. He is followed by a group of men who hoe the ground over which the seed has been spread, digging out the loose roots and burying the seed two or three inches under the loosened soil. While doing this, the Mende farmers often sing to entertain themselves and make their work seem less tedious. The song presented here is typical of these work songs except that in the fields each verse would be followed by a refrain from the rest of the farmers. There is a great deal of improvisation and from time to time the singer calls out the names of the men working with him. The song consists largely of made-up words which are not part of the Mende language.

SIDE I, BAND 3: MENDE TALKING DRUM. Recorded at Waiama. The kelei, a drum carved entirely from wood, is a favorite instrument of the Mende tribe and can be seen in almost every village. The one played here is 22 inches in length and six inches in diameter, cylindrical in shape, with slit-like openings along one side, varying in length so as to provide the instrument with five different tone levels. The inside of the drum is hollowed out and the two ends have holes bored through them which are sometimes covered with perforated metal discs. The drum is suspended from the musician's neck by a piece of chord tied to each end and hangs at knee level. It is played by hitting the areas between the slits rapidly with two ordinary sticks which are stored inside the drum when not in use. These drums are used only by men and are sometimes played in groups of two or three at a time. A larger form of the Mende kelei is used by the Temne Tribe and is made from a hollowed-out log, suspended from the wall of a house or a tree and beaten with wooden clubs. These are sometimes carried in a lorry and beaten to announce the arrival of a Paramount Chief. The Temne version range up to five feet in length. In the Mende villages miniature kelei are occasionally made by the men from bamboo stalks as toys for their children. To play the kelei requires special skill and dexterity.



The kelei

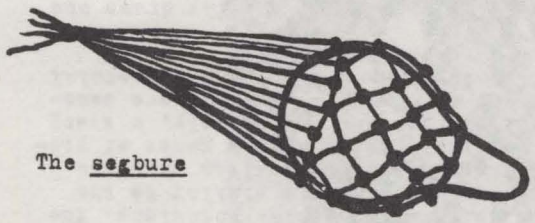
SIDE I, BAND 4: MUSLIM PRAYERS. Recorded at Waiama. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, wandering Muslim teachers, mostly from the Fula or Madingo tribes, began making converts among the Mende people, thus competing with the already established Christian missionaries. In recent years Islam has been gaining many more adherents in Sierra Leone than Christianity and the majority of people in this village are now practicing Muslims. The prayers recorded here are recited five times daily by the worshippers as they face towards Mecca.

SIDE I, BAND 5: SALIA KOROMA. Salia Koroma, a man in his fifties, is one of the best known Mende singers in all of Sierra Leone. His instrument, the accordian, is of western import, but his songs deal with traditional themes of love, war, and death. He often reverts to a classical form of the Mende language not always readily understood by the younger generation. When Salia appears in a chiefdom, people journey from many miles around to hear him. He travels in his own land-rover, is in great demand by the Paramount Chiefs of Mendeland, and has made numerous commercial recordings of his songs which he composes himself. Salia comes from the Kenema District.

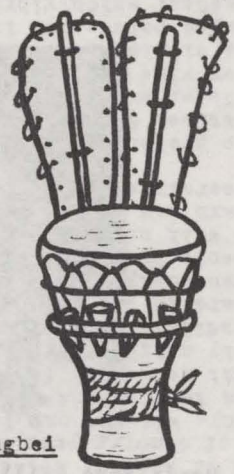
SIDE II, BAND 1: VILLAGE DANCING. Recorded at Waiama. Dancing is an important aspect of social life in a Mende village. On important oc-

casions, such as the Muslim festival of Ramadan, the termination of the Poro and Sande secret society initiations, or the funeral of a Chief, tribal elder or prominent personage, the whole village community dances together, led by their leaders, drummers and soloists. They are often joined by one or more "devils", the masked figures attached to the secret societies. The celebration recorded here began early on Christmas Eve and continued until late the following morning, during which time almost every inhabitant of Waiama participated, including elderly women and teen-age children. The dancing procession went round and round the village, weaving its way between the houses and stopping from time to time to greet the village Headman and other dignitaries.

Three instruments can be heard in the background: a) the sangbei, a wooden drum shaped like a rice mortar, about two feet in height, with goat or sheep skin stretched across the opening at the top, the tone of which can be changed by hammering wooden pegs into the wire lopp around the center of the drum to which the animal skin is attached by wire. There is sometimes a large flat piece of metal connected to the back of the sangbei with metal rings attached to its edges which produces a rattling effect when the drum is beaten with the palms of the hands. The drum is held between the thighs of the musician when played; b) the kongoma, a large hollow wooden box-like instrument which serves as a sounding board for the three or four bamboo keys attached to the top and plucked by the musician, producing a thump-like sound. Similar instruments, classified generically in West Africa as sansa, are commonly found in a variety of forms throughout the continent. The Loko and Limba tribes of Sierra Leone use an instrument identical to the Mende kongoma in principle, except that it is smaller in size and has metal keys; c) the segbure, a rattle made from an empty dried gourd around which is sewn a network of colorful beads. The beads produce a loud but pleasant rattling sound when snapped against the gourd in a steady rhythmic pattern. At times the women place pebbles inside the gourd to increase the volume of the sounds produced. The segbure, unlike the instruments described above, is made and played exclusively by the women and is often referred to as "The National Instrument of The Mende", although it is also found among tribes in the Liberian interior. Whenever sowei, the black masked figure which symbolizes the spirit of the Sande Society, appears in public, she is always accompanied by attendents playing the segbure.



The segbure



The sangbei

SIDE II, BAND 2: MENDE MUSLIM SONG. Recorded at Waiama. Muslim women singing in Mende in praise of the Prophet Muhammed.

SIDE II, BAND 3: MENDE SONG. Women singing to the accompaniment of the sangbei.

SIDE II, BAND 4: VILLAGE CELEBRATION. Recorded at a small village near Mano in the Moyamba District on Christmas Day, 1962. Three instruments were used - the segbure, the sangbei, and a mouth organ. The villagers were entertaining the Chairman of the Public Service Commission, a native of this area, who was visiting for the holidays. The male leader, a farmer, improvised much of the song.

SIDE II, BAND 5: NEFALI DANCE. Recorded at the Kenema Agricultural Show, 1962. The Mende people have many traditional masked figures or "devils", some of them secular such as Gongoli, and others, such as Yavii, Jobai, Goboi, Yoma-Yoma, and Gbeni, which are connected to the secret Poro Society. The identity of the masqueraders is always kept a closely guarded secret, their costumes covering the entire body, and, except for Gongoli, they never speak. In the early days the masqueraders were employed by the Chiefs and did not have to pay taxes or take part in communal labor. Today a man will masquerade as a "devil" to earn additional money and in ordinary life will be a farmer, weaver, trader, etc.

Nefali is a "devil" found everywhere in Mendeland. Its costume consists of a cloth head-piece with holes for the eyes over which are sewn tufts of cotton or animal fur and an elaborately designed crown decorated with beads and cowrie shells. From it hang four cloth flaps frilled with colored knitting wool on which cowrie shells are sometimes sewn in intricate geometrical patterns. The masquerader's body is entirely covered with cloth, sewn closed at the hands and tightly bound at the ankles, and he wears a natural color raffia collar, skirt and foot-pads. In the Bo and Moyamba Districts Nefali is often portrayed by children and is not taken very seriously. It takes on a greater significance above Kenema and east to the Liberian border. In some areas, such as the Daru Chiefdom, it is known as Ngafei and appears in public only after the death of a Paramount or Section Chief. When Nefali dances, it raises its arms and hops about from one foot to another, swinging its legs in wide arcs. In the selection presented here, the sangbei drum is beaten briskly to encourage the "devil" to dance and the crowd of spectators at the Agricultural Show can be heard roaring their approval. The segbure was also used.

The Nefali Devil

Recordings and photographs by Gary Schulze.

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