

by Ruth M. Stone

Photos (L-R): St. Peter's Kpelle Choir, Monrovia, Liberia (two photos): Dancer at the Momo Kaine funeral, Sanoyea. Liberia. Photos by Verlon L. Stone, courtesy of Liberian Collections Project, Indiana University.



war & wealth:

music in post-**conflict** Liberia

I left Liberia in the summer of 1989 knowing that the political situation was shaky at best. The dictator Samuel Doe had jailed many relatives of the Kpelle singers I worked with in Monrovia, and these musicians often stopped by to relay stories when they returned from visiting family members in prison. In December 1988 my husband and I had filmed the funeral of James Gbarbea where singers covertly protested political oppression with song lyrics such as “Ku kelee be lii ee, Doe a pail ii, ee” (We all are going, Doe is going). Gbarbea, a former government minister, had fled to

Charlotte, North Carolina. He returned in death to his homeland. After a funeral in Monrovia, his family brought him back to Sanoyea, some 90 miles in the interior.

The 14 years of war and destruction that followed are well known to the world. Vast numbers of people were killed; many more fled to other parts of Liberia, or the neighboring countries of Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, or Sierra Leone. Other Liberians went farther, including some who are living in the Philadelphia area. Philadelphia has been fortunate in that several fine singers, including Fatu Gayflor and Zaye Tete, were among those refugees. And their

talents were featured in a wonderful concert here last spring. I wasn’t able to join you for that event, but I’m thrilled to share a few thoughts about my recent research trip to Liberia.

Although the country was devastated by war, and reports often focus on the resulting damage to the infrastructure, I want to tell you what has been preserved—what has actually flourished—during the 18 years I was absent. To an ethnomusicologist the vitality of the music was impressive, a cause for celebration for all who know Liberian music.

Before I tell you about the music I experienced in June and July this past year, let me say that

I visited Liberia for the first time when I was three years old and my family went to live in Bong County. After being home-schooled in the mornings, I accompanied Kpelle people to the fields, went fishing with them, and sat with them by the cooking fires. My parents, who were missionaries for the Lutheran church, took me and my brother to Liberia, where we lived in Bong County until we left to obtain our high school and college educations.

dynamic female soloist who had been the choir's sparkplug. As various choir members saw me, they came up to welcome me, hug me, and relay the news that Feme was gone—she had traveled to Utah to visit her daughter.

The good news was that there were now three dynamic young singers who could lead the singing in the choir. We were thrilled to record a choir still bound together as a tight social group and greet some

Even more tightly coordinated were the transverse horn ensembles we encountered in the Gbanga area of Bong County, some 120 miles interior. We recorded one group in Baaokole, near Gbanga. In the Baaokole group, each horn played only one or two notes, and each player timed his notes to create a part of the whole.

A drummer added another rhythmic layer to the richly textured sound. The women



I returned in 1970 as a graduate student and lived there on and off until 1989.

I planned this last June and July to visit sites where I had recorded before the war and to research the performers and their music. I began my work at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia, where we had worked with the Kpelle choir—that bold group of women singers and male instrumentalists who sang about injustices in the late 1980s. I knew that many members of the choir had fled to the Bunduburam refugee camp in Ghana during the war. They had written me a letter from Ghana describing the music that they were performing even in those difficult times.

As I walked into the church on a Saturday afternoon, when I knew there would be choir practice, I looked for Feme Neni-kole, the

members who had been in the choir since the 1980s, such as Tono-pele.

The horror of the massacre of 1990, when soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia killed more than 600 people in St. Peter's, seemed far away as the women sang in their tight call-and-response arrangements accompanied by their gourd rattles. This is how musicians communicate and build community. Kpelle people say, "Kwa faa ngule mu." (We respond underneath the song). This same technique is used by both Fatu Gayflor and Zeye Tete in their music.

In the summer of 2007, the St. Peter's choir was no longer emphasizing protest against the government, as they felt they had to do in 1989. They proudly sang the Liberian national anthem in Kpelle and requested that we record it.

dancers created visual rhythms that amplified the excitement of the players. This Baaokole group has been playing together since the 1960s and continues today, often getting invitations to play for the county superintendent. While in earlier years they might have played in the chief's official ensemble, in the twenty-first century they are more like freelance musicians.

In nearby Suacoco we found a group that had added a struck metal instrument to an ensemble containing four horns and one drum. The musicians told me that they had painted their horns light blue, the color of the UN troops, because they had played at several functions for the Bangladeshi contingent now resident nearby, helping to keep the peace. The

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evening we recorded in Suacoco, the horn players gave way to chante fable or story songs (meni pele) as people laughed, joked, and sang. One performer even presented an episode from epic (woi-meni-pele).

I was surprised that anyone could still perform this complex genre. Many Kpelle people will tell you that woi-meni-pele is the essence of Kpelle life. Eighteen years ago, it had been hard to find a performer capable of singing it, and I thought that this rich aspect of culture might have faded with the war. But I was surprised to discover several performers within a 40-mile radius in just two short months in Liberia. Woi epic appeared to be even more alive than it had been before the war.

Woi epic, featuring the superhero Woi, is emblematic of some of the most important aspects of Kpelle society. And people proudly point to it as a kind of encyclopedia of Kpelle life, an index to “a wealth in knowledge.” This wealth in knowledge in turn is related to what Jane Guyer and Samuel Eno Belinga have said of Equatorial Africa as a whole: “The study of growth in Equatorial Africa in the pre-colonial period might be seen as, in part, a social history of expanding knowledge, and the history of the colonial era as one of loss, denial and partial reconstitution. That much of this must remain inaccessible should not deter us from creating the space to envisage it.”¹

The Woi epic demonstrates a tremendous wealth in knowledge. The episodes that I recorded in 2007, and in the years before the war, are embedded with rich details of animals, plants, and domestic objects. These are details that are much more extensive than required for simple existence. One performance of a Woi epic included the spider, tuu-tuu bird, ant eater, poling bird, squirrel monkey, tsetse fly, beetle, bat, bull, and bees. Plants too played roles in the battles—the

bele tree, koing tree, pumpkin, and koong leaf—as did objects like a bow and arrow, a bag containing implements to help Woi, an axe, a cutlass, and a double-edged knife.²

As the historian Jan Vansina has said: “Local communities knew much more about their local habitats than they needed to know,” and “such scientific knowledge for knowledge’s sake was an essential ingredient” of social life.³ The essential discovery, which I made several years after first recording the Woi epic, is that this epic symbolically represents the migration of the Kpelle people, beginning in the 14th century from the grasslands area of the kingdom of Mali to the forest region of the coast. Through allusion and metaphor we can see the traces of this history, which is detailed more literally in oral narratives.⁴

The Kpelle, as one of many branches of the Mande people, responding to various pressures, left the grasslands and started toward the coastal rainforest. They encountered other people on that long migration and fought small-scale wars to defend the areas where they settled for a time, as their oral histories tell. Peter Giting, a member of the famous Giting family of chiefs from Sanoyea, told of battles in the Kpelle area of what is today Bong County. Peter narrated how each warring side had a musician who played before battle to increase the warriors’ courage and pump the troops up for battle.

When the fighting began, musicians were immune from attack by either side. Following the battle, the winners had the prerogative of taking the musicians belonging to the losing side. Through this practice, the musicians became a kind of prize of war.

In the Woi epic, the hero alludes to the migrations: Woi is constantly moving his house as

battles are brewing:

“Woi is ready. He said, ‘You singing that, Zo-lang-kee, the war is ready.’

And I was in the house. I said to him, ‘Ee.’ I said to him, ‘Woi?’

He said to me, ‘Mm.’

I said to him, ‘What war is prepared? You yourself see the Sitting-on-the-neck crowd here. Why is the war being prepared since there is no one equal to you?’

‘Fine, when Kelema-ninga has pumped my bellows and they have sewn my clothes, then we will start on the war.’⁵

The moving house, filled with the extended family, symbolically represented the Kpelle people as a whole migrating toward the coast. Woi stood for the greater aggregate of Kpelle people. When knowledgeable Kpelle hear the epic being performed, they frequently comment on this connection, noting how the Woi epic indexes the coming of their ancestors to the area in Liberia or Guinea that they occupy in the present.

In the wealth of performances that I found in Liberia in 2007, I was most surprised to find several people capable of performing this quintessential form. One epic pourer we were able to record in Bong County performed in Totota. He sang of the familiar characters, including the hero Woi, the spider, and many others. But he also sang of body parts, reflecting the reality of a people working through the horrors of war. While all of this will require much more study, it’s abundantly clear that music is flourishing, thriving, and healing people in Liberia.

In Philadelphia too, music, whether performed by Fatu Gayflor or Zeya Tete or others, has helped to underscore people’s humanity and transport them home, if only for a few moments.

I left Liberia on August 1st, convinced that music has been

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vital to Liberians wherever they have been and wherever they live. And the richly layered rhythms, tone colors, and allusive texts continue to build that rich legacy that is grounded in expressive culture.—Ruth M. Stone

Notes

- ¹ Guyer and Belinga 1995: 94-95
- ² Stone 1988: 94
- ³ Vansina 1990: 89, 225 as quoted in Guyer and Belinga 1995: 93
- ⁴ Geysbeek 1994: 49; d’Azevedo 1962: 13
- ⁵ Stone 1988: 13-14

Resources for further exploration

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The Liberian Collections Project:
<http://onliberia.org/history.htm>

Ruth M. Stone is the Laura Boulton Professor of Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, where she has served as chair of the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Director of the Archives of Traditional Music, and a member of the African Studies faculty. Professor Stone has written and published significant books, articles, and multi-media publications on musical performance of the Kpelle in Liberia, West Africa. She has edited Africa, a volume in the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, which is the first comprehensive reference work in ethnomusicology. She has also pioneered research, publication, and presentation of ethnomusicological analysis through digital electronic formats. A leader in her discipline's professional organization, she has served as president of the Society for Ethnomusicology. She has also been the president of the Liberian Studies Association. She visited the Folklore Project this past fall as part of our African Song / New Contexts project.

Tim: Did you ever personally meet (Liberian) President William R. Tolbert, who, as head of state, was sort of the patron of the Kendeja Cultural Center?

Fatu: In fact I did! I was part of a select group of members of the Cultural Troupe who were invited to dine at the President's table in 1979 when Liberia hosted the annual meeting of the continent-wide Organization of African Unity at the "OAU Village" [next to the Hotel Africa in Monrovia]. In fact, I met President Tolbert a few times. As members of the National Cultural Troupe we were frequently close to the corridors of power but never real "insiders." I felt that President Tolbert supported the arts, and that he was basically a good person.

Tim: Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk to me!

Fatu: You are very welcome!

Timothy Nevin was born and raised in Chicago, but recently lived for three years in Senegal and Ghana, where he was a caseworker with Liberian refugees. He is currently a PhD candidate in African History at the University of Florida. His dissertation will be about cultural production in Liberia during the 1970s and early 1980s. His wife, Zakpa Paye, is a Liberian nursing student at Santa Fe Community College, in Gainesville, Florida.

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