

BULU SONGS FROM THE CAMEROONS

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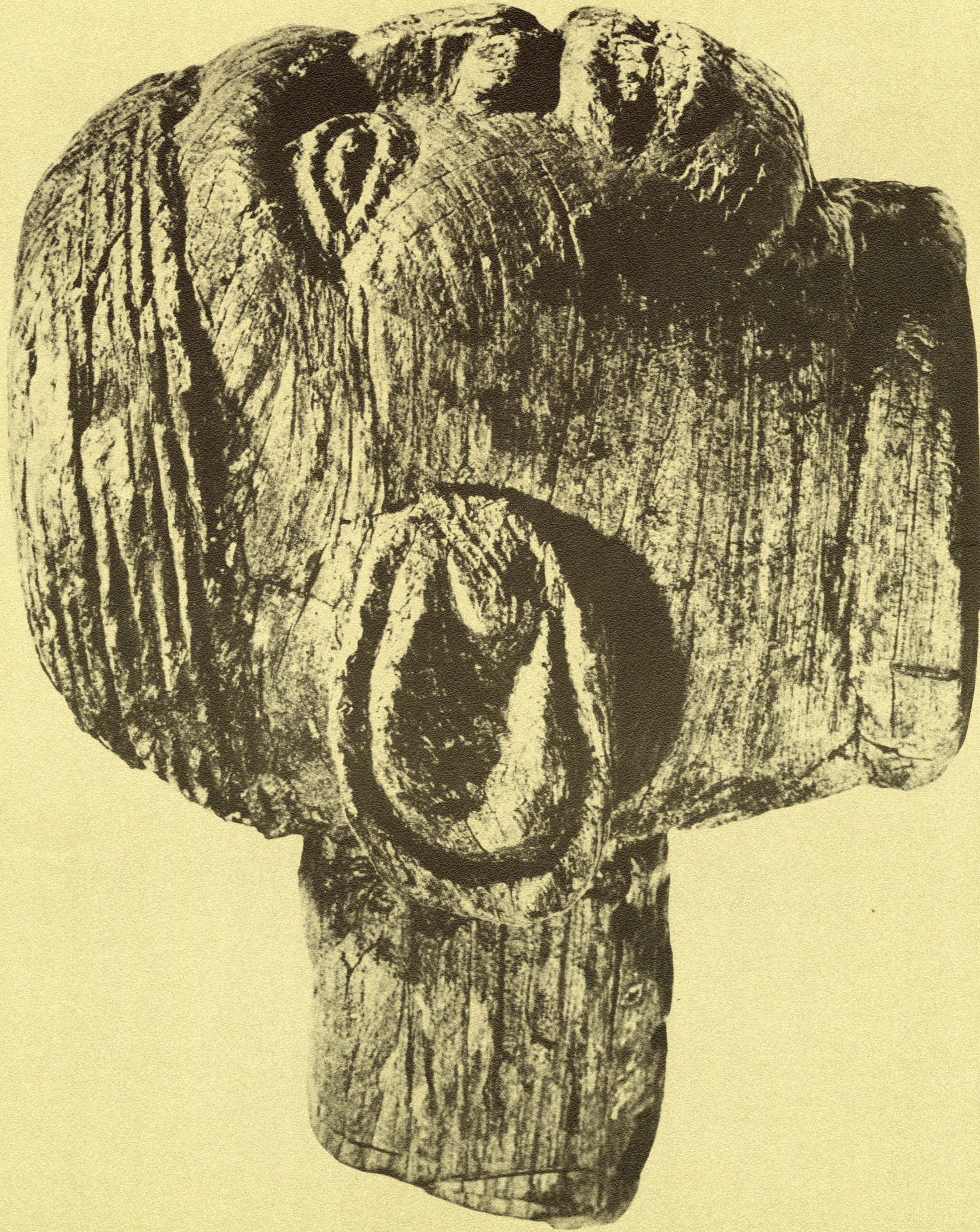
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DANCE SONG
SECRET SOCIETY INITIATION SONG
FOLK TALE
SONG OF SELF PRAISE
SONG OF SORROW
DANCE SONG
DANCE SONG
WOMEN'S DANCE SONG

MEN'S DRINKING SONG
SONG OF SELF PRAISE
WORK SONG
MEN'S DANCE
STORY SONG
FLUTE MELODY
WAR SONG
SUNG TO A GROOM

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INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

by
EDWIN COZZENS

Tradition has it that the peoples now living in the southern Cameroons, Spanish Guinea and northern Gaboon came from a place far to the north and east. Some legends, if interpreted literally, would place this earlier home in the neighborhood of the Red Sea. When the migration began, it is said, the tribe was told by the old people to follow the sun, and thus its travels were south and west. As the tribe "followed the sun" across the continent it broke up into smaller groups, which, however, share the same historical traditions.

These related tribes and sub-tribes are generically known as Fang peoples, though in recent years the term has come primarily to specify language. Among these closely related peoples are the Bulu (to whom this collection of recordings is devoted), the Ntum, the Okak, the Yaounde, the Beti, and the Mpañwe. They speak dialects of Fang which to a great extent are mutually understandable. The Bulu and the Ntum dialects are perhaps more divergent than the others.

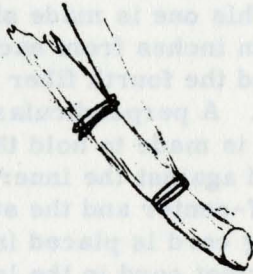
Among all of the Fang-speaking peoples, the travelling minstrel occupies a place of favor. The minstrel is not only a story teller and a musician, he is a carrier of news from distant places. In the Bulu dialect he is called mbom mvvet -- "the beater of the mvvet." The mvvet along with the sansa is the traditional stringed instrument of the minstrel. It is made in the following way:

The main rib of the frond of the raffia palm is cut to a length of about five feet. The section is taken from near the tip, and so is about one and a half to two inches in thickness,

and has a natural curve. Beginning at the center on the concave side of the bend, a strand of the "shell" of the frond is lifted with a sharp knife. This separating process is continued until the strand has been disengaged nearly the whole length of the frond, perhaps to within six inches of each end. At this point on each end, the frond is bound with cord so that the fiber string will not pull out. Another fiber is separated from the frond in the same way. This one is made shorter, and is tied about ten inches from each end. The third fiber and the fourth fiber are progressively shorter. A perpendicular bridge with four notches is made to hold the strings, and this is fastened against the inner curve of the bow a little off-center and the strings put in place. The long cord is placed in the highest notch, the shortest cord in the lowest. They are tuned to proper pitch by sliding the bindings forward or backward at the ends. In the center, on the convex side of the bow, a large half-gourd is fastened for resonance. Smaller half-gourds are sometimes added along the length of the bow. In playing, the musician holds the large central gourd against his chest, so that the chest cavity itself becomes a resonator. The strings are plucked with the fingers of both hands.

In all of the minstrel's "news" and stories, singing plays a major part. Sometimes he has a chorus of assistants. In the narration of a long tale he may talk for two or three minutes, then break in with the appropriate song, and again revert to the story. Sometimes when the story calls for dramatic action, the minstrel will give his instrument to an assistant and, while the music continues, act out the drama with gestures and dance steps. He is at his best with a group of supporters to act as his chorus. Sometimes he brings his own with him. Other times he gets impromptu assistance from the villagers whom he is visiting... men to sing, women to help with handclapping, stick clapping, and the shaking of rattles.

The old traditions are passing, but the minstrel remains as popular as ever. When he appears in a community, crowds gather to hear him. His traditional garb consists of a bark-fiber breech cloth, a kind of skirt made of monkey tails or strips of antelope skin, and leg rattles. These rattles are woven like baskets, and contain nutshells. His chest is bare but frequently painted with white designs. On his arms are fastened raffia cuffs and more monkey tails. His head-dress is prepared with feathers.



NOTES ON THE SELECTIONS

Side I, Band 1: DANCE SONG, with male chorus.

This song, sung here without instrumental accompaniment, is on certain occasions sung with drums and other percussion for dancing. However, a song is not necessarily identified with a specific situation. The same song may be used for dancing, for work, or simply for pleasure. The character of the music changes somewhat according to the context in which it is used. Here, without accompaniment, the choral aspects of the music are emphasized.

Side I, Band 2: SECRET SOCIETY INITIATION SONG, with male voices, drums, rattles, and singing horn.

The leader of the group talks and sings through a small instrument with a vibrating membrane, which functions like a kazoo. The distortions of the voice give an eerie, unwordly quality which is valued for the air of mystery which it creates.

Side I, Band 3: FOLK TALE, sung by a wandering minstrel with a mvet, and accompanied by a chorus and rattles.

Side I, Band 4: SONG OF SELF-PRAISE, sung by a wandering minstrel with chorus.

A good many songs of the minstrel's repertory are of the praise variety, telling of great deeds of warriors and chiefs. The self-praise song is often used by the minstrel to put himself in proper perspective before his audience, indicating he is no ordinary person but a professional artist of standing.

Side I, Band 5: SONG OF SORROW, with male voice and chorus.

This song tells of the grief of a person who has been left behind by a loved one. The falsetto voice style used by the main singer is found throughout West Africa and is regarded as appropriate to certain situations and moods, often where sympathy is called for.

Side I, Band 6: DANCE SONG, with male voice and chorus.

Side I, Band 7: DANCE SONG, with mixed voices, drums, rattles, and percussion sticks.

Side I, Band 8: WOMEN'S DANCE SONG, with female voices and handclapping.

In some dances of the Bulu, handclapping or stick-clapping provides the entire percussion accompaniment. This is particularly true in women's gatherings in which men do not participate. The drummers, as in most of West Africa, are always men.

Side I, Band 9: MEN'S DRINKING SONG, with male voices and handclapping.

This is a song for a social occasion, where the men are drinking palm wine.

Side II, Band 1: SONG OF SELF-PRAISE, sung by a travelling minstrel with accompaniment of chorus and rattles.

The refrain of the song is: "Wo ye me ne bo aya?" -- "What will he do for me?" The words of the leader are in praise of himself, such as: "I am a wonderful fellow. I am strong surpassing everyone. When I work I do more than any other. All the people think I am brave. I am the leader in time of war."

Side II, Band 2: WORK SONG, with male voices.

This is a song of the type that is sung when a group of men are working together in the fields, or building a house. Specifically, the refrain of this piece refers to a town sweeper. It says: "A kóm nlam, a keya kóm nlam, Ngo Oéchele." -- "He cleans the town, he has gone to clean the town of Ngo Oéchele." The solo parts consist of complaints. The sweeper is hungry, hot and tired, and there is no one to help.

Side II, Band 3: MEN'S DANCE, with male voices, drums, sticks, handclapping.

SIDE II, Band 4: STORY SONG, with male voices, handclapping.

This is a story about a boy who had a parrot which he taught to dance. The words of the boy as he encourages his parrot are as follows:

"Kangalé, kangalé, ékpwalé kos."

("Do it well, do it well little parrot.")

"A ékpwalé a ékpwalé."

("Ah little one, a little one. . .")

"Ekpwalé é tame jem na."

("Little one, please dance like this. . .")

"Ekpwalé tame tek ana."

("Little one, please shake yourself like this. . .")

Other phrases praise the parrot for its performance.

Side II, Band 5: FLUTE MELODY, with clapping and rattles.

A very old dance tune, the words of which were not known to the younger people. The flute is played by an old man more than seventy years old.

Side II, Band 6: WAR SONG, with male voice and chorus.

The main singer here is the old man who played the flute in the preceding piece. The song is that of a chief who narrates his mighty deeds and his responsibilities. Part of the song goes:

"Ma me tita meyoñ."

("I am the father of the tribe. . .")

"Kólô me zena me bena."

("Get out of my way, I object. . .")

"Me me ne futa meyoñ."

("I am the support of the tribes. . .")

Side II, Band 7: SUNG TO A GROOM.

This is a wedding song, in which the men sing to the groom that he must watch his wife. They use the parable of the hunting dog:

"O ba'ale mvu za woñ, meyoñ mva ja woñ."

("Look after the dog that hunts, the whole tribe of hunting dogs. . .")

"A maneya wôé zip."

("He has killed an antelope and has eaten it. . .")

(Inference: A wife might act all right, but what will she do when you are not looking?)

"Okokut meyoñ a té d'ana."

("A foolish tribe knows this much. . .")

The admonitions of the wedding songs are not one-sided. In another song the bride's relatives instruct the relatives of the groom to take care of their daughter. The songs sung at the wedding festivities are mostly instructions to the young couple.

Side II, Band 8: SUNG BY THE BRIDE'S
RELATIVES. A wedding song, with
mixed voices, drums, rattles, hand-
clapping.

The bride's relatives here tell her to
behave herself, not to give them cause for
shame, and to feed her husband and care for
him as she should.

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NOTES ON PRONUNCIATION OF BULU WORDS

- a -- pronounced ah as in English father
- e -- pronounced as in the French le
- é -- pronounced as the French e
- o -- pronounced aw as in English saw
- ô -- long o, pronounced oa as in English boat
- i -- pronounced ee as in English meet

