Music Of The Kpelle Of Liberia

Recorded by Verlon Stone and Ruth Stone  Notes by Ruth Stone
MUSIC OF THE KPELLE OF LIBERIA

SIDE 1
Band 1. Entertainment Love Song
Band 2. Framed Zither Solo
Band 3. Topical Song Of The Medicine Men's Meeting
Band 4. Poro Entertainment Song
Band 5. Horn and Drum Ensemble
Band 6. Children's Counting Song

SIDE 2
Band 1. Musical Dramatic Folktale
Band 2. Rice Planting Song
Band 3. Musical Bow Solo
Band 4. Entertainment Song
Band 5. Bush Clearing Song
Band 6. Xylophone Duet
Band 7. Entertainment Love Song
Band 8. Entertainment Song

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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The Kpelle people occupy a wide band of land which begins forty miles inland from the coast of Liberia, and extends through the country and into Guinea. Some writers have characterized them as two distinct peoples, because of the political division and the name Guerzé for those Kpelle living in Guinea. But the variations actually seem to be no greater than those within the Kpelle of Liberia. It appears more accurate to consider them one people culturally and linguistically who number about 250,000 in Liberia and 90,000 in Guinea.

As part of the Peripheral Mande, the Kpelle probably migrated from the Niger Basin before the rise of the Malinke empire of Mali (1240 A.D.). They moved toward the coastal region, either settling among the people already there or displacing them (Murdock 1959: 259-264). During this movement, armed struggles sometimes resulted, some as late as the early 1900's in the area northwest of the Deg, St. Paul River.

The Kpelle are also known as Fessi, Kpwesi, Oberese, and Guerzé.

LANGUAGE

Kpelle belongs to the Mande language subfamily which is part of the larger Niger-Congo family (Greenberg 1966: 8). It is a tone language; that is, relative pitch is significant to each syllable. Three tones
including high, mid, and low affect meaning in the following ways:

trč - (high) "chicken"
teg - (mid - no ranking) "pass by"
třč - (mid, high-low) "black deer"

In written form, Kpelle has an indigenous script invented in the 1930's by Gbili, a paramount chief of Sanye. He received his inspiration in a dream which lasted three days. The script spread throughout the Kpelle area as a means of communicating officially and personally, as well as of executing business transactions and contracts. Today its use is very limited due to the later adoption of a Western phonetic alphabet, and with subsequent publication of Kpelle literature using it. The indigenous Kpelle script is one of at least eight other West African scripts of recent invention (1840's - 1940's) (Dalby 1967: 1-51). In Liberia, the earlier Vai script no doubt influenced the Kpelle script since Vai scribes were employed by Kpelle chiefs prior to the invention of the Kpelle script (Westermann 1921: 15).

POLITICAL AND JUDICIAL ORGANIZATION

The Kpelle political organization has been termed a "polycerebral associational state" (Gibbs 1962: 341-350). That is, equal and autonomous paramount chiefs, supported by the national government, have clan chiefs and, in turn, town chiefs ruling under them. The court system parallels the political system with the highest tribal court being that of the paramount chief. There are also unofficial courts held by the town chiefs and quarter elders. Family disputes may be settled in an informal house hearing known as bërei my meni sëm where friends and family members hear the complaint and have a kinsman, who also holds office, mediate the dispute (Gibbs 1963: 1-10).

KINSHIP

Kinship is predominantly "patrilocal polygynous" with a man and his several wives and children forming a household. But it may sometimes become extended patrilineally. Several families form a village quarter (kọl) headed by the quarter elder who is related to most of the members (Gibbs 1962: 341-350). Marriage is characterized by the exchange of tokens. In the most common form of marriage, the man pays a bride price to the girl's family which is refunded if the marriage ends in divorce.

SECRET SOCIETIES

The secret societies, known as Poro and Sande (pōlō and sānē in Kpelle), influence political and social aspects of Kpelle life. They represent arbitrary authority and are powerful forces for preserving traditional values. They educate the young in traditional arts including such skills as iron working, drumming, and dancing. They provide for the preservation of oral history. They are basically, but not always, conservative and resistant to change. The spirits of the Poro are essences of the arbitrary cultural authority. They sometimes appear in public as masked dancers. The Poro and Sande sessions last from a few months to several years and are attended by all young men and women who become full citizens. The initiates are instructed in a secluded area apart from the village. Music and dance are integral to the ritual and informal activities, being publicly displayed in the lavish celebration that marks the end of each session.

SUBSISTENCE

Traditionally, the Kpelle have cultivated dry-land rice. During the dry season, the tropical rain forest is cleared by the men, and sometimes women, using cutlasses (gëba). (The land is communally owned, and permission to farm it must be given by the clan chief.) Often a work co-operative (kwa-si-kuu) will clear the bush while several instrumentalists accompany them in their work songs. After the bush is dried, it is burned, leaving tree stumps and large fallen logs which prevent soil erosion. The women plant the rice, often working in planting co-operatives (kwa-si-kuu). They accompany planting as well as harvest with appropriate work songs. Most able-bodied people are involved in the agricultural activities in addition to whatever other role they may assume in the village such as tailor, blacksmith, musician, or woodcarver. With Westernization sweeping Liberia, some of these traditional roles have changed as people have moved to industrial centers to become wage earners.
MATERIAL CULTURE

The Kpelle have long practiced iron working. Before imported iron was available, blacksmiths smelted their own in clay furnaces for some days to oxidize the impurities. There was a ritual song and dance connected with this process designed to purify anyone who, while smelting iron, had violated the taboo against sexual intercourse. The blacksmith holds high status since he makes the tools for farming and the implements used by the Poro and Sande to cut the body cicatrizes of the initiates.

Woodcarvers hew mortars, spoons, and masks. The masks are used in connection with Poro and Sande activities. They are characterized by very human-like features carved on a highly polished, black-dyed wood. There is abstraction in the elongated face that begins with a wide forehead, has narrow slit eyes, and gracefully tapers into a narrow chin. The slightly protruding forehead and chin make the mask slightly concave (Delafield 1968: 12-19).

Musicians traditionally craft their own instruments, whether they carve wooden horns or drums, prepare skins for drum heads, or lace the heads to the drum body with oil-palm-fiber.

People also engage in other specialized activities. Women weave raffia rice bags and oil-palm-fiber fishnets. Men make piassava fishtraps and raffia hammocks, twine, and masked dancers' costumes. Weavers make long, narrow strips of cotton cloth on outdoor looms. The strips are sewn together into garments, especially long, flowing, open-sleeved chiefs' robes. Both cotton and raffia fibers are dyed with natural dyes of indigo blue, camwood red, or kola nut brown.

MUSIC

Music is vital to many Kpelle cultural events in a variety of media and forms. Most significant activities, whether they are initiation into the secret society, rice planting, or storytelling are integrated with musical performance. A large portion of the Kpelle participate in group performances and a few trained specialists lead the performing groups as master drummers or soloists. Music may be either ceremonial or non-ceremonial. Music of the ceremonial or ritual type may accompany life cycle events, or secret society activities. Among the non-ceremonial music are songs of livelihood, signaling, political protest, historic epics, musical dramatic folktales, and entertainment. Two of these types, the musical dramatic folktale and signal music, deserve further explanation.

The musical dramatic folktale (méni-pêlee) is the performance of a folktale from the oral tradition by a master storyteller, minor soloists, and a chorus. The chorus provides a background ostinato pattern against which the storyteller alternately narrates the story and sings a refrain, employing dramatic gestures and exaggeration, while assuming the roles of various characters within the story, and even moving outside of the story to make comments from the audience viewpoint.
Signal music is that music whose pitches reflect the relative pitches of speech in tone languages such as Kpelle. It is usually thought of as that music used to send messages over long distances, although among the Kpelle, the more important type of signal music is that played within small gatherings. It might be performed on a xylophone, musical bow, slit drum, membrane drum, or wooden horn to communicate a proverb, story, personal praise, or social ridicule. The knowledgable listeners understand the stylized phrases which present the message in a large enough context to let the listeners positively identify it. A master drummer also takes signal patterns and intersperses them into all types of non-signal music, playing signals that tell a drummer to play faster, indicate a particular choreographic move to a dancer, praise the ensemble, or curse the players for poor playing.

PERFORMING GROUPS

The performing groups are highly organized. Each group has a manager (pelee kalon) who negotiates playing engagements, travel details, and housing arrangements. He keeps the chief informed of the group's activities, and settles disputes among the players. There is also a posia who acts as a kind of master of ceremonies to call for pauses in the music so the audience can praise the performers with elaborate speeches and tokens of money, food, or liquor. The posia also keeps the crowd from interfering with or overwhelming the players. The master drummer leads the performing group musically as a skilled specialist who spends most of his non-farming time in practice and teaching of his skill. The instruments of a performing group are communally owned and usually kept by the master drummer or pelee kalon.

NOTES ON THE RECORDINGS

SIDE I, BAND 1: ENTERTAINMENT LOVE SONG (Giiq)

As a popular entertainment song, Giiq was found in the repertoire of many performing groups in the summer of 1970. The text concerns an unfaithful lover. Near the end of the song, two men employ voice disguise as they add bird and animal imitations. Several young Sande members dance throughout the song. The performers from Gbe-ylia-taa, Song County, include wokpe, male soloist; Pona-weni, female soloist; Kafo-master drummer playing the fall; and Saki playing the gburn-gburn. The fell is goblet shaped, hand beaten, and the skin is held taut by a string network laced around the sides of the drum. Metal rattles are attached to give a pungent sound quality. The master drummer uses palms, fingers, and even elbows to achieve a diverse range of pitches and sound qualities. The gburn-gburn is a cylindrical, two-headed, stick beaten drum.

SIDE I, BAND 2: FRAMED ZITHER SOLO (Konin)

This triangular framed zither song, according to soloist Flumo of Totota, depicts a leopard hunting for food in the rain forest. Melodic motives interlock in hocket style. The player holds the instrument at a right angle to his body, pressing the gourd resonator against his chest. The konin has 9 strings (in this case) stretched across a triangular wooden frame that is attached to a gourd resonator. Of the nine wire strings, the five highest pitched are nonii (children) and the four lowest pitched are neema (mothers), as explained by the soloist.

SIDE I, BAND 3: TOPICAL SONG OF THE MEDICINE MEN'S MEETING (Sii-koloo)

This topical song reflects communal interest in a recent gathering of prominent zoona (medicine men) from surrounding towns. A female soloist, Lopui, and a mixed chorus are accompanied by the keg (gourd rattle) and kongoma (two tongue plucked idiophone). The ensemble comes from Zonkai, Song County. The gourd rattle consists of a gourd covered with a network of strung beads. The kongoma has two wide metal tongues fastened to a box-shaped resonator and the instrument provides a pitched, rhythmic ostinato in ensembles.

SIDE I, BAND 4: PORO ENTERTAINMENT SONG (De kpblni nnur)

A young Poro (polic) member entertains his fellow male initiates in a public song that alludes to aspects of the Poro. Within the song text he asks, "Isn't that right, fellow initiates?" (Kena-bela you, you?) and his friends answer, "Right!" (You). Tokqa Peepee of Ponataa sings and plays the gbebbetze (multiple bow lute) to the rhythmic accompaniment of a struck idiophone, an empty beer bottle tapped with a pen knife. The multiple
The text describes a folktale, alternating a counting song. In responsorial manner of his misfortune, accompanies the horns. The horns come together within his range. Two goble drums (fell) accompany the horns. The horns come together at one point and then pause as the players sing the words of the song:

Meni kpala-kpiri wee koo-kpaa kula yaa.
Load of dried matter releases you from the pain of pregnancy.

Zalei a a koo-kpaa kula yaa.
The medicine has released you from the pain of pregnancy.

A typical horn ensemble consists of four to six horns and two drums. The wooden horns have raised side embouchures. There are also ivory or animal horns.

SIDE I, BAND 6: CHILDREN'S COUNTING SONG (Taag, veer, zaagá)
A group of children from Totota, Songo County, sing a counting song. In responsorial manner the oldest girl takes the part of soloist and the rest of the children make up the chorus. Everyone accompanies the singing with hand-clapping.

SIDE II, BAND 1: MUSICAL BOW SOLO (Gbon-kpala)
A master storyteller, Otto Giddins of Sanoyea, performs a folktale, alternating recitative-like singing with dramatic narration. A mixed chorus provides an ostinato background. There are two other minor soloists. One interjects spoken comments about the story, and the other sings an ostinato in alternation with the ostinato of the chorus.

The story involves an orphan boy and a woman without relatives who come together. The storyteller describes the young boy walking down a path daydreaming. He meets a woman who, hearing of his misfortune, accompanies him to gather palm kernels. The woman picks the finest kernels and admires one wistfully, wishing that it were a son. As she walks away, a child calls, "Mother, wait for me." It seems to be the palm-kernel calling her. What has in fact happened is that the orphan boy changed into a palm kernel and then into a son for the woman through a series of unexplained supernatural events. The transformation also gives the boy the special ability to kill animals with a magical song. But because he originated from a palm kernel, the boy cannot use this power on the wild boar. This is because the wild boar eats palm kernels for food, according to the storyteller, and so ranks above the palm kernel in nature's hierarchy. The boy uses his magical song two times to kill meat for feasts of red "buffalo" (kilo) and "buffalo" (tou). But then a childless woman, jealous of the first woman's good fortune, hears about the boy's unique power. The boy, asking for meat, falsely claiming to be his mother's sister. Then she leaves and calls none other than the wild boar. As she comes racing out of the bush, with the boar in pursuit, she denies knowing the boy at all saying, "I'm trying to think of the person who sings the song." But the law restricting the boy's power has been violated, and even before the confrontation he sings, "You've killed me." The boar and the boy begin to fight. At one point, the boar tosses the boy into the air and opens his mouth beneath him. As the boy comes falling down, he bounces down the boar's throat with the sound gboro, gboro. The boar has killed the boy, leaving his mother alone once again.

SIDE II, BAND 4: GBELE ENTERTAINMENT SONG
In a song for personal entertainment, Jokoli of Totota sings and accompanies himself on the gbele (plucked idiophone) which is known elsewhere in Africa as sanza, mbira, or kalimba. The seven metal tongues on the gbele are fastened to a wooden board which is attached to an enamel bowl resonator. From the player's left to his right, the tongues are designated as follows: 1-nuul kete - great person, 2- nub - child, 3- nub - child, 4- nub uye nub - soloist "song, raising person", 5-6 and 7- nub uye nub - singers. The instrument is played by tongues with the index, middle, and ring fingers of both hands. The gbele is most...
important as a solo instrument played for personal or small group entertainment.

SIDE II, BAND 5: BUSH CLEARING SONG
(Kwaa-ôô-wojë)
The workers of a bush clearing cooperative sing as they clear the tropical rain forest in preparation for rice farming. Two instrumentalists accompany the singing on hand-held slit drums (kônô) of different sizes. The music is characterized by short overlapping ostinato motives performed in hocket style. Shouts from the women express appreciation for the work and later announce that the afternoon meal is ready. The slit drum produces various pitches based on varying thickness of wood along the slit. In one type of kônô ensemble of three, there is kônô lee (mother kônô), the next smaller kônô samà (middle kônô), and the smallest kônô lev (child kônô). A tortoise shell kônô is used for Sande rituals. This particular ensemble is led by instrumentalist Tokpa of Yanekwele.

SIDE II, BAND 6: XYLOPHONE DUET
( Zu kélee kélee)
As an example of signal music, this song tells the story of a lazy boy who didn't enjoy working on the family farm. One day the family left him in the village as they traveled to the farm. But the boy soon became hungry and started towards the farm alone. On the path, he met the namu (spirit of the Foro) and was devoured by it. The musical patterns reflect the relative speech pitches of Kpelle, a three tone language. The musicians also play variations on the strict signal pattern. The two instrumentalists play on a single xylophone, each playing a part of the slabs. Peter Giddings and Adam Kwam of Pekwele hold one stick in each hand as they strike the wooden slabs which are strung together by raffia string, and suspended from four wooden stakes pounded into the ground.

SIDE II, BAND 7: ENTERTAINMENT LOVE SONG
(Kwa marar soo-pie)
This song begins somewhat unusually with an unaccompanied vocal solo by Gaiam from Stewart's Rubber Farm near Totota. She sings about her problem involving her husband and another woman. After the opening section, a chorus, goblet drum (leli), and two-headed cylinder drum (gbun-gbun) join the soloist.

SIDE II, BAND 8: ENTERTAINMENT SONG
Two performers from Kakata sing and play the hourglass pressure drum (danin) and gourd rattle (kêê) in an entertainment song. Such an ensemble traditionally accompanied a chief on his travels. The hourglass drum has two heads connected by strings which raise the pitch of the heads when tightened by arm pressure.

APPENDIX A

Orthography used here is that standardized by the Kpelle Language Center of the Lutheran Mission (Welmers and Spehr 1956; Lesson 1). Approximate correspondents are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kpelle</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>as in pot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>as in lick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ee</td>
<td>as in say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>as in leak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>as in poke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>as in boot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u (shorter than caught)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>as in bet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>as in sing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>y and g sounds somewhat like &quot;ch&quot; in German &quot;ach&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kp</td>
<td>k and p said together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gb</td>
<td>g and b said together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>implosive stop with air going in rather than out when lips are closed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tone marking system may be explained in simplified manner as the following:

Whatever tone mark appears on the stem of the word governs until another tone mark appears. Thus, lôôlù is high tone throughout and kâli is mid tone throughout. When the circumflex (high-low) appears, as in kâli, the first syllable is high and the second is low tone. But when the circumflex appears on the last syllable, as in kôni, the high-low compound tone occurs on a single syllable.

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