



*Liberian Camp teachers
Fatu Gayflor, Zaye Yete
and Kormassa Bobo, and
students at the closing
celebration. Photos:
Verlon Stone, 2009*

Ethnomusicologist Ruth M. Stone has done extensive fieldwork among the Kpelle people in Liberia. She brought her expertise to the spring Culture Camp, helping with the planning, teaching afternoon sessions on the cultural traditions represented, and facilitating conversations and storytelling with Liberian elders from the Agape Senior Citizens Center. Here, Dr. Stone shares her knowledge of Liberian arts, recollections of her experiences in Bong County, and her impressions of the week-long camp.



by Ruth M. Stone

Building a town with dance and drum

If you build a town and there's no drummer, it's not a town. If you build a town and there's no dancer, then it's not a town.—Kpelle proverb

I first heard this proverb from a Kpelle musician in Liberia more than twenty years ago. At the time I was impressed by how vital music and dance are in West Africa. A town simply cannot be a real place without people who drum, sing, and dance together: I thought of it many times since then during the time I spent in that country recording Kpelle musicians in Bong County. It came alive in a new way in Philadelphia during the week of April 6–10, 2009, at the Philadelphia Folklore Project's first Culture Camp on Liberian music and dance.

Background

Liberia sits near the equator on the West Coast of Africa. When one looks at the continent on a world map, this is the area that bulges out into the Atlantic Ocean. The region was once called the Pepper Coast after the hot spice that has been grown there and exported over the years. The vegetation of Liberia ranges from thick rainforest near

the coast to grasslands in the north. During the rainy season, which runs from about May to October, the soil is saturated. Rice and cassava are grown by nearly everyone living in the rural area, along with sweet potato greens, collard greens, tomatoes,

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and peppers. Rubber is harvested and exported for cash income.

Liberia is abundantly endowed with resources, including iron ore, timber,

gold, and diamonds. Yet its people have suffered greatly since civil war erupted in 1989. Many were killed or displaced during the war years; even today, thousands of United Nations peacekeepers remain in the country. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first woman elected as a head of state in Africa, is working to restore the country's infrastructure, as well as peace and prosperity.

During the war, refugees sought safety in other parts of Liberia, in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, and in places even farther afield, including the United States. Many now reside in the Philadelphia area. Among the students at the Culture Camp were some who had fled Liberia with their families as toddlers or infants, along with some who had never lived in Liberia at all but claimed it as their ancestral home.

The Culture Camp

At the camp, more than forty students worked with four talented Liberian artists all day for a week. At the beginning of the day, Gbahtuo Comgbaye guided them in storytelling, sometimes narrating stories from

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local areas in Liberia, sometimes letting the young people practice storytelling themselves. Fatu Gayflor, Zaye Tete, and Kormassa Bobo then taught dance-drama and led students in varied choreographies. The young people bonded, learned, and explored.

As a student wrote: "The teachers were really interesting to me because they were very proud, pleasant, and kind. Most Liberian people would not want to tell others about their culture. They would say they are too civilized for their own culture. But one thing I learned from these teachers is that it does not matter who you are, you should always respect and own your culture."

Each group spent an hour at a time with a teacher. Zaye Tete trained her group in a dance that depicted childrearing and childcare while her husband and son provided drumming backup. Fatu Gayflor taught a dance that she had learned as a member of the Liberian National Dance and Culture Troupe while residing in Kendeja, on the outskirts of the capital, Monrovia, using her voice to produce the rhythms of the drums and gourd rattle. Kormassa Bobo's dance portrayed the farming cycle: clearing bush, planting and harvesting rice. Her daughter served as her able assistant.

At the end of each day was a period for cultural reflection. All the students gathered together for conversation and discussion. The children were asked the first day, for example, what they knew about their family's origins in Liberia. Some replied that their families came from the Loma, Vai, or Krahn areas, among others. Some young people could not name the languages of their ancestral areas, but went home that day to discuss this with their families. I told the students about how I first came to live in Haindee, Bong County, as a three-year old because my parents worked there as missionaries. I learned to speak Kpelle as I played with Liberian children after I had finished my home schooling each day.


Music and Song

Many Kpelle people believe that instruments, like people, have voices. A master drummer may give his goblet drum a woman's name. One drummer I worked with in Liberia called his drum Gomaa ("Share with me"). A player of the *konîng* (a triangular frame-zither) gave the low-pitched strings names like "voice of the chief," while the upper strings were called "voice of the children." Instruments may become not only human-like, but

even supernatural, as when a tutelary spirit comes to make their sound especially fine.

Among the Kpelle, instruments are classified as struck (*ngale*) or blown (*fee*). The struck instruments include goblet drums, two-headed cylinder drums, hourglass drums, and xylophones, as well as plucked string instruments such as the *konîng*, struck bow, and the multiple bow-lute. Hollowed-out wooden logs are used to accompany workers cutting bush for making rice farms. The struck category also encompasses gourd rattles, which a number of the musicians used in the Camp to lead the dancers and indicate when to change step patterns. The blown instruments,

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ranging from side-blown wooden or ivory horns to flutes, are frequently believed to represent the voices of spirits or supernatural beings. Camp instructors introduced the students to various instruments and helped them develop a list for each category.

During our cultural reflection periods, we focused on the types of musical performance found in Liberian communities. Work songs accompany all the stages of farming—clearing, planting, harvest, rice pounding. Entertainment songs tell stories, some of great length and complexity. The epic known in Kpelle as *woi-meni-pele* displays the wealth of knowledge of local people. Plants, animals, and objects are named as the storyteller narrates the adventures of the superhuman Woi, moving with his family, encountering obstacles, and overcoming them. As one Kpelle musician in Liberia told me, "If you know the woi-meni-pele, then you know the Kpelle people." He regarded the epic as a kind of encyclopedia of Kpelle life, an oral repository of knowledge, passed on from one musician to another and

poured out in the evenings in village life.

I told the students how in 2007 I recorded an epic-pourer in Totota, Bong County, who knew a wealth of episodes. Sometimes he narrated the story; sometimes he responded to the *mare-kee-ke-nuu* (questioner) who sat directly behind him; sometimes he directed a chorus of audience members who helped create the background of song that was the foundation for "pouring the epic."

The Feel of Liberian Music

Motion and action feature prominently in Liberian music. During my fieldwork among the Kpelle, I was vividly impressed by the pervasiveness of precise and subtle metaphors in their descriptions of music and dance moves. Dancers' movements might be called "trembling" or "sharp." A drummer described his improvisation on the goblet drum as "*Kwa woo tono sijye, ku bene, bene*" ("We take one sound and turn it, turn it"). The singer Feme Neni-kole layered metaphors of motion and action as she sang, "*Ngei ya e pu gata, gata yee gbai gbang su gbai*" ("My tears fell gata, gata like corn from an old corn farm"). Kulung, an epic performer, depicted the jealous wife of the superhero Woi, forced to earn her living by carving bowls with her voice. The visual-kinesthetic action of her carving was portrayed by words, each sound conveying a different action and a different effect:

Bongkai, kpolong, kpolong, kpolong
Mono, mono, fee laa.

Kalu fee laa, kalu mono, mono.

Bongkai—the sound of carving a bowl with a large interior space; *kpolong*—small adze strokes; *mono, mono*—shiny blackness; *fee laa*—a flat bowl. Each word evoked a different gesture. As we listened, the bowl, with all its distinctive features, took shape.

The Kpelle have a rich array of performance contexts where motion and action are essential components of music performance. The result is a creative, constantly evolving tapestry of sound and dance. This, in turn, is at the heart of the rich world of thought, movement, and music to which Philadelphia students were introduced during their week at camp.

Greedy Father Spider

In the storytelling that constituted the first hour each day at camp, Gbahtuo entertained and educated the group with folktales,

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including stories about Nansii or Father Spider, a greedy trickster who is always getting into trouble as he tries to fill his stomach. Some of those stories were accompanied by songs that the children learned.

One of my favorites is about Nansii's love of feasts. One day he went to a village where the people were getting ready to have a feast. Nansii became excited and asked them to let him know when the feast was ready so that he could join them and share the food. To make sure that he would be informed, no matter where he might be, Nansii tied a rope around his waist and left one end in the village. He instructed the villagers to pull on the rope when the food was ready.

Several days later Nansii was in another village where people were also talking about an upcoming feast, and how they were going to butcher a cow and set out a spectacular array of food. Nansii's eyes got big and his stomach grumbled as he thought about eating wonderful rice dishes piled with meat. So he tied another piece of rope around his waist and asked the townspeople to be sure and pull on it when they were ready to serve the feast.

Days went by, Nansii thought he felt a tug at his waist from the first village. He started to walk toward that village, anticipating the abundance of food that was going to be served. But not long afterward he felt a tug from the opposite direction. He staggered on his feet as he started to walk toward the second village. Each village pulled the rope, more and more insistently, first from one direction and then from the other: Father Spider, dragged first one way and then the other, couldn't move very far in any direction. The tugging became more and more intense, and Nansii's waist became thinner and thinner. He was stuck in one spot, with the ropes around his waist pulling harder and harder in opposite directions. And that is why, when you see spiders today, you will notice that they have very thin waists. And this is a reminder

of why one shouldn't be greedy.

Gbahtuo explained to the campers that these morals are an important part of the stories, meant to teach young people about values and ways to behave.

One afternoon a group of elder Liberian storytellers from the Agape Senior Center, who work with Dr. Mary Hufford, a folklorist from the University of Pennsylvania, joined the students to share stories. Benjamin Kpangbah, Ansumana Passawee, Martha Carr, and Napaa Byepu took turns telling stories to the fascinated students. I was touched to learn that Napaa Byepu, whose husband was a pastor in Parakwele, had known my father when he lived in Liberia. She wanted to tell her story in Kpelle, so we formed a partnership that afternoon. She narrated in Kpelle, and I translated—line for line—into English. I realized that my tone of voice and rhythm needed to match hers in order to convey the pace and tone of the story.

These Liberian elders remembered stories told by their families and friends in the evening by the village fires, after the meals were over and the chores completed for the day. The afternoon with the elders was particularly wonderful for the young people. As one of the students reflected: "When it came to the storytellers, Teacher Gbahtuo and the elders were really given the gift of storytelling. You could image yourself in the story because of the way they told it. This brought back memories from my grandfather: He was a storyteller. He always told his grandchildren stories every evening."

Several of the students present displayed their own storytelling skills during the final program, a community gathering, on Saturday.

Community Gathering

On Saturday afternoon, friends and families gathered in the cafeteria area of the Folk Arts - Cultural Treasures Charter School, the site of the Camp. Two drummers set the stage. The students danced, synchronizing their movements to the patterns

of the drum and gourd rattle. Each of the teachers showcased a group of students, who performed the dance-dramas they had rehearsed. At the end of the performance the whole group came forward for a bow and more dancing, as the drums kept the energy high.

A Liberian feast was spread out, and the audience and performers ate the rice delicacies and various soups for which the country is well known. Families thanked teachers and camp organizers for their efforts, while students mingled with new friends. Most significantly, people could reflect on the richness of the culture that had been shared that afternoon and the week that led up to it—a rare and important chance to learn about the wealth of a country that could not be destroyed by the recent war.

Postscript

The Philadelphia Folklore Project's Culture Camp testifies to the power of the arts to persist, to sustain, and to bind people together: Liberian artists may have lost land, houses, country, and material wealth. But cultural wealth in the form of the arts continues in their minds and their limbs. They remember the dances they were taught at Kendeja, the national music and dance center once situated on the beach outside Monrovia. By teaching these arts to young students living in Philadelphia, they cultivate Liberian music and dance in new and previously unanticipated ways. Returning to the Kpelle proverb quoted at the start of this article, these drummers, dancers, and storytellers taught young Philadelphians how to build a town through art.

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