MUSIC OF THE MENE OF SIERRA LEONE

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Music Of The Mende Of Sierra Leone

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 Cunha, 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 capital city of Freetown. This figure includes a large number of tribes, Mendes, Temnes, Limbas, Lokos, Fulas, Korankos, Madingoes, Susus, Konos, Sherbroos, Kissi, Yalunkas, Krins, 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 chieftoms, 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 these 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.

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 who wish to make their estates. If his sons, for example, wish to make
his brothers makes allocations according to their requirements. Prefer­
ence 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, and the title to headship with which overall con­
control of land coincides. Today sons are often awarded their father's
land in preference to his brothers. The Chief
may end. But he cannot dispossess an individual or family
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 dispose of individual farms
from land which they have held and cultivated for a number of years.

The basis of the farming group in the mawe or household, consisting of
a man, his wives and children and frequently other relatives. Members
of the mawe make the kppa 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 cocoa for themselves. The farmer
expects help from the members of his mawe 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 ndomahji, assisted by a tribal or chief­
dom 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 candidates, which consist of various sections and sections
of each farming season from
and dis­
ciplines, 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. For
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 undergo 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 qual­
ities, and through his have intercourse with the spirit world. A
series of grades, representing specific attainments and experience,
are generally recognised, advancement being open to those who under­
and pay for the necessary additional instruction.

Traditionally women are usually married by the time they reach puberty
Marriages are legitimized by the payment of a bride-price or mbea
by the prospective husband and the public declaration of their agree­
ment by the parents. For both men and women a necessary prerequisite
to marriage is Initiation in the Poro or Sande secret societies. Flural marriage
confers prestige on a man and is a sign of affluence
since the wives work on the farms, fish, spin cotton, and trade. Ad­
ditional wives ensure an increased number of children, and a large
organization which includes education and
and the increasing number of Mendes marrying members of other tribal
groups, these values are changing and the educated young Mende gen­
erally prefer 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 kaehun 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 dis­
ciplines, sometimes tame and sometimes rugged, including circumcision
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series of grades, representing specific attainments and experience,
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and pay for the necessary additional instruction.
For the women there is the Sande, or Bundu Society, which is widespread in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and closely resembles the Pare 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 mal­estation. 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. Initiation may last for three or 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 elitrification. 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, midwifery, nursing, sanitation, and first-aid. Domestic science and handicrafts are also included. Sewel, a "devil" wearing a large black wooden helmet-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 Sewel

Other Mende secret societies are the Humul, which regulates relations between the sexes, the Niaye, a male healing society, and the Wonde, 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 Pare 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 harmony, without any leader. The quality of the singing varies from area to area and some villages have acquired reputations throughout Mende land for their fine vocalists, the singers being invited by neighboring Chiefs to perform on special occasions. The women sometimes sing with an affected 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 flaps. A reed-like instrument with lizard skin attached, which vibrates when blown, is used by the secret Pare "devil" but is rarely heard by non-members. Various types of horns can be seen, including elaborately carved ivory Chief's 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 accordion. The late Ali Sanka and J.S. Rodgers have popularized 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.

Suggested Reading List


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. Inside 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. There are sometimes 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
casions, such as the Muslim festival of Ramadan, the termination of the Foro 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 teenage 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 sanfibe, 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 lop 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 sanfibe 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 kongone, a large hollow wooden box-like instrument which serves as a soundboard for the three or four bamboo keys attached to the top and plucked by the musician, producing a thumb-like sound. Similar instruments, classified generically in West Africa as saanse, 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 kongone in principle, except that it is smaller in size and has metal keys; c) the sej'ibure, 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 sej'ibure, 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 novel, the black masked figure which symbolizes the spirit of the Sande Society, appears in public, she is always accompanied by attendants playing the sej'ibure.

The Nefali Devil

Recordings and photographs by Gary Schulse.