

# Folk Music of Liberia

Gio / Kpelle / Kru / Mandingo / Bassa / Loma  
Recorded by Packard L. Okie



ETHNIC FOLKWAYS LIBRARY FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4465

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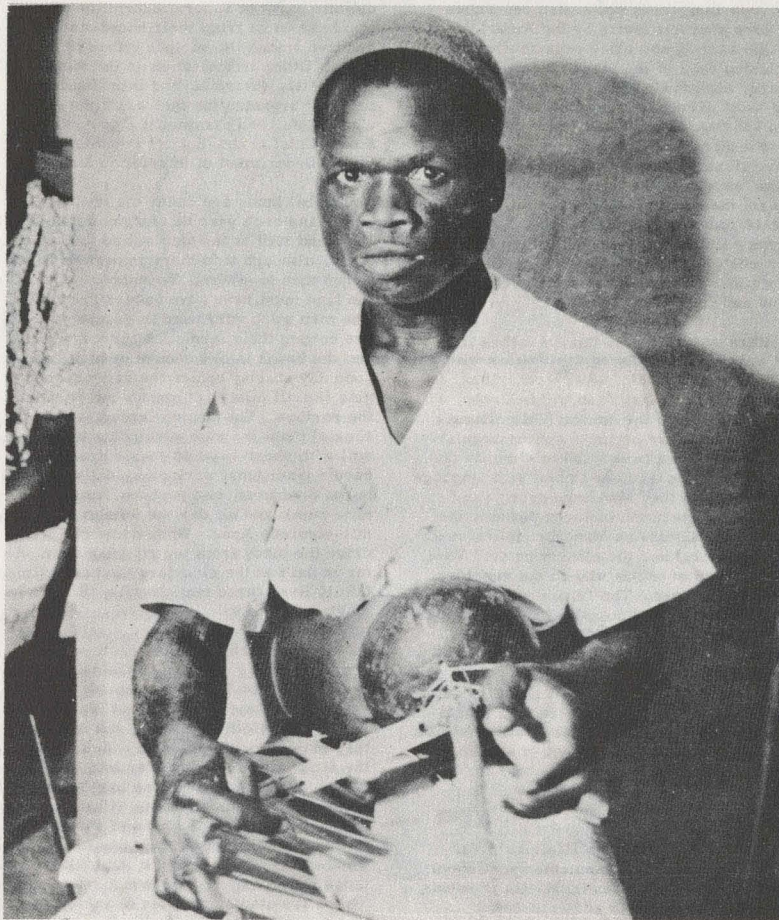
FOLK MUSIC OF LIBERIA / FOLKWAYS FE 4465

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

Mandingo  
Kpelle Bush-Cutters  
Gio Songs  
Bassa Musical Bow  
Kpelle Harp  
Loma (Buzi) Song with Fanga Drums  
Mandingo Songs With Balafon  
Bassa Belly Harp  
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Kpelle Band

# Folk Music of Liberia

# FOLK MUSIC OF LIBERIA



-- BASSA MUSICIAN WITH BELLY HARP

## FOLK MUSIC OF LIBERIA

### INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

PACKARD L. OKIE

The population of Liberia includes a large number of tribes, each with its own language and customs. The main political and social force in the country, however, lies with the English-speaking, non-indigenous population descended from settlers sent to Liberia by the American Colonization society and other organizations during the closing days of the slave trade. During these years, almost 20,000 Africans were returned to West Africa from the United States and settled in Liberia. The United States Navy used Liberia as a place to release Africans liberated from slave ships. This "repatriated" group formed the nucleus of the "westernized" Liberians who set the country up as a republic. Their descendants today are English-speaking and have strong cultural ties with the United States and other western nations. But the largest part of today's Liberian population is made up of the indigenous and immigrant tribes.

Early writers about Liberia list the tribes in different ways, some treating the Kpelles with their differences of dialect as several tribes, for example, others including Jabo within Grebo, Putu within Kru, etc. Only the coastal Vais, Bassas,

Krus, and Grebos have begun to appear regularly on all the lists. Some have tried to simplify the problem by grouping together tribes with language similarities. Thus the "Mandingo group" or "Mande group" in the north includes not only the people known in Liberia as Mandingo (often described as Malinke) and the closely related Vais, but another group of tribes who do not consider themselves Mandingos. The "Kru group" includes Bassa, Kru, Grebo, and possibly all the other tribes of the Southeast. The Gola and Kissi, who are thought not to be closely related to either group or to each other, are classed as "West African." This is only a language grouping, and there are unclear fringe areas, but it is a helpful division. Here is a list of tribes which follows the language grouping, with alternate spellings and names in parentheses:

#### I. MANDE or MANDINGO

- A. Mande-tan: Mandingo (Malinke), Vai
- B. Mande-fu or Mande-pu: Mende, Gbandi, Gbundi, Loma (Buzi), Kpelle (Kpwesi), Mano (Mah), Gio

#### II. KRUGROUP: Kru, Bassa, Grebo (Gedebo), Webo, Jabo, Padebo, De, Belli, Putu, Kulu, Gibi, Tchien, Kron

#### III. GOLA (Gora)

#### IV. GISI (Kissi)

There are also small colonies of Fantis and others from various parts of West Africa.

Many of the tribes have a tradition of having migrated from the north. All of them now inhabit definite parts of Liberia except the Mandingos, who have come from their home land to the north, and live among the various tribes of northern Liberia. Other tribes, such as the Mende, Kissi, and Kpelle, extend beyond Liberian borders. The political organization includes elders, town chiefs, clan chiefs, and paramount chiefs. Over the Paramount Chief is the district commissioner, appointed by the Department of Interior in Monrovia.

The tribal lands are under the control of the chief, and each year he assigns portions for farms. Dry-land rice is the staple food throughout Liberia, although it is more important to some tribes than to others. To support a good crop, the land must have seven years growth of bush. The men work very hard in groups while they are cutting their farms. After a few weeks of sun the brush is dry enough to burn, and on a good day shortly before the rainy season begins (April) pillars of smoke can be seen along the horizon. The women (except among the Kissis) plant the rice, scratching it under the soil with short-handled hoes. Kpelles and others have a traditional work party called *Ku*, with horns or drums, and perhaps "cane juice" (sugar cane rum); and all day the women work in rhythmic vigorous lines. Women and children usually drive the birds from the ripening rice. A shelter is built at the rice-farm and sometimes the family lives there temporarily. Rice is harvested stalk by stalk.

Subsistence farming is the basic work, but there are other more specialized fields. The weavers use cotton spun with finger spinners, dyed with native dyes, and loomed about four inches wide. Usually the cloth is striped, but in some places they plan intricate patterns which emerge after the strips are sewn together into bed-cloths or gowns. The blacksmith has long been an important person in some tribes. (Gbandis and Lomas long used light twisted bars of native iron as money.) There are also goldsmiths, shoemakers, wood-carvers, carpenters, and tailors, although these latter may be comparative late-comers. There are also specialists in various kinds of healing, in detecting and averting witchcraft, and in administering ordeal trials. Petty traders sell imported cloth, tools, utensils, salt, tobacco; and buy rice, palm kernels, and palm oil. Some people leave home to work as laborers. (Firestone Rubber employs 30,000.)

The clothing varies from place to place. Mandingos wear elaborate flowing gowns. Others wear simple loin coverings only. The houses are usually close together in neat villages, and usually made of sticks daubed and plastered with mud and roofed with palm-thatch. Sometimes mats or wood are used, instead of mud walls.

Most tribes have no written language, but just over a century ago a Vai, Dualu Bukere, invented (he is said to have dreamed it) a clever syllabic alphabet still in use. Recently a Loma is said to have invented a writing system. Writing their own language has been known among the Grebos for almost a century due to the work of missionaries, and Bassas and more lately others have also learned in the same way.

The Mandingos and Vais in the north are Moslem. Some of the Mendes, Gbandis, and Golas have more recently taken up Islam. Christianity has been strongest along the coast. Probably the majority in the interior have had little or no contact with either. Many, probably most tribes, even where there is no apparent influence of monotheistic religion, have a word for a high god. There seem to be few dealings with him, however. Religious ceremony is more apt to be concerned with the dead; with semi-personal powers in certain trees, mountains, waters, or animals; most of all, perhaps, with a kind of impersonal almost

inanimate force, met with certain herbs, animal matter, fetishes, "medicine," etc.

Among the important institutions, except perhaps among the southern and coastal tribes, is the "Bush Society" -- the Poro Society for men and the Sande Society for women. The "Bush Society" might be said to play the part of educational system, church, fraternal order, and inter-tribal association. It has a permanent organization. Its most obvious activity is conducting the "bush school." Near puberty the boys (and at another time and place, the girls) live apart from home for a period varying from a few days to several years. They learn songs, dances, crafts, secrets, and indelible respect for old age and old traditions. They undergo ceremonies and disciplines, sometimes tame and sometimes rugged, usually including circumcision and scarification with tribal markings. They become adult members of the tribe. The public washing off of the clay after the retirement is over seems to signify re-birth, as do certain other features. The girls are married soon after, and in fact are usually betrothed before they enter. One effect of polygamy is that girls are married very much earlier than men.

The different tribes have their own musical traditions, and, often, their own musical instruments. A common form of singing is the solo with refrain. 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. One may also hear melodies in two-part harmony. Sometimes you hear solos, or songs sung in unison by two or more people. A group of dancing people may sing a simple chorus in unison or in harmony, without any leader. Songs often tell stories. Conversely a story or drama will often break into song at the climax.

The favorite musical instruments are percussion, chiefly drums and gourd rattles. The gourds may have rattling objects inside, or a network of beads outside that is pulled with a snap against the gourd. Some drums are made completely of wood, like the six-foot hollow log with openings along the side, hung up horizontally and beaten with clubs (technically these instruments are bells); or a miniature edition, the little bamboo instrument heard in these recordings. Other drums have heads of skin. One is like our bass drum. Another stands on its wooden base between the drummers legs, while he beats its single head with the palms of his hands. The *fanga* drum has variable tension in the drum heads.

One of the most tuneful percussion instruments is the Mandingo balafon.

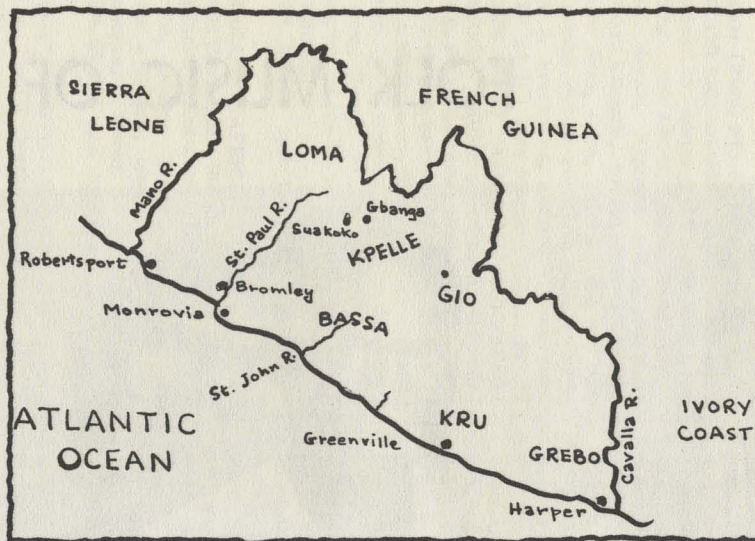
Plucked instruments use strings of wire or more often vine. Usually a portion of large gourd gives the resonance, but I have seen a wooden sound box with a skin head and a bridge, mounted as on a banjo.

Wind instruments seem to be less common. I have seen simple little flutes or whistles only rarely -- although the imported plastic flute has found some virtuosos to play it. Wooden horns are heard among these recordings. Occasionally animal horns or even elephants tusks are used as horns, chiefly for signalling or announcing a chief's procession, etc.

Drums and certain other instruments can "talk" by imitating the tones and the rhythm of the language, directing the dancers, or even telling stories and sending messages. This is a special skill.

Following is a list of the instruments I have seen in Liberia:

- Drums (five separate varieties)
- Balafon (17 tones)
- Balafon (5 tones)
- Gourd rattles (two varieties)
- Metal rattles
- Percussion irons
- Thumb pianos
- Harps (three varieties)
- Musical bow
- Horns (three varieties)
- Flute



Imported instruments used for African music include:

- Guitar
- Mouth organ
- Plastic flute
- Mouth horn with tissue paper (has African precedents)
- Saw (scraped for quadrille accompaniment)

The selections in this collection were taken from tape recordings made at Robertsport, Grand Cape Mount County, Bromley, Montsurado County, and near Gbanga, Central Province. They do not, of course, cover the whole field of Liberian music, but are offered as samples of typical musical performance.

**SIDE I, BAND 1: MANDINGO.** Guitar and voice. This piece was recorded in the Mandingo quarter of Gbanga, Central Province, during the most festive occasion of the year for the Moslems: the feast following the fast month. The song is in honor of Mohammed. A woman sings very simply. Then a man sings very high, loud, and rapid. The man plays the guitar accompaniment.

There were extensive and wealthy Mandingo kingdoms in the Sudan centuries ago. The Mandingos of Liberia have come into the country in recent generations, and have no territory assigned to them. They live in small groups in villages or in quarters of villages throughout northwestern Liberia. Often they are traders or Moslem teachers.

**SIDE I, BAND 2: KPELLE BUSH-CUTTERS.** The cutting of the bush is a common task in Liberia, for ground newly cleared and burned over must be used each year for hill rice, the staple food. It is a group project. The cutlas, a long knife bending forward at the end, cuts all but the big trees, is the favorite tool, and supplies the percussion in this casual work song.

There are six men cutting and singing. It is a kind of music frequently heard.

**SIDE I, BAND 3: GIO SONGS.** This is a recording of some Gio laborers who were walking about performing one night, at Bromley, on the St. Paul River. The song was originally sung by porters as they carried a rich man's hammock, and told how money could give a man such power and possessions.

The percussion instruments are slit-bamboo "drums" or "bells".

**SIDE I, BAND 4: BASSA MUSICAL BOW.** The player is Jon Wieh, from the deep interior of the Bassa area, near the Mano tribe. He recorded this song while working at Bromley on the St. Paul River, saving money to get a gun for his father and a wife for himself. The instrument is a piece of rattan vine on a bowed stick. The player's

left hand held one end of the instrument and a short stick which varied the pitch as he pressed it against the vine. His right hand struck the vine with another stick. His mouth surrounded one end of the string, varying the resonance, coloring the tone, and making the instrument "talk."

The talking is an imitation of the sound of speech. A fellow tribesman who is himself familiar with the instrument can understand it. Here is the story this selection tells, translated from Bassa into pidgin English by the player himself:

"The man, the woman palaver hard. He scared. He take his woman, he carry way in the bush, far way. All right. Soon they go there, they make rice farm the rice not ripe self, the woman die. She dead in the bush. The man ain't got no family, ain't got no boy, he ain't born no pickin, ain't got nobody. He don't know what to do. All right. He take that dead body, put it on his shoulder, he bring it far way; put it down. He go carry all the loads, come pass the dead body, carry the loads far way. (laughter) Put it down; before he come back again, take the dead body, go, pass the loads, carry it far way, join to the big road before he put it--put the dead body down; go carry the loads. So he do always before he reach town. Before they go bury the woman. And from there the other woman what he take it, she not make woman business too much again."

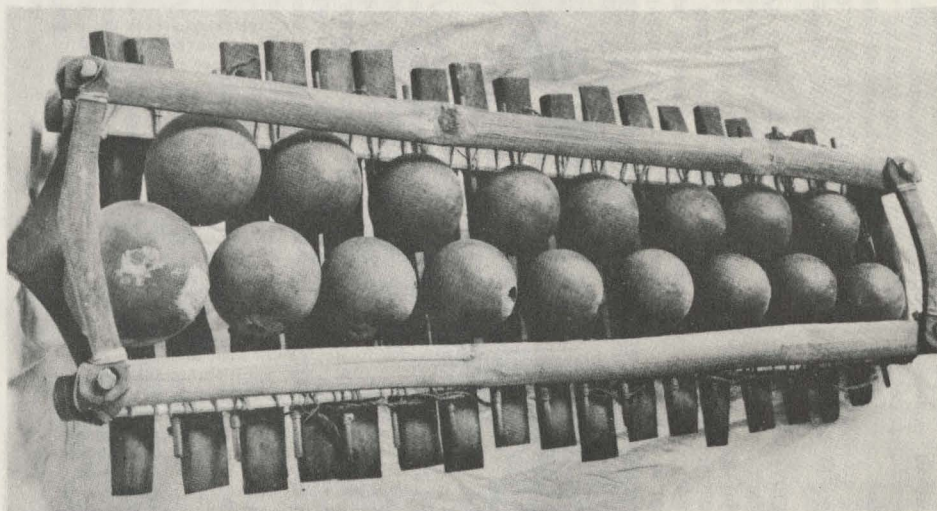
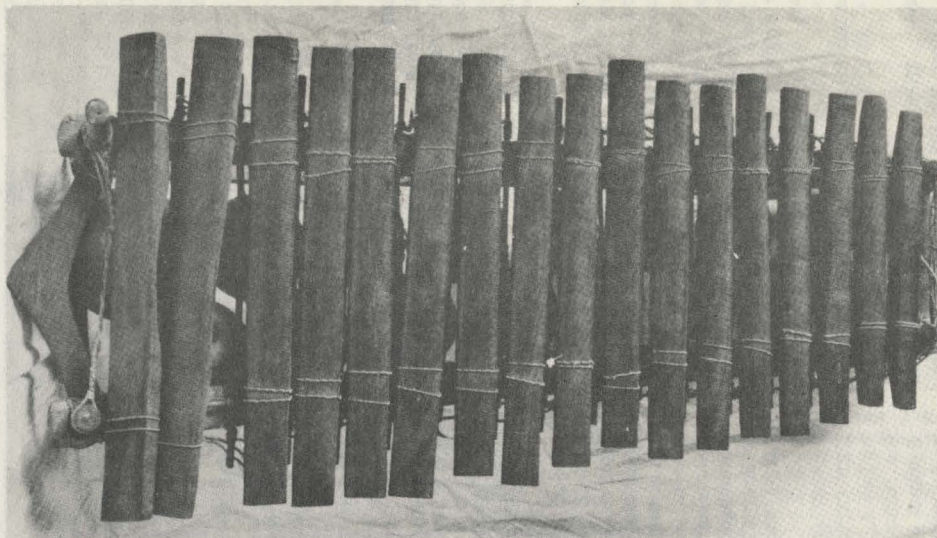
**SIDE I, BAND 5: KPELLE HARP.** Pepa Kroma, of French Guinea and Central Province, Liberia. Recording made near Senje, where he was temporarily staying and acting as occasional musician.

This is a solo performance. The singer plucks the strings with his right hand, while tapping with a ring on a finger of his left hand. The harp has seven wire strings. Each is attached to a separate strip of bamboo, which is springy enough to give tension to the string. The other ends of the bamboo strips are attached to a gourd for resonance. A rattle made of small pieces of tin, a watch chain, and other ornaments, slopes off the neck of the instrument.

**SIDE I, BAND 6: LOMA (BUZI) SONG WITH FANGA DRUMS.** Two men singing and playing their drums, assisted by a few women in the background. In this selection they tap on the wooden portion of the drum at first, shifting to the drum heads later on.

The *fanga* drum has two heads laced together with cord. By squeezing the lacings with his elbow the player can vary the pitch, while beating the drum with an L-shaped stick in the other hand.

**SIDE II, BAND 1: GIO SONG.** These Gio singers here sing a song of the snake society. Jeru, the song leader, though a leper, was high up in the snake society. At Bromley, where he worked, he was invariably sought out in case of snake bite, and his treatment was generally successful.



-- MANDINGO BALAFON, SEEN FROM ABOVE AND BELOW

The snake society is strong among the Mano and Gio tribes. The members learn to handle most snakes and snake bites very ably, using secret rites and herbs as well as more prosaic "first-aid." I was told that if you sang this song and "made medicine" properly, no snake would bite you.

**SIDE II, BAND 2: MANDINGO SONG WITH BALAFON.** The Mandingo balafon has 17 strips of wood between 11 and 16 inches long, between one inch and an inch and five eighths wide, and less than an inch thick. The ends and middle are thinned from the bottom in varying amounts for tuning and toning. The range is, roughly, from C up two and a third octaves to E flat. Under each strip is a spherical gourd between 2 1/2 and 5 inches in diameter. The whole instrument is lashed together with native string on a flexible bamboo frame three feet long. The player puts his instrument on the ground in front of him and uses two sticks with rubber heads. He has rattles on each arm.

The selection was recorded during the feast that follows the fast month - the year's most festive occasion for the Moslem Mandingo. Two balafons accompany the singing in praise of Mohammed.

**SIDE II, BAND 3: BASSA BELLY HARP.** Jeffly, a partially blind Bassa man, working near Gbanga, Central Province, assisted by another Bassa man, Bo. Jeffly sang and played the harp; Bo assisted in the singing, and beat lightly on a chair with sticks.

The harp has a triangular frame made of sticks. Small pieces of tin on a nail at one corner give a rattle effect. Half a gourd lashed tightly to another corner gives the resonance. The gourd is held against the stomach, and occasionally taken away during playing, making a "wa" sound. There are six strings made of thin vine, tied through holes at one end, and tied around the stick at the other.

This song tells a story about a big bird.

**SIDE II, BAND 4: KRU SONG WITH GUITAR.** The singer is a Grebo who had worked as mechanic's assistant on freighters along the African Coast. He learned this song from Kru sailors.

The guitar is the favorite imported instrument in Liberia.

**SIDE II, BAND 5: KPELLE BAND.** A band from an outlying town visiting the Paramount Chief in Gbanga, and honoring him during the festive period before Independence Day (July 26). The horn is carved from wood, with a raised hole for the mouth on the side near the small end. The player's hand inserted into the large end varies the tone. A group of horns of differing size and pitch play together (four in this record). Besides the horns there is a drum, held between the knees of the drummer who sits and plays the drum head with his hands. The drum has a light framework with rattles on it curving up above the head. The third kind of instrument represented is the "iron", a curled piece of iron struck like a triangle.

Recordings by Packard L. Okie  
Photographs by Packard L. Okie  
Production Director, Moses Asch  
Editor, Harold Courlander

# Music of Africa on FOLKWAYS

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