

RECORDED AND ANNOTATED BY STUART LEIGH



STEREO ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4330

# MUSIC OF SIERRA LEONE

## KONO MENDE FARMERS' SONGS



COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE



### The Songs

#### Side A

1. "Dear, come, let's go to the coffee bush" (3:20)
2. Medley (8:48)
  - "I'm going to the marketplace/I'll come back. . ."
  - "Please don't sleep/Dawn is just around the corner"
  - "I'm going to the marketplace/I'll come back. . ."
  - "Whom are you voting for?"
  - "The electioneers have gone/They have gone"
3. Song in the Kono language (2:45)
4. "The snail with the soft shell" (2:28)
5. "The dancing now requires a drink" (4:13)

#### Side B

1. Song of the accusation of witchcraft at Manjama (5:35)
2. "Give me the Chieftancy, quick" (2:21)
3. "Take care of the Bundu devil" (2:02)
4. "All my labors have been in vain" (1:59)
5. "I have to go" (2:10)
6. "Excuse us, let us pass" (6:15)

"These songs were recorded during one long evening in July of 1978. I was brought to this lively home by the Chief's son, with whom I had been working in another part of Sierra Leone. My friend's return was a cause for celebration. He knew of my interest in music and so arranged with his family to gather together those family members and friends who would enjoy an evening of music making. There were at various times between 5 and 18 people participating in the singing and playing."

(From the descriptive notes)

Recorded in the village of Punduru, in the Kenema district of eastern Sierra Leone, July 30, 1978.

## MUSIC OF SIERRA LEONE

© 1981 FOLKWAYS RECORDS & SERVICE CORP.  
43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., 10023 N.Y., U.S.A.

### KONO MENDE FARMERS' SONGS

All photographs by Stuart Leigh

RECORDED AND ANNOTATED BY STUART LEIGH

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4330

FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. FE 4330

© 1981 by Folkways Records & Service Corp., 43 West 61st St., NYC, USA 10023

# Music of Sierra Leone

## Kono Mende Farmers' Songs

Recorded and annotated by Stuart Leigh

Recorded in the village of Punduru, in the Kenema district of eastern Sierra Leone, July 30, 1978.



### The people

In the history of West Africa, Sierra Leone is famous for the role that its capital city, Freetown, played in providing a haven for liberated slaves during the late 18th and the 19th centuries. The British colony at Freetown became home to an extremely diverse mixture of peoples whose genetic backgrounds could be traced all over Africa's western coast and, to a limited degree, to the white inhabitants of the United States and Canada. This unique co-mingling at Freetown produced one of Sierra Leone's tribal groups, the Creoles. They are also called Krios and speak the hybrid language, Krio, which combines elements of Yoruba (Nigeria), Twi and Ga (Ghana), Mende (Sierra Leone), and English among still other contributing linguistic streams.

But the Krios, residing for the most part within the immediate environs of the coastal capital city, are just one of the 16 tribal groups who collectively make up the 3 million inhabitants of Sierra Leone (1974 census). The fertile and forested hinterland, which was known as the Protectorate during the period of British administration, is home to the Susu, Limba, Yalunka, Lokko, Koranko, and Mandingo in the north; the Bullom and Timne in the northwest; the Kono and Kissi in the east; and the Mende, Krimi, Sherbro, Gola, and Galina in the south.

When the Protectorate was annexed to the Colony in 1896, the British extended their administration into the interior reaches of Sierra Leone. Respecting, to some degree, the natural political arrangements of the various Paramount Chiefs, they divided the Protectorate into districts which roughly conformed to the areas under the predominant influence of one tribal group or another. The 13 districts thus bear the stamp of the significant tribal leaders' domains circa 1896. At that time, the hinterland had been witness to a long series of tribal wars. The territory of the Mendes had expanded into Kono territory, for example, and the boundaries of political influence were in flux. A certain stability was brought to the country by the British administration. But the district boundaries that were drawn were quite arbitrary and in some cases were themselves productive of disputes. These lines cannot really be used as an accurate blueprint of tribal demography.

1. Two friendly girls, Tikonko town, Bo District

While Kenema and Bo districts are almost entirely Mende, and Tonkolili district is predominantly Timne; there are Konos and Kissis in Kono district, and Timnes, Limbas, and Mandingos in Bombali district. At the borders of these districts, of course, the situation is not at all straightforward. There is often a drift between groups due to intermarriage and the lure of employment.

One further aspect of the subtleties which often complicate research into patterns of tribal affiliation is that there are subgroups within most of the 16 traditional tribal group designations. (Gary Schulze has written excellent notes to Folkways record No. FE 4322, "Music of the Mende", examining the lifestyles and social institutions of the Mende. While he found that there are three Mende subgroups, the Kpa Mende, Sewa Mende, and the Ko Mende, there seems to be a more detailed understanding of tribal affiliations operative among the Mende themselves.) Wherever there has been inter-tribal coexistence for a long enough period, we are likely to find a subgroup.

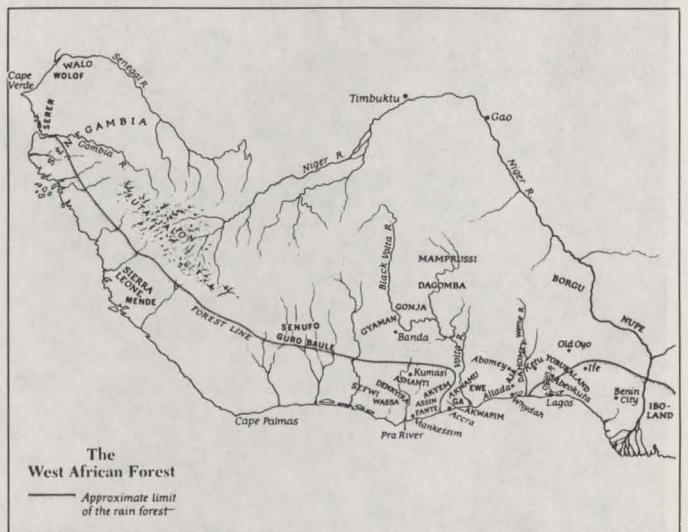
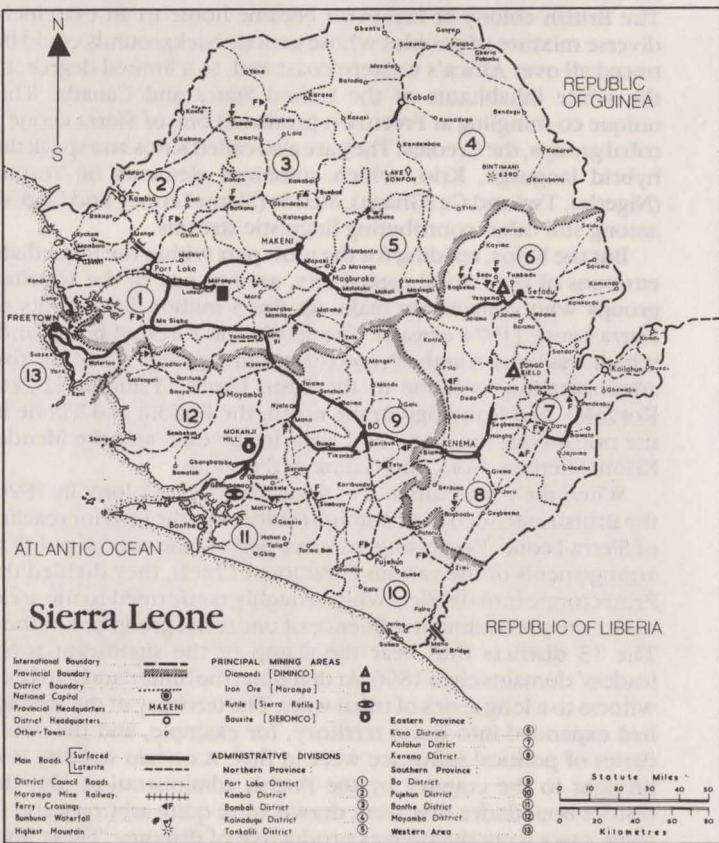
In the south of Sierra Leone, in the Pujehun district, the home of the Krimi, Gola, and Galina, as well as the Mende, we find the Krimi Mende, the Gola Mende, and the Galina Mende. These different subgroups are collectively known as the Wanjama Mende.

Near the town of Kenema we find the Nongowa Mende. Not far to the northeast of Kenema, in the Kailahun district, live the Ko Mende. Their name really gains meaning when we consider them in the light of their neighbors to the northwest, the Mbue Mende. Ko means "Up" and Mbue means "Down". The Mbue Mende refer to the Ko Mende in this way because of the relative proximity of each group to the "up country." While to leave the coastal regions for anywhere in the interior is known as "going up country", in the Kono and Kailahun districts the phrase has a more literal meaning.

A few hundred miles to the east of these territories lies the Futa Jalon mountain region. The Futa Jalon is the major watershed for West Africa. The Niger river begins here on the east slope, flowing off to the northeast on its 2,600 mile course to eventually empty into the Gulf of Guinea on Nigeria's coast. Many of the rivers of the West African coast originate on the west slope of the Futa Jalon, such as Sierra Leone's Sewa river. The closer one lives to the Futa Jalon highlands, the further "up country" he lives. And so, while only marginally higher in altitude, the Ko Mende of Kailahun are known as "Up" Mendes by the Mbue Mendes further "down country."

Not only is the Futa Jalon region the source of much of Sierra Leone's water, but it is from there that the original Mande speaking ancestors of the Mende are said to have come to what is now Sierra Leone, some 400 years ago.

Mande speaking peoples carried the basic patterns of the Sudanic civilization widely across West and West-Central Africa



Sierra Leone, detailed

West Africa, topographical

during the last millenium. There are strong similarities between the languages of many groups that consider themselves to be distinct from one another. For example, the Mende and the Susu of Sierra Leone "speak separate Mande languages. . .so closely related as to be nearer dialects that distinct tongues."<sup>1</sup>

Among the subgroups of the Mende themselves, there is enough similarity in their dialects so as to be mutually intelligible. However, a Mende and a Kono or Timne man would not normally be able to understand one another. Sierra Leone does have a lingua franca, Krio. Most practical inter-tribal business can be accomplished easily using Krio when no other common language exists. In border areas many people are necessarily and naturally bi-, tri-, or multi-lingual.

Such forays into the subjects of tribal subgroups and linguistic differences are important to an understanding of the people who are singing and playing the music recorded on this record.

These people are farmers living in Mbue Mende territory. Their town is called Punduru and it is virtually on the Sewa river border between the Kono and Kenema districts. Their tribal background is as Konos. They tell the story that, at the time of the division of the Protectorate, their town was to become a distinct district center. However, due to a loss of the official document which was to be the instrument of such a partition, they were assigned to the Kenema district. This may be only a part of the reason behind such an apportionment.

During the tribal wars the Mende had extended their influences northeastward into the formerly Kono territories around Punduru. But it was the British who finally accomplished the partition of Kono lands. The Sewa river was, no doubt, a convenient district boundary for the British administrators. Consequently, they sealed the rather fluid historic territorial dispute of the tribal wars by apportioning Punduru (south of the Sewa) to the Kenema district. With Punduru's legal administrative center now in predominantly Mende Kenema, the Konos in this region were forced to accept Mende culture.

Consequently, though these people think of themselves as Konos, or perhaps as Kono Mendes, all but one of the songs on this record are sung in Mende. 75% of the residents of Punduru are still able to speak Kono, but 100% of them can speak Mende. It was the fact of there being two different languages represented in these songs that led the way to an understanding of these people's extra-musical context and history.

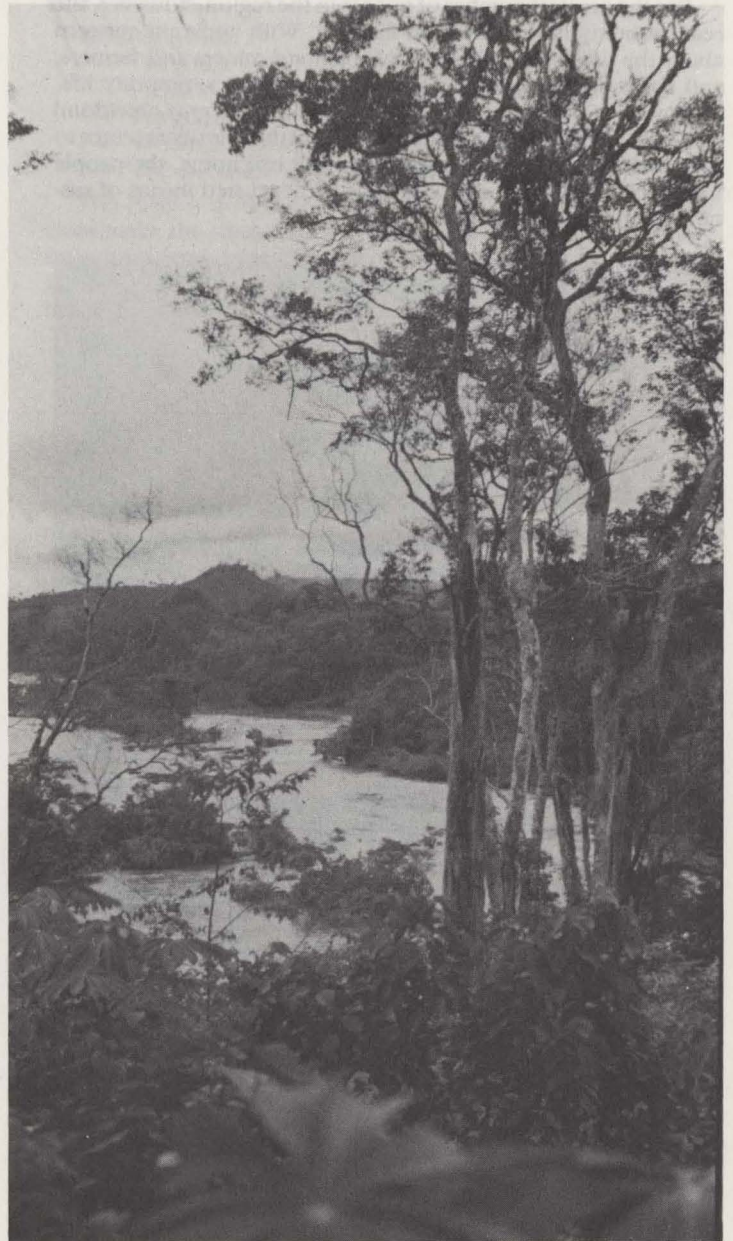
While they might best be called Kono Mendes, a subgroup within the Mbue Mende subgroup, their natural sympathies lie across the river, to the northeast with their Kono brethren.

## The place

Across the Sewa is the town of Sewafe, about 6 miles from Punduru. Sewafe, in turn, is not far from Sefadu, the largest town in the Kono district. Kono is famous for its role in the industrial economy of Sierra Leone, for it is here that the greatest part of the country's diamond mining is done. People from all over Sierra Leone, and from other countries as well, come to work in Kono where the National Diamond Mining Corporation makes its headquarters.

While all diamond mining is government regulated, there are illicit diamond miners who dig on their own in the endless verdant hills. Occasionally, fortunes are made by diamond "gang" organizers who own the greatest percentage of the production of their crews, whose basic needs they meet.

In view of these facts, Sefadu has certain boom-town qualities. But the taxi drivers and new housing cannot disguise the fact that the town was there before the mining corporation arrived and will remain if and when it leaves; for the production of diamonds is declining. The most easily accessible deposits have been worked over and the requisite transition to more costly methods of extraction has led to substantial cuts in production.



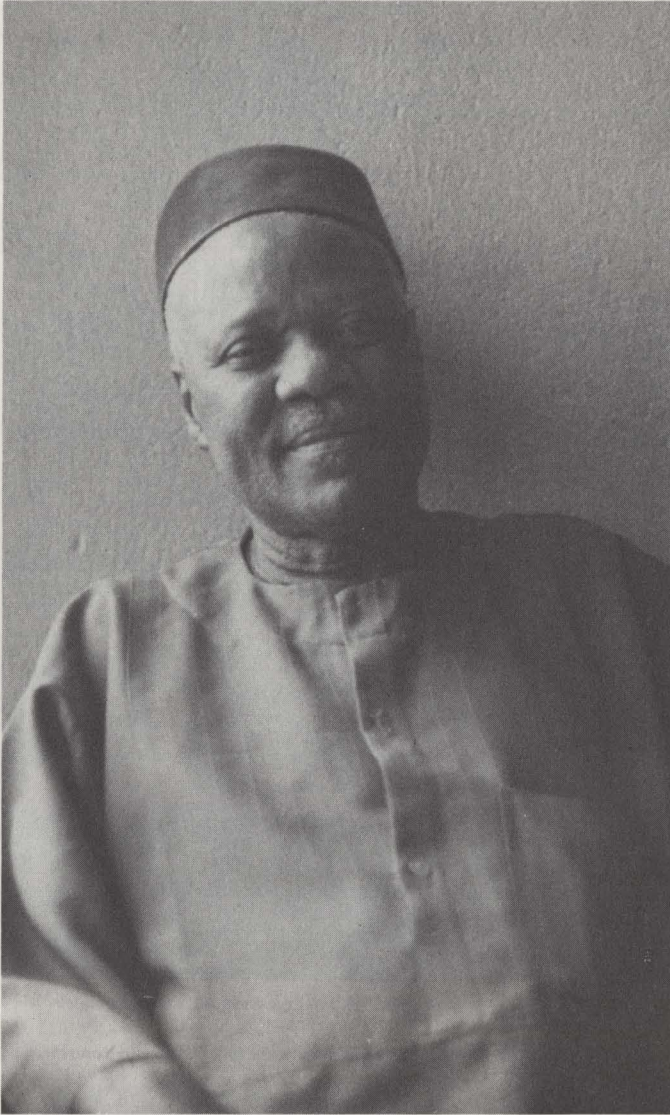
2. The Sewa river, a short walk from Punduru

3. Bustling Sefadu, the largest town in Kono district



<sup>1</sup>E. Jefferson Murphy, *History of African Civilization*, (New York, 1972), p. 96.

For the greatest number of people in the region, however, the real economy is still based on farming. With apparent concern about the lifestyles and values of diamond miners and farmers, and about their relative effects on family and community life, Paramount Chief Tortor of Sewafe (Jaiama Nimiya chiefdom) told me, "When the diamonds run out and the transients return to the cities or to places that they *may* still call home, the people here will still need to eat." Farming is the trusted means of sustaining oneself and family.



4. Paramount Chief (P.C.) Tortor of Jaiama Nimiya Chiefdom, Sewafe

And so, these people singing and playing this music are farmers, reliably connected to the land by an ancient living cord. While some of their relatives and neighbors were trying to tap the opportunities for far greater monetary gain, these singers were participating in a rather stable way of life. Within their songs are the same expressed concerns that have been sung for generations: the difficulty of physical labors, the joys of harvest, praise for the family leader. At the same time, one can recognize within these songs the tensions of change alongside the reaffirmation of tradition.

The greater wealth of the few may lead to discontent with a humbler way of life. The motor bike of one successful diamond gang organizer implies an unlimited sphere of exciting material possibilities. Women who work for the sustenance of the family cry out to their husband for greater freedoms. There is the tension that grows of recognizing the boundaries of one's culture. These people are, for numerous reasons, members of a society in transition.

## The music

These songs were recorded during one long evening in July of 1978. I was brought to this lively home by the Chief's son, with whom I had been working in another part of Sierra Leone. My friend's return was a cause for celebration. He knew of my interest in music and so arranged with his family to gather together those family members and friends who would enjoy an evening of music making. There were at various times between 5 and 18 people participating in the singing and playing. And except for the accompaniment of three percussion instruments, the music was exclusively vocal.

Two of the instruments were shegurehs, both of which were played by women with prominent voices. The shegureh is a gourd with a net of beads, buttons, or shells strung about it. With the slack lines of the net gathered in one hand, and the neck of the gourd in the other, the shegureh can be played with both staccato and legato articulations. (See photographs #5, #8.)

The third instrument, and the percussive centerpiece of this music, as in so many Sierra Leonean musical groups, is the kelei. (See photograph #5.) The kelei is a slit drum fashioned from a hollowed log, approximately 21 inches long and 5 inches wide. Four slits within a 90° arc create three resonant strips, attached at both ends, which sound three different tones. The middle strip produces the lowest, or "male" tone, in this case an A above middle C. One adjacent strip produces the higher "female" tone, which is a partly flatted fifth above the "male" fundamental, somewhat closer to an Eb than an E. The third strip produces a second, a B, above the fundamental. By drumming on the sections of the drum to the sides of the slits, or on the median section of the kelei below or above the slits, a high wooden click of rather indeterminate pitch may be produced. This sound is an integral part of kelei drumming.

The kelei hangs by a string which passes around the waist of the player, and is suspended just above the knees. With the arms at nearly full extension, the player strikes the kelei with two short sticks.



5. The musicians: Njeva, Maraima, Ms. Njuveh, Madiye, Natoma, —, —, Maraima (daughter)

## The songs

### Side A

1. "Dear, come, let's go to the coffee bush" (3:20)
2. Medley (8:48)
  - "I'm going to the marketplace/I'll come back. . ."
  - "Please don't sleep/Dawn is just around the corner"
  - "I'm going to the marketplace/I'll come back. . ."
  - "Whom are you voting for?"
  - "The electioneers have gone/They have gone"
3. Song in the Kono language (2:45)
4. "The snail with the soft shell" (2:28)
5. "The dancing now requires a drink" (4:13)

### Side B

1. Song of the accusation of witchcraft at Manjama (5:35)
2. "Give me the Chieftancy, quick" (2:21)
3. "Take care of the Bundu devil" (2:02)
4. "All my labors have been in vain" (1:59)
5. "I have to go" (2:10)
6. "Excuse us, let us pass" (6:15)

### Side A Band 1:

#### "Dear, come, let's go to the coffee bush" (3:20)

We open with this song because it demonstrates so well the organic nature of this music. The lead singer ventures a musical idea twice before the entire group steps into full-swing. Once the kelei player commits himself to the rhythm, the rollicking movement of the music, there is no going back.

This is a rather bawdy song which occurred near the end of the evening. The gentleman is saying, "Dear, come, let's go to the coffee bush/It's hard to find a room now/Let's go to the coffee bush/Let's go to the potato garden."



ter of Natoma and Chief Momoh), and two children.

### Side A Band 2:

#### Medley (8:48)

- "I'm going to the marketplace/I'll come back. . ."
- "Please don't sleep/Dawn is just around the corner."
- "I'm going to the marketplace/I'll come back. . ."
- "Whom are you voting for?"
- "The electioneers have gone/They have gone"

This medley demonstrates the facility with which these musicians make the transition from one song to the next. There are four songs represented here, though a case could easily be made for the four really comprising a single song. One hears at the very beginning the lines,

*Ngi le ma dowebunlo  
Ngi wa, Ngi wa, Ngi wa  
Ngo li na chocho*

I'm going to the marketplace  
I'll come back, I'll come back. . .  
Sing that rhythm

Singers often give instructions or encouragement to the other musicians and singers, as in the third line above. "Chocho" refers to the rhythm of the shegureh. This sort of direct communication between the singers eases transitions between songs, as in the transition which we now hear. Addressing the singers once again, the leader asks them not to tire and to continue singing. The chorus responds in kind,

*A wa ye yo  
Nge le woma  
A wa ye yo  
Nge mia na wonga  
A wa ye yo  
Nge gbae mia wonga*

Please (you, plural) don't sleep  
Dawn is just around the corner  
Please don't sleep  
Morning is come  
Please don't sleep  
It is now daybreak

Stamina is a highly valued quality in West African musical groups. I have often heard musicians praised for having played 'til daybreak ("T.D.B."). As catalysts for celebrations, they can prolong the joys of others.

Without hesitation the singers return to the idea which opened the medley,

*Ngi le ma dowebunlo  
Ngi wa, Ngi wa, Ngi wa*

I'm going to the marketplace  
I'll come back, I'll come back. . .

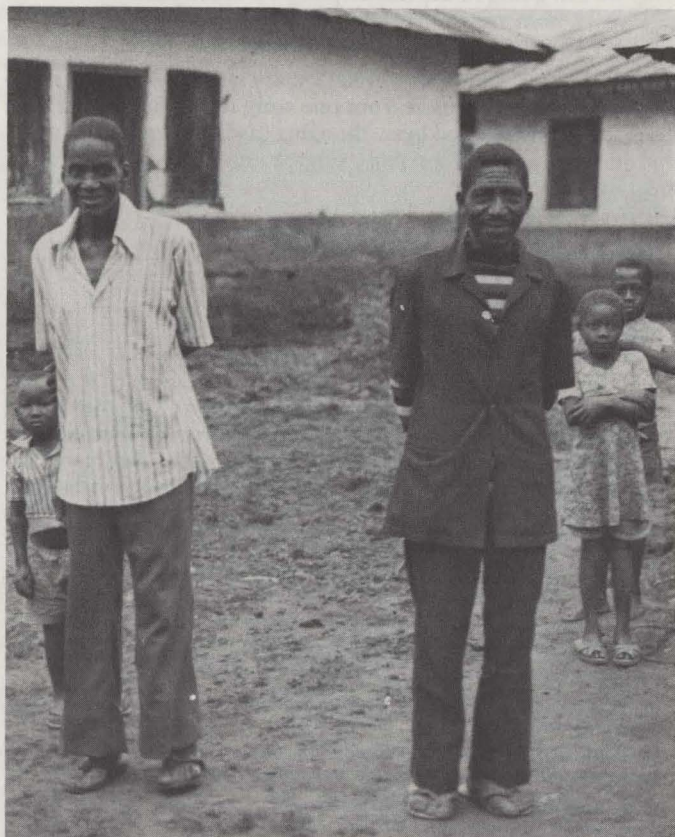
Note the excellent rhythmic variations of the kelei player, Njeva, in this song and in the one which follows. The shegureh gives the cue to the singers and without missing a beat they begin to sing,

*Wu kolei gulama yei va lo?  
Wu kolei gulama yei va lo?  
Gba, nyaga, wa kolei gula Momoh va  
A bowabu, bowabu, bowabu, Konju Lalāhun  
Banya wa, banya wa, banya wa, Konju wa ob*

Whom are you voting for?  
Whom are you voting for?  
Why, ladies, vote for Momoh  
Go into the election booth, Konju of Lalāhun  
Don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me Konju

These recordings were made only a little more than a month after the national elections of June 1978 which resulted in the institution of a one party government. At that time, there was a great deal of political tension in Sierra Leone with occasional outbreaks of violence. These singers had probably been singing about this theme during the weeks immediately preceding this night. They were voicing their concern for the outcome of the election in a geographical area with a somewhat unstable political history, as well as for their own well-being should there be any fighting during the volatile period of the election.

Konju Lalāhun is the forceful singer who we hear on side A, band 4 and on side B, bands 1 and 6. Lalāhun is the town that he comes from. A foil in the song, his name is used in the line "don't kill me. . .Konju." as a rhyming device.



6. Konju Lalāhun (r.), a strong singer, Punduru

These songs express the real feelings of their creators and they develop along logical lines of thinking. The story of the election unites the former chorus thematically with the following one,

*Neneho ti ya  
Ba ti ya*

The electioneers have gone  
They have gone

Neneho is a nickname given to the electioneers who were traveling about the country during the election period. In singing of the departure of the neneho, perhaps these people were expressing some relief that the election had been concluded peacefully in their village.

Side A Band 3:

**Song in the Kono language (2:45)**

The meaning of this song is unknown to me. The language is Kono, a language altogether distinct from the Mende language employed in all the other songs on this record. The absence of improvisation may be explained by some of these people's lesser familiarity with the Kono language. (See the first section of these notes for further explanation of this point.)

Note the marvelous harmonies.

Side A Band 4:

**"The snail with the soft shell" (2:28)**

Metaphor is frequently used in Sierra Leonean songs. While most snails, such as the "kole kondae" have hard shells, there is a snail called "fa fa kondae" which appears to have a shell like that of any other snail, but in fact, its shell is not very thick and is rather soft. In this song, the singer alludes to the deceptive appearance of the "fa fa kondae" in order to question the sincerity of his sweetheart's affection for him.

Side A Band 5:

**"The dancing now requires a drink" (4:13)**

Musicians are often reimbursed for their efforts with drinks which are donated by the patron who has called them to perform. Palm wine, a naturally intoxicating liquid tapped from the palm tree is one favorite beverage. Because it requires no fermentation or distillation, the Mendes often say that it comes "from God to Man." Another favorite spirit is "cane juice." It is a distilled product of sugar cane. Beer and non-alcoholic drinks are also commonly offered. Such fortifications as these drinks provide enables the musicians to keep on with their efforts—perhaps "T.D.B." It is well within the bounds of propriety for the singers to ask for something to drink, as they do here,

*Ndoli sani ma mbei  
Pe gbama lo  
Moneb, oh moneb, oh  
Ke gbama lo*

The dancing now requires a drink  
Otherwise, it's a fruitless enterprise  
Labor, oh labor, oh  
It's an enterprise without profit

Side B Band 1:

**Song of the accusation of witchcraft at Manjama (5:35)**

While traveling through the town of Manjama, a man was accused of having practiced witchcraft upon ("having eaten") someone's child. The case was brought before the town's chief and the defendant contended that the charges were false. This song recounts that affair.

*Manjama te ngi mbaati lui menga  
Ke mbama egbama yaji  
Oh, Manjama Quee*

At Manjama they say I have eaten someone's child  
Is this not a false accusation  
Oh, Chief Quee of Manjama?

(Witchcraft is a very serious subject in Sierra Leone. Certain people are believed to be endowed with the power to heal and harm others. Within their own society, at least, the powers of such people are testable and verifiable. By one account, an official in a town in southern Sierra Leone was testing the efficacy of the powers of a particular "witchdoctor," a term much abused in the West. He drove in his car some two miles out of town and walked into the bush where he buried a coin. As he returned to the town, the "witchdoctor" ran off in the direction from which the official had just come, and within an hour he had returned with the coin.

By another account, a ripe paupau, which is believed to have beneficial medicinal powers, was brought before another "witchdoctor." He stared at it for 5 minutes. It was then cut open revealing, instead of the fruity substance of seeds and flesh that one would expect, an airy and empty interior.

Control over the elements of fire and water is another aspect of witchcraft in Sierra Leone. I have been told of certain "devils" who can dive into a river and not return to the surface and to their village for days. Do they find an underwater cave which supports their dramatic ruse, or do they actually remain underwater communicating with inhabitants of a spirit world, as their local brethren believe?

Fire is used by those who are empowered to discover a liar or a criminal among a group of innocent others. I have seen the mere threat of such a trial by fire produce the desired result when the thief replaced the goods he had stolen. Such a trial would have entailed all of those in question placing their hands in the flames of a fire or grasping a red-hot iron in the presence of a presiding "witchdoctor." Only the guilty party is burned during such a trial. The innocence of the others protects them. How often these tests are actually carried out, and how often the fear within the guilty party betrays him in advance of any dangerous test, I do not know. The rationale for this type of trial is clearly related to that of the modern polygraph truth verification test.

It is well known that people may fall ill and die under the malevolent intentions of practitioners of voodoo cult rituals. As



mysterious as the amazements of witchcraft, but more sinister in their manifestations, some archaic voodoo cult practices in Sierra Leone demanded the amputation of certain body parts, such as fingers, ears, or breasts. The fat derived from those parts was used as a potion or linament which was reputed to endow its user with extraordinary powers. Many criminal accusations were filed against members of "baboon cults" during the early decades of this century for such practices. Men dressed in baboon skins would snatch unsuspecting people walking along paths in the bush. While this sort of practice is categorically distinct from the more innocent, elusive, and marvelous realms of Sierra Leonean witchcraft, fears of mysterious violence understandably arise in cases such as the accusation at Manjama.)

This song seems to surface out of the activity of the room, building itself as more people join in singing. As in the case of the first song on Side 1, the gradual development of the song reveals the care taken by all to secure the proper rhythm. As everyone gains confidence in the tune, taking parts with which each is comfortable, Njeva, the kelei player, gets the music rolling. His extraordinary rhythmic punctuations add energy to the song. We hear a clear demonstration of the antiphony so inherent in Sierra Leonean music, though in this particularly relaxed moment, the division of roles between lead singers and chorus is not fixed.

We take leave of this song as the kelei player illuminates the meaning of the term "upbeat."

Side B Band 2:

**"Give me the Chieftancy, quick" (2:21)**

This is a song of political opinion. By implication, the singers take the part of their husband, father, or friend, Momoh.

*A humbu a ma ha yei vei mbe*

Give me the Chieftancy, quick

Note the nearly diatonic descending phrase that highlights the chorus. Note, too, how the male voice provides a simple subdominant bass note to the repeated phrase at the end of the piece.

(♩ = 168)

The musical score is arranged in three systems. The first system includes staves for VOICES, KELEI, and SHEGUREHS. The lyrics 'A humbu a ma ha yei vei mbe' are written under the voice staff. The second system continues the vocal and instrumental parts. The third system shows the vocal line with repeat signs (double slashes) and the instrumental accompaniment.

D.C.



7. Chief Samuel Momoh and Fred (seated), Punduru

Side B Band 3:

**"Take care of the Bundu devil" (2:02)**

The Sande or Bundu society is the secret society for women, found all over Sierra Leone and in other parts of Africa. The Bundu manages the traditional education of girls, preparing them for the responsibilities of womanhood. This song is specific to the Bundu society.

Though not present at the recording of this song, the Bundu devil, as shown in photograph #8, appears at festive public occasions and at initiations in the Bundu bush, where no men are allowed to go. The devil is the symbolic repository of the special wisdom of the society, enacting and enlivening its guiding principles. Invariably a great dancer, the devil mediates, in a dynamic fashion, the relationship between the women and a special set of ideas.

The distinctive wooden masks that crown the devil's costume signify the unique and enduring spirit of each devil. The rings around the neck of the mask represent the folds of skin which are considered a sign of beauty among traditional Mendes. I have heard a song in which the neck of the devil was compared to the neck of a frog. Jokes, taunts, and endearing comments are often made to stimulate a celebration with the devil. Care is taken by the devil's attendants so that no part of the body of the person within the rafia costume should be exposed during the dance. One often sees the attendant rush up to a dancing devil to straighten its coverings and excitedly speak a word or two.

*Sowe, mabun gbae*

Take care of the Bundu devil



8. A Bundu devil and friends, Gbo town, Bo district.

Side B Band 4:

**"All my labors have been in vain" (1:59)**

There is an extraordinarily powerful secret society called the Wunde society which is not usually found in the part of Sierra Leone where these songs were recorded. The Wunde society is found mainly among the Kpa Mende, who live further to the south and west. As a secret society, the Wunde is a great source of strength and power to its leaders. Male leaders are called *Ngombuwa*, which literally means "Fire chief." The *Ngombuwa*, who are held in high esteem, lead the dancing around the great fires which are a central part of the Wunde ceremonies. These ceremonies are infrequent and so are important occasions during which the political and social leadership positions within the society are redefined. Young aspiring individuals pass through a rigorous initiation which includes learning the precise steps of the traditional Wunde dances.

Because the Wunde society is so powerful, its leaders can organize ambitious and expensive projects. If Chief Momoh, to whom these people were singing, could convene the Wunde, he could command the many free services that initiates are required to perform. But he has been lamenting the absence of the Wunde from his village's culture. Perhaps there were projects that he would have liked to undertake. The singer says to him, "Take heart, *Ngombuwa*/We know that your labors have been in vain/ But cheer up/Wunde is not part of our culture."

*Oh, bondae*  
*Oh, ob, yayob*  
*Ngì ke moneh wai nga gbama*  
*Ngowo lo a nugob*  
 Oh, family  
 Oh, oh, mother  
 I have labored for nothing  
 It is God who will provide

Side B Band 5:

**"I have to go" (2:10)**

Toward the end of the evening some of the singers wanted to retire and so they sang,

*Ngì ya, Ngì ya*  
*Nya dae wa muli woa*  
 I'm going, I'm going  
 Come on, you girls, let's go

Side B Band 6:

**"Excuse us, let us pass" (6:15)**

The Ghanaian musicologist, J.H. Kwabena Nketia has written of Ghanaian music,

"Sometimes a name, a proverbial saying that catches the fancy of a performing group, or the name of a person who originates a musical type may be used as a label for the music; that is particularly true of music performed for entertainment or recreation. Examples have been noted of labels such as *ntan* ("Bluff"), *sika rebɛ wu a, ɛ pere* ("money struggles before it vanishes"), *onni bi amane* ("the sufferings of the person who has no relatives or friends")."<sup>2</sup>

If song genres in Sierra Leone were to conform to those in Ghana, this song might fit in the last category above; for the words depict a difficult reality. It is hard to be a person without strong social ties.

*Ya ya yo, ya yo*  
*A lekpeh mu le wei ya ya yo*  
*Bonda bla mu le wei*  
*Numu njei I be woma be lo*  
 Excuse us, let us pass  
 Those who have families, let us pass  
 He who has no mother can stay behind

Because our Western musical notation has difficulty expressing microtonal variations, we can only approximate many of the

itches which characterize melodies like this one. We have already observed that the female tone of the kelei lies somewhere just sharp of the Eb above the male tone, a barely sharpened A 440. We accommodate these variations by using small arrows, indicating the raising or lowering of pitches, either in the place where we normally find a key signature, or directly above or below the individual note.

This song presents an added difficulty, however, for there is a "drift" between tonalities. Konju ventures into this song establishing G as the first note of the melody. The chorus follows his lead, resting in the second complete measure, as he does, on a lowered Eb.

(♩=142)

The musical score is written for three parts: VOICES, KELEI, and SHEGUREHS. It is in 2/2 time with a tempo of quarter note = 142. The key signature is one flat (Bb). The lyrics are: "Ya - Yo - o Ya-Yo", "A lek-pe mu le wei ya ya yo -", and "Bonda bla mu le wei Nu mu njei-i be wo-ma be lo Ya -". The score shows melodic lines with microtonal adjustments indicated by small arrows above and below notes.

But by the end of the song, the first notes of the melody have become G#, F#, B, E. The song has been raised an appreciable 1/2 step.

The musical score is written for VOICES and KELEI. It is in 2/2 time. The key signature is one flat (Bb). The lyrics are: "Excuse us, let us pass", "Those who have families, let us pass", and "He who has no mother can stay behind". The score shows melodic lines with microtonal adjustments indicated by small arrows above and below notes.

This song, led by Konju Lalahun and sung by all in such an energetic and propulsive manner, is widely known among the people of Sierra Leone. The rhythm is characteristic of songs of the Wunde society. True to the spirit of the music, Konju and others were dancing as they sang.

I would like to extend my thanks to these Sierra Leonean friends and acquaintances who have given me indispensable help in gaining some understanding of these songs: Lawrence Boima, Hassan Conteh, Juliana Amara, Mahen Sumner, Louis Taylor-Kamara, Sylvester Rowe, Chris Jasabe, Joseph Kebbie, and the musicians.

Stuart Leigh

<sup>2</sup>J.H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, (New York, Toronto, 1974), p. 25.