Songs of Death from the Slave Coast

SIDE 1
Band 1 Gogodzi—mournig song
Band 2 Gogodzi—mournig song
Band 3 Alvi-he—Plain mourning songs

SIDE 2
Band 1 Gabada—Funeral music
Band 2 Yazo—Funeral music
Band 3 Yazo—Funeral music

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Songs of Death from the Slave Coast
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with the technical assistance of Larry Christopherson
DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4259
The Ewe people occupy the southeastern part of Ghana and the southern part of Togo, which was formerly known as the Slave Coast, because of the infamous trade to which it was intimately linked. The Ghanaian Ewe can be divided into three geographically and socioculturally distinct subethnic groups: the coastal Ewe, the riverine Ewe (along the Volta River) and the mainland Ewe. These three groups occupy most of what is called the Volta Region in Ghana, and the music recorded here comes from one of the mainland groups.

The mainland Ewe were divided into a mosaic of small confederacies of two to five sovereign villages, in contrast to coastal and riverine Ewe who formed more powerful chiefdoms. In their cultural life, the Ewe from the mainland also differ markedly from their southern brethren, and this is nowhere more noticeable than in their music. This may partly be explained by the fact that the mainland Ewe were subjected to a much greater influence from their western neighbors, the powerful Ashanti.

The music presented here was recorded in Abutia Kloe, a village of the Abutia confederacy. Although no systematic comparative analysis was carried out in the other mainland confederacies, there is no reason to believe that Abutia music is not representative of other mainland Ewe music.

Mainland Ewe social organization is completely geared around the village. The village is a bounded unit and, although not walled, it is the center of social existence and clearly distinguished from the outside, the 'bush'. This dichotomy is manifest in the rituals, and the symbolism in general: to the contrast between village and bush are coupled those between life and death, inside and outside, kinship and citizenship, peace and war, social and animal existence. Within the mainland Ewe villages there are only citizens, all equal in their rights. the women only being excluded from the full franchise associated with eldership. There are neither ranks, nor exploiting gerontocracies, nor abusing chiefs, nor fearsome secret societies, but a complete egalitarianism. The villages are divided into clans, but songs are not the prerogative of certain clans, nor are there clan-linked guilds of musicians. There is no secret or special transmission of musical knowledge. Music is learned and performed by anyone who is interested and talented enough, on the public place.

The Ewe language has no special word to translate 'music'. Instead, they speak of 'drumming' or 'singing'. The Abutia can perform some fourteen different types of drumming and singing, seven of which are reproduced on these two records. These fourteen types can further be reduced to three main categories: drumming and singing related to the bush (category I), drumming and singing related to death (category II), and drumming and dancing related to chiefship (category III). Record 1 presents a sample of music from category I, and record 2 from category II. No music from the third category has been included.

**RECORD 1**

**SIDE ONE:**

Band 1 and 2: Asafouv - war drumming.

The traditional mainland Ewe army recruited all male citizens old enough to carry a gun; the warriors did not form a distinct group. Apart from defending the villages from slave-raiders coming from the south and west, the warriors were also responsible for burial
and funeral rites in cases involving 'bad deaths', that is, deaths resulting from violent accidents or warfare. Such deaths were considered evil and the spirits of those who died in such a way are believed to come back to possess the living. Nowadays, the war-drumming takes place during such rituals only, since traditional warfare has now disappeared.

Drummers, choir, soloists and dancers are always men. Women will occasionally join in the dancing but only when possessed by the spirit of a dead warrior; they then go into a trance and wear the warriors’ clothes. The dancing of the men is an imitation of war and communal hunting movements in a pantomime of what used to be. The songs are simple and speak of war preparations, of enemies about to be killed.

The instrumental ensemble uses five drums and two 'gong-gongs' (kpodoga). The drums are the chalice-shaped type, like the Akan apentemma drums.

Transcriptions and translations (translations are not literal):

Side one, band 1:

Soloist: Ye, Ndo ee, Ndo ee! Miawoe du ade loo!

Choir: Ndo ee, Ndo Yewoe du ade loo! Ndo ee.

Soloist: Ye, wakaa, wakaa, wakaa Maku le edzi Yewoto, wakaa maku loo!

Choir: Wakaa, wakaa, wakaa, Maku le edzi.

Soloist: E, wasaa, Abrafo, wasaa maku loo! Waka, waka maku le edzi! Wububu......bububuu!!!

Choir: Waka, waka maku de edzi!

Soloist: Yes, warrior, Yes, I can die prone!

Yes, warrior. I can die prone!

Soloist: Oseee yiee!

Choir: Sprealing, Yes, leader, I can die prone!

Soloist: Oseee yiee!

Side one, band 2:

Soloist: Mioo basaa, Mioo nyama, Miyi afhe!

Choir: Yes, yee, ayoo! Woaegnula?

Soloist: Kale wofhe enye gbedzi loo! Gbedzi loo, gbedzi loo!

Choir: Yes, one shows bravery at war.

Soloist: Kale wofhe gbedziee!

Choir: Yes, one shows bravery in the bush.

Soloist: Gbedzi miado l-o, Gbedzi.

Choir: Kale wofhe nye gbedzie!

Soloist: Gbedzi miado l-o, Gbedzi.

Choir: Kale wofhe nye gbedzie!

Soloist: Gbedzi miado l-o, Gbedzi.

Choir: Kale wofhe nye gbedzie!

Soloist: Kale wofhe enye gbedzi loo! Gbedzi loo, gbedzi loo!

Choir: Kale wofhe gbedziee!

Soloist: Kale wofhe enye gbedzi loo! Gbedzi loo, gbedzi loo!

Choir: Kale wofhe gbedziee!

Soloist: Kale wofhe enye gbedzi loo! Gbedzi loo, gbedzi loo!

Choir: Kale wofhe gbedziee!
Individual hunting of big game used to be one of the most prestigious male activities because of the risks involved; like war, it required from the hunter the most potent medicines. These big animals (from the elephant to the buffalo) are believed to be so powerful that their spirit ‘possesses’ the hunter, who must therefore undergo a special ritual immediately after having killed such an animal. Should the hunter fail to undergo the ritual, he would become mad and die. Every year, however, a similar ritual is performed for the god of the hunt to ensure successful hunting. During these rites, the hunters who have killed big game are ‘possessed’ by the spirit of the animal they killed and more or less fall into a trance, dancing madly in imitation of their victorious pursuit of the animal.

This kind of drumming takes place during these rituals only. Three of the smallest chalice-shaped drums used in war-drumming are used together with the ‘gong-gong’, which plays the time-line for the ensemble. Drummers, choir and dancers are exclusively male, and men do get ‘possessed’. The songs are even simpler than the war-songs; the singers call the names of gods, and pray for good fortune in hunting. They also speak of hunters and animals. Most songs of this type consist of one or two sentences which are repeated for the duration of the song. Some use minor text variations, as in the fourth song. The talking drum is used very rhythmically to imitate the sound of animals running in the bush.

**Transcriptions and translations:**

**Side one, band 3:**

Soloist: Ade wu 13 loo!
Choir: A13 ku loo.
Soloist: Megadae o, malee, Adele, megadae o malee!
Choir: Megadae o, malee xo!

**Side two, band 1:**

Soloist: Gli mele eme o,
Choir: Gli mele eme o,
Soloist: Nye mayie o,
Choir: Nye mayi na o.
Soloist: L0w0 yi nuagbe be,
Choir: Gli mele eme o,
Soloist: Nye mayie o,
Choir: Nye mayi na o.

**Side one, band 3:**

Soloist: Ade wu 13 loo!
Choir: Adele wu 13 loo.
Soloist: Megadae o, malee,
Choir: Megadae o, malee xo!

**Translations:**

**Side one, band 3:**

Good hunting!
The hunter has killed an animal.
Indeed, the animal is dead.
Don’t shoot (to waste your bullets), I will catch it. Hunter, don’t shoot. I will catch it with my bare hands.
Don’t shoot, I will catch it, Hunter, don’t shoot.

**Side two, band 1:**

If the elephant is not going, I am not either.
All the animals are on their way but each and every one says: if the elephant is not coming, nor am I.
If the elephant is not of the party, I will not go.
The animals are on their way.
If the elephant is not included, don’t count me in.

This refrain by the choir is repeated after each of the following lead by the soloist:

Soloist: Dzatawoe yi nuagbe...
The lions are on their way...
The... (?) are on their way...
The... (?) are on their way...
The tortoises are on their way...
The buffaloes...
The (?) are also...
The leopards...
The crocodiles are also on...
The rats have also joined in.
All sorts of species are...
The hunter has killed an animal!
Side two, bands 2 and 3: *Trvéhu* - drumming to the gods.

The mainland Ewe pantheon is mainly composed of two categories of gods: the autochthonous and the immigrant ones. The immigrant gods are by definition outsiders, they inhabit a stool which cannot touch the ground, and select women as their priestesses. They possess these women, who then speak as their voices. The autochthonous gods, on the other hand, shelter in chthonic abodes and choose men as their priests, but never possess anyone. These gods all have their yearly rituals but drumming is performed for the immigrant gods only.

The instruments used in this type of drumming are basically those used in the hunters' drumming, and the 'gong-gong' is still used to play the time-line. Drummers and choirs are all men but, since the immigrant gods have priestesses only, women perform the dancing. As they become possessed by their god they enter into a trance and start dancing to the *trvéhu* rhythm. These songs, like the texts of the previous songs, use quite simple texts and mainly list names of gods and beg their favours. The meter is very fast and the rhythms are extremely complex.

**Transcriptions and translations:**

Side two, band 2:

Soloist: Osée yée!

Choir: Yes, yes, Atando, oo.

Soloist: Yawoe, yawoe, Frama Yawo.

Choir: Yawoe, Yawoe.

Soloist: Dzinui, Dzinui, Nana Dzinui.

Choir: Dzinui, Dzinui.

Soloist: Asiome, Asiome, Kofi Asiome be ye yeade agbéfléfleh fe zo?

(exclamation for calling).

[they call the name of Atando, an Abutia god].

They call the name of Aframa Yawo, another Abutia god.

The choir repeats the name.

Calls the name of Nana Dzinui, an Abutia goddess.

Choir repeats the name.

Really? Did Kofi Asiome say that he needed to 'buy life'?

Asiome said that?

Never!

Indeed, Kofi Asiome has gone to beg for life.

Yes, even Kofi Asiome has to pray the gods for life.

Asiome, Kofi Asiome must be close to death to seek to 'buy life'.

Yes, even Asiome has to 'buy life'.

Side two, band 3:

Soloist: Luvi menye me kum o.

Choir: Luvi menye me kum o.

Soloist: Da du nui ma!

Choir: Da du nui ma be gredzima duanu seng.

I am only a tiny hole, but do not dare to dig me. I am only a tiny hole in the savannah, but if you dig a snake will bite you.

The snake has bitten. The snake that has bitten says he is a viper, the most dangerous of all.

The remaining part of the song was too difficult to transcribe and translate.
In all cases involving a normal death, that is, death by sickness or old age, the funeral and burial rites are performed by the deceased's relatives and fellow-villagers. The deceased is normally buried on the day following death and the burial is preceded by a wake which lasts through the night. The wake-keeping attracts mostly a female audience but, wherever the mourning songs involve drumming, men are invited to perform. The Gogodzi mourning songs are accompanied by drumming, but on a limited scale. The instrumental ensemble is, however, still percussive and the rhythm is obtained by pounding two sticks together and hitting an empty bottle with a pebble. The choir is composed of women and young men, and only women dance. Most mourning songs of this type start with a long introductory text, sung by a soloist. This introduction is followed by a solo-response section which carries a dialogue with a long series of varied sentences. These songs talk of love, grief, and sorrow, and the melodies are somewhat restrained. As mourning songs, they are only sung at night.

Transcriptions and translations:

**Side one, band 1:**

Soloist: Ozalele, lele, lele,
Mene nya de sem le adzo ụ
Adzo mel ụ atsi nam o?
Agotime de be
Da bra tsi o.

Soloist: Teva ụgụ
dezu a ụ
dza ụ
dadza kọ dje
Xawu kọ ade nja kọ?

Soloist: Dza yaa dza aghagba
Nha de dza wa,
Ame a laa
Abe kodzoe nere
Ne kodzoe go tsie la alee
Eye alee kọ de
Mada (tui) o zaa?
Wobe Dza xoxoa,
Dza aghagba
Nafho de wa.
Ahewo llo!
Yoo!

**Side one, band 2:**

Soloist and Choir:

Soloist: Ame nyanga
daa
Wolui mevo o.

Choir: Ame nyanga akanga fhue
Wolui mevo o.

Band 3: Avihe - Plain mourning songs.

These songs are interesting in that they represent the extreme of the tendencies inherent in this type of music. Whereas the music of category I (related to the 'bush') consists of drumming and singing, with the emphasis placed on the drumming aspect, mourning music consists mostly of singing, with little drumming involved only as...
an accessory. In these plain mourning songs the drumming is com-
pletely absent and only rattles and a pair of metal castanets are used
to mark the meter and rhythm. The melody openly wins over the
rhythm and the mourning songs have the most sustained melodic struc-
ture of all their music. Choir and dancers are exclusively women
and the texts are longer, more elaborated and varied than most of
the other types of mainland Ewe songs.

Transcriptions and translations:

Side one, band 3:

Soloist: Fhonyemeawo gbm loo,
Fhonyemeawo gbm loo,
Gbeke mefo adzoglo da?

Choir: Fhonyemeawo gbm loo,
Fhonyemeawo gbm loo,
Gbeke mefo dzata loo,
Fhonyemeawo aom za?

Soloist: Etofomeawo gbm loo,
Enofomeawo gbm loo,
Gbeke mefo adzoglo de?

Choir: Fhonyemeawo gbm zo,
Fhonyemeawo keg gbm,
Ne eva me be mefo dzata de?

Soloist: Eɛ, nye menya mi o,
Nye mayo mi o.

Choir: Dzi de mebe
Yeadozo mi o.

Soloist: De moyo mì za,
Mìato o.

Choir: Dze de mebe
Yeadozo mì o.

Soloist and Choir:

Ne meka be gbemagbe
Ameeka mado hu na wo?

Kpalime yigbe gbemagbe
Ameeka mado hu na wo?

Korle Bu yiyi gbemagbe,
Ameeka mado hu na wo?

Ho degbe,
Ameeka mado hu na wo?

Addidome yi,
Ameeka mado hu na wo?

Tondome degbe,
Ameeka mado hu nawo?

Fidagbe be gbemagbe,
Memledagbe be gbemagbe,
Egbe be gbemagbe
Ameeka mado hu na wo?

But who knows? Had I called you,
You might not have responded.

But even this action,
Might not have pleased you.

When I talk of that day, who
would not sympathize?

Of that day when sickness took
me to a faraway hospital, who
would not sympathize?

Of that trip to the Kpalime hos-
pital, who would not understand?

To the Korle Bu hospital...

To the Ho hospital...

To the Adidome hospital...

To the Tondome hospital...

Whether it was a Friday,
a Wednesday,
or even today,
who would not sympathise?

SIDE TWO:

Band 1: Gabada - Funeral music.

A mainland Ewe funeral is not a sad occasion. People mourn
on the burial day but the funeral marks the end of bereavement. It
emphasizes the victory of life over death, the re-insertion of the
bereaved ones to normal life. Funerals used to take place on the seventh day after the burial but, nowadays, the two events can be separated by as much as one year. The funeral thus emerges as an occasion of rejoicing and commemorating. The funeral day is preceded by a commemorative wake-keeping, where Gobada is performed. The songs are still elaborate and diversified and they are accompanied by drumming, but the drums used are no longer of the Akan type; they are cylindrical and are akin to the drums found among the coastal and riverine Ewe. As usual, men drum but the choir is composed of both men and women, and the dancers also belong to both sexes. The dancing is not imitative but rather conducive to flirt, with partners of both sexes dancing together.

Transcriptions and translations were impossible.

Bands 2 and 3: **Yazo** - Funeral music.

Yazo belongs to the 'music of rejoicing' played on the day of the funeral. It is a modern and Christian version (introduced around 1965) of a traditional type of drumming and dancing which was phased out by missionaries for its erotic overtones... Yazo is still more of an occasion for flirt, since it is only performed by the young and unwed people and very often leads to love affairs. It is performed on the day of the funeral itself, starts in the afternoon and lasts late into the night. The drummers are men but all those present, choir and dancers, assembling members of both sexes, join in the singing. Dancing and singing are not dissociated, as in other instances, and the choir dialogues with the dancers.

Transcriptions and translations:

**Side two, band 2:**

Soloist: Agba\-\nuvo menoa am\-\gu
Wotso yina de yome o.
Dzo yi do, mide avo nam,
Ne mayi.

Choir: Agba\-\nuvo menoa am\-\gu
Woyi na yome o.

Soloist: Ao, Ao,
Noviwo,
Mina ngudo

One does not bury a man with the cloth in which he is laid in state. Friends, remove mine. It is now my turn to depart (in the grave).

A man is not buried with the cloth used to lay him in state.

(Exclamation) Friends, be ready.

**Side two, band 3:**

Soloist: Miva, miva, mivaa

Choir: Miva, mivo Mawudo la,
Miva, miva, mivo Mawudo la ko.

Soloist: Agbehia didi Mawu me wotso.

Choir: Miga tsi dzi li e\-\gu o.
Yehova na go la Nusianu me.

Egbe, hafi \( \nu \) nake la,
Etso, menye towo \( \nu \).
Xexeame nuwo ka\-
De wotrona yesi\-\yi.
Ao. Noviwo mina ngudo.

Come, come, come.

Come, and let us do God's work.

God is the source of want and necessity in life.

But do not worry. Let Jehova be our leader in everything.

Today is yours until day breaks, but tomorrow no longer belongs to you. This world is always changing. Yes, brothers, be ready.
Gogodzi, Gabada, Avihe and Yazo, despite their differences, all belong to the same category of mainland Ewe music (category II, related to death). The drums used are the cylindrical Ewe type and the 'gong-gong' does not play a leading role. In the mourning music the singing is most important, at the exclusion of drumming and even dancing, in the plain type (avihe). In the funeral music, dancers and singers are fused, and the drumming is only an accompaniment to the singing and dancing. The song texts are longer and more detailed in their expressions, as they give expression to the varied feelings of grief, sorrow, and love. The choreography is also varied; it is made up of graceful movements of the upper part of the body, as smooth as the melody itself with no intent to pantomime. Overall, this category of music is overtly women-oriented.

In contrast, asafovhu, adevhu and trovhu (category I) share a number of characteristics which clearly mark them off from the music of category II. They are all performed with the same type of chalice-shaped Akan drums, led by the sound of the 'gong-gong'. They have fast meters and their rhythms are highly syncopated and complicated. The songs are made up of texts that essentially address themselves to spirits from the outside. They are the spirits of those who have died in the bush or from accident (war-drumming), the spirits of big game (hunters' drumming), and the spirits of immigrant gods (drumming to the gods). All of their texts are short exclamatory sentences, and they consist of incantatory repetitions of the same sentences which, backed by the drumming, aim at calling the spirits to possess the dancers.

The music of categories I and III (the latter not represented on these records) share more similarities than either of these groups does with the music of category II. In category III, all texts are 'spoken' on the drums (the music is performed on the fontomfrom, the Akan 'speaking drum' of the chiefs) and all 'singing' disappears. Dancing is nearly is nearly non-existent in category III and, in category I (music related to the 'bush'), it is leg-based with motions which are imitative of human and animal behavior.

Seen from a more global point of view, these three categories of mainland Ewe music represent three different orientations: totally drum-oriented in category III with dancing as a sheer ancillary performance, it is almost completely song-oriented in category II whereas drumming, singing and dancing are totally inseparable in category I. These three orientations also express the deep cleavages between men and women, and between elders and youth.

Nevertheless, all three categories of mainland Ewe music share a common denominator: all three are intimately tied to ritual events. It does seem as if there was no 'profane' music traditionally, no music not connected to important moments in the villagers' life. More interesting and important still is the fact that, since the advent of Christianity, the Abutia and the mainland Ewe have retained only those traditional rituals which are music-bound. This in no way suggests that the rituals survived because they were the occasion of musical performance. It does rather mean that the rituals which survived were the most critical ones from their point of view, and that these important ritual events were underlined by musical performance. They were symbolically the most potent rituals, and their association with music gave them a collective dimension more difficult to delete than the more personal aspect of rituals such as outdoor ceremonies or rites of widowed birth.

Annotated by Michel Verdon.
Transcriptions and translations of songs by Michel Verdon and John Amenyo.