Music Of The Kpelle Of Liberia

Recorded by Verlon Stone and Ruth Stone   Notes by Ruth Stone

MUSIC OF THE KPELLE OF LIBERIA

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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FÊLI -
GOBLET DRUM

Recorded in Liberia in 1970
By Verlon Stone and Ruth Stone

Notes by Ruth Stone

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 Deŋ,
St. Paul River.

* The Kpelle are also known as Pessi, Kpwesi,
Gberese, and Guerzé.

LANGUAGE

Kpelle belongs to the Mande language sub-
family 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:

tée – (high)   "chicken"
tɛɛ – (mid – no marking) "pass by"
tɛɛ́ – (mid, high-low)   "black deer"

In written form, Kpelle has an indigenous script invented in the 1930's by Gbili, a paramount chief of Sanoyea. 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 (1830'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 "polycephalous 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 bérei mu meni saa 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 (kóli) 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 (pólɔŋ and sànɛŋ 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 (gbéya). (The land is communally owned, and permission to farm it must be given by the clan chief.) Often a work co-operative (kwa-śó-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-síi-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.
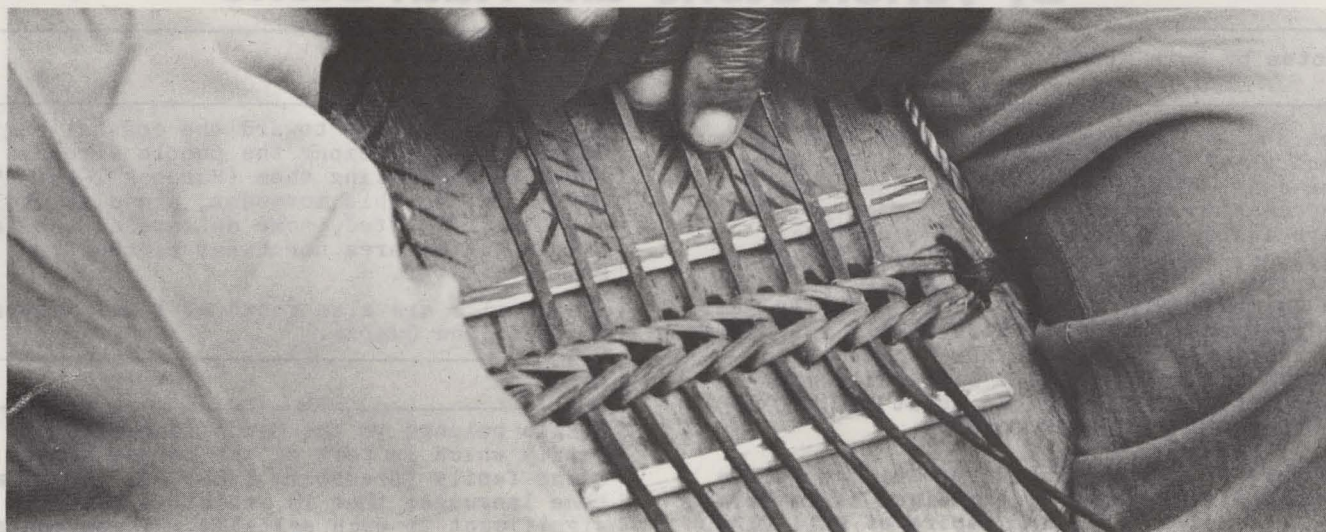
MATERIAL CULTURE

The Kpelle have long practiced iron working.
Before imported iron was available, black-
smiths 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 cicratices
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 nat-
ural 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 signi-
ficant activities, whether they are initia-
tion 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-ceremon-
ial music are songs of livelihood, signaling,
political protest, historic epics, musical
dramatic folktales, and entertainment. Two
of these types, the musical dramatic folk-
tale and signal music, deserve further
explanation.

The musical dramatic folktale (mɛni-pɛlee)
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 charac-
ters within the story, and even moving out-
side 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 kaloŋ) 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 kaloŋ.

NOTES ON THE RECORDINGS

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

As a popular entertainment song, Giiŋ 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 Gbɛ-yila-taa, Bong County, include Wokpɛ, male soloist; Pona-wɛni, female soloist; mixed chorus; Kao, master drummer playing the fɛli; and Saki playing the gbuŋ-gbuŋ. The fɛli 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 gbuŋ-gbuŋ is a cylindrical, two-headed, stick beaten drum.

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

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 konîŋ 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 nónii (children) and the four lowest pitched are ̀heeŋa (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 zóoŋa (medicine men) from surrounding towns. A female soloist, Lɔpuu, and a mixed chorus are accompanied by the kɛɛ (gourd rattle) and kóŋgoma (two tongue plucked idiophone). The ensemble comes from Zɔŋkai, Bong County. The gourd rattle consists of a gourd covered with a network of strung beads. The kóŋgoma 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 (Da kpéni ̀nóŋ)

A young Poro (pólɛŋ) 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?" (Kɛna-ɓela yɔɔ, yɔɔ?) and his friends answer, "Right!" (Yɔɔ). Tokpa Pee-pee of Ponataa sings and plays the gbɛgbɛtɛlɛ (multiple bow lute) to the rhythmic accompaniment of a struck idiophone, an empty beer bottle tapped with a pen knife. The multiple

bow lute has seven bamboo bows coming from the gourd resonator with wire strings stretched across the bows. The strings are designated as the following, moving from the lowest to highest pitched: 1- nee - mother, 2- nee nóŋ - mother's child, 3- nee nóŋ no nóŋ - grandchild, 4- neye - younger brother or sister of string three, 5- nóŋ - child of string four, 6- nóŋ - child of string five, 7- gbe-ŋa - end string. Metal rattles are attached to the instrument which is known in some Kpelle areas as kolo koniŋ rather than gbegbetele.

SIDE I, BAND 5: HORN AND DRUM ENSEMBLE (Mɛni-kpála)

A horn and drum ensemble performs an entertainment song accompanied by dancing. The text describes a medicine that produces abortions. The four wooden horns (túru) are played both by blowing and voice disguise in multi-ostinato hocket style, each horn playing that part of the melody which falls within his range. Two goblet drums (fɛli) accompany the horns. The horns come together at one point and then pause as the players sing the words of the song:

Mɛni kpála-kpiri wee koo-kpaaŋ kula yâa.
Load of dried matter releases you from the
    pain of pregnancy.

Zâlei aâ koo-kpaaŋ kula yâa.
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 (Táaŋ, veeré, zaaɓá)

A group of children from Totota, Bong 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 handclapping.

SIDE II, BAND 1: MUSICAL DRAMATIC FOLKTALE (Mɛni-pɛlee)

A master storyteller, Otto Giddings 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" (kólɔ) and "bush cow" (tou). But then a childless woman, jealous of the first woman's good fortune, hears about the boy's unique power. She comes to 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 2: RICE PLANTING SONG (Gbenee mɛi-oo)

The women of a rice planting co-operative (kwaa-síi-kuu) sing a responsorial work song as their short-handled hoes scratch the surface soil in rhythmic strokes. The soloist, Sia-wɛli, leads the song as well as the slowly moving formation of workers. An old woman intermittently calls out encouragement to the workers who all live in Gbɔrɔla.

SIDE II, BAND 3: MUSICAL BOW SOLO (Gboŋ-kpala)

Jɔkɔli of Totota plays the musical bow by striking the bow string with a bamboo stick held in his right hand, and stopping the string at various places with the back edge of a pocket knife held in his left hand. He encircles the upper end of the string with his mouth, the resonator. By changing the shape of his mouth, he emphasizes certain harmonics of the fundmental tone. This song is a Kpelle proverb played with some variation in the strict signal music pattern. Text:

Fèlɛŋ aâ e woŋ tóo kpa, kpa ɣele leŋ.
Lizard has slapped its tail, kpa ɣele leŋ.

The musical bow (gboŋ-kpala) is regarded as an instrument for young boys to play for personal entertainment.

SIDE II, BAND 4: GBƐLƐƐ ENTERTAINMENT SONG

In a song for personal entertainment, Jɔkɔli of Totota sings and accompanies himself on the gbɛlɛɛ (plucked idiophone) which is known elsewhere in Africa as sanza, mbira, or kalimba. The seven metal tongues on the gbɛlɛɛ 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-núu kéte - great person, 2- nóŋ - child, 3- nóŋ - child, 4- nulei siɣe núu - soloist "song raising person", 5-6- and 7- nulei too núui - singers. The instrumentalist plays the tongues with the index, middle, and ring fingers of both hands. The gbɛlɛɛ is most

important as a solo instrument played for personal or small group entertainment.

SIDE II, BAND 5: BUSH CLEARING SONG
(Kwaa-ɓó-wulei)
The workers of a bush clearing co-operative sing as they clear the tropical rain forest in preparation for rice farming. Two instrumentalists accompany the singing on handheld slit drums (kóno) 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 kóno ensemble of three, there is kóno lee (mother kóno), the next smaller kóno sama (middle kóno), and the smallest kóno lóŋ (child kóno). A tortoise shell kóno is used for Sande rituals. This particular ensemble is led by instrumentalist Tokpa of Yanekwɛle.

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 ŋamú (spirit of the Poro) and was devoured by it. The musical pitches 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 Kwana of Fokwɛle 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 maráŋ soo-nia)
This song begins somewhat unusually with an unaccompanied vocal solo by Gamai 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 (fɛli), and two-headed cylinder drum (gbuŋ-gbuŋ) join the soloist.

SIDE II, BAND 8: ENTERTAINMENT SONG

Two performers from Kakata sing and play the hourglass pressure drum (daniŋ) and gourd rattle (kɛɛ) 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:

Kpelle		English
a	as in	pot
e	as in	lick
ee	as in	say
i	as in	leak
o	as in	poke
u	as in	boot
ɔ	as in	(shorter than caught)
ɛ	as in	bet
ŋ	as in	sing
ɣ	-	y and g sounds somewhat like "ch" in German "ach".
kp	-	k and p said together.
gb	-	g and b said together.
ɓ	-	implosive stop with air going in rather than out when lips are closed.

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, lóólu is high tone throughout and kali 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 konâ, the high-low compound tone occurs on a single syllable.

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