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ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4388

Music of the Vai of Liberia



COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., U.S.A. 10023

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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The Vai are a Mande-speaking¹ people living in the coastal and near-interior regions of northwestern Liberia and southern Sierra Leone. Approximately 8,000 Vai inhabit the southern province of Sierra Leone where they are called Gallinas Vai, but the majority of Vai speakers (about 12,000 according to the 1974 Republic of Liberia census) are located in a 3,300 square mile area north of the Lofa River and south of the Mano River in southern Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia. Common borders are held with the Gallinas Vai and Mende on the north and northwest, the Gola on the east and southeast, and the Dei on the south.

Oral accounts indicate that the Vai migrated from the Niger river basin to their present coastal location, arriving sometime between 1500 and 1550 (Holsoe, 1967:67). Linguistic data also support the folk etymologies concerning migration. Much of this evidence is based on the relationship of the Vai language with other languages in the northern sub-family of Mande languages, namely Kono and Manding (Welmers, 1958:21). The Kono ethnic group is today located in northern Sierra Leone. It has been postulated that both the Kono and Vai were part of the coastward migration from the Manding region of the Western Sudan, but for several reasons, a portion of the group settled in what is now northern Sierra Leone, while others proceeded to the coast. The people who remained became known as Kono; those who continued became Vai. In both the Vai and Kono languages, kono means "to wait" and vai means "to go forward" (Johnson, 1954:7).

ECONOMY

The traditional Vai economy is based primarily upon slash-and-burn agriculture, which they are at least partially responsible for introducing to the coastal region. Field rice and cassava are the main agricultural products.

Various forms of craft specialization and trade are also important to the Vai economy. Several occupations which were recognized in the past as generalized activities have recently become a means for generating cash income for craft specialists. In former times, hunters, carpenters, storytellers, musicians and blacksmiths provided their communities with needed services on an exchange-of-favor basis. Today, persons in these occupations are itinerant craftsmen who, when solicited, travel long distances to work. An improved transportation system has increased the mobility of craft specialists, enabling them to provide services to an expanded network of clients.

Vai people also participate in the modern Liberian labor force as school teachers, auto mechanics, government officials, and a variety of other occupations.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The Vai political system is today a part of the political organization of the Republic of Liberia; however, the government has allowed the retention of the traditional system of chieftainship in rural Vai areas. In the past, political authority rested with several chiefs whose extent of power was determined by the political unit they headed. Paramount chiefs (bolo manjah) were in charge of chiefdoms, the largest political units. Kone, Tombe, Tewo, and Gawula were the traditional Vai chiefdoms. These units still exist today, except that Kone has been divided into Gola Kone and Vai Kone. The former is now a Gola chiefdom. At the head of the second largest unit, called the clan (zii), was a clan chief (zii manjah) who was customarily a high-ranking member of the patrilineage of that particular clan. Most Vai clans consisted of several towns of the same patrilineage; and each town had an individual town chief (sanja manjah). The offices exist today in title, but each chief is elected by his constituents.

SECRET SOCIETIES

There are two formerly compulsory, secret societies among the Vai -- Poro for men and Sande for women. To become a member of the respective societies, young men and women are required to spend a period of seclusion in designated areas apart from the general population. These areas are commonly called "Poro bush" and "Sande bush." Traditionally, the societies alternated sessions; Poro sessions lasted for four years followed by Sande, which lasted for three years. Initiates were required to remain secluded for the entire period. Because of the conflicts between the so-called "bush schools" and public schools, the time spent in Poro or Sande today may vary from two weeks to the full three or four year term. Poro and Sande are distributed throughout the region and membership is recognized pan-ethnically, regardless of where a person was initiated.

During periods of seclusion in the respective societies, young men and women are taught how to fulfill male/female adult roles, with the notion that upon graduation they will assume such responsibilities in society. Thus the societies are also a form of rite de passage. Specialized training is emphasized in a particular craft or skill which befits an individual's abilities and aptitudes. Similarities in structure and purposes of Poro and Sande among the Vai and other ethnic groups partially account for the homogeneity that exists in southern Sierra Leone and northern Liberia.

RELIGION

Within the past fifty years the Vai have become almost totally committed to Islam. The process of Islamization began in the mid-eighteenth century, with proselytizing by Manding missionaries. Vai conversion to Islam followed a trend similar to that in other areas of Africa; that is, the conversion of chiefs, kings and other royalty first, and later the entire populace.

The religious ideologies among the Vai prior to Islam are similar to those currently practiced by neighboring ethnic groups. Among the Gola, for example, beliefs center on the worship of one supreme being from whom the ultimate power over man and the universe emanates. Immediate reverence, however, is directed to ancestors who, according to belief, reside in mountains, streams, rivers, rocks, etc. To receive the blessings of spirit-ancestors, sacrifices are performed at grave sites and mythical abodes. Among the Vai, religious practices of this nature remain only in legend; Islamic law forbids the rituals associated with spirit-ancestor worship.

THE VAI SCRIPT

The reputation of the Vai as a very prestigious people in Liberia is due partly to the fact that they were the first indigenous African ethnic group to develop a system of writing. The Vai script was invented by Duala Bukele sometime between 1814 and 1833. The 1814 date is based on oral traditions (Moore, 1970:135); however, the first report of its existence by a Westerner was in 1833. This has led one modern scholar to place the date of invention at 1830 (Holsoe, 1967:50). Today, use of the script remains widespread, especially among middle-aged and elderly men. The Vai script was the stimulus for the invention of scripts among neighboring ethnic groups such as the Mende, Loma and Kpelle.

MUSIC OF THE VAI²

Music among the Vai is an integral part of several social activities: the celebrations at each point in the life cycle are accompanied by music; farmers, hunters, midwives, and storytellers all have music to accompany their recreation and task-oriented activities; and groups of people often get together on a quiet night to reminisce on the day's activities through song.

Music in Vai society displays a number of salient features that are also common among neighboring ethnic groups, namely the Mende, Gola and Dei. The similarity of music and culture traits among these groups is a regional phenomenon, sparked by the spread of Poro, domestic and foreign trade, intermarriage and interethnic warfare in the past (d'Azevedo, 1962 and Monts, 1982). In the song repertoire, many of the songs associated with institutions acquired by the Vai from other ethnic groups are in the languages of those groups. For example, the songs used for various secret society ritu-

als and ceremonies are in Mende, the ethnic group from which the Poro and Sande reportedly originated. In another instance, religious songs in Manding and Arabic have completely replaced ancestor-worship songs of the past that were in Vai. This is due to the fact that Manding missionaries were responsible for the Vai conversion to Islam.

The secret societies play a significant role in the musical life of the Vai. Both Sande and Poro (or sub-societies called gbonji) provide several types of musical training. While all initiates are taught historical lore, sexual behavior, social etiquette, etc., through song and dance as part of normal secret society training, specialized training is required for masked dancers, initiate troupe dancers and individuals seeking careers as instrumentalists or vocalists. Regarding specialized dancing, the Poro sub-societies, gbonjisia (plural of gbonji), maintain five masked dancers (tombokefen): Bowu, Jobai, Kwakpo, Nafai and Yavi; the Sande sponsors one, Zoba. Each dancer has its characteristic songs, dance movements, dance rhythms, ritual behavior, and esoteric drum or rattle "language" associated with its performance. Much of this information, including the dancer's identity, is couched in the secretive aspects of Poro and Sande and cannot be discussed outside the confines of the "bush."

A second type of specialized dancing is performed by Poro and Sande initiate dance troupes. While young men and women are secluded in the respective secret societies, those who show extraordinary aptitude as dancers are given special training. Besides their performances at various secret society activities, the colorfully costumed troupes are often a special attraction at death feasts, political occasions and other large-scale events. Sande initiate dancers (boni) are especially adept in the performance of choreographed dance displays and the enactment of dance dramas which depict various aspects of Vai social life. In the interior chiefdoms, Poro initiate dance troupes (wusa) specialize in a dance style that emphasizes acrobatic movement.

In addition to the "special" types of musical activities provided by Poro and Sande, the opening, closing and various events between are considered social occasions of great importance and provide recreation and entertainment to the entire populace. Music for secret society activities, death feasts, and the like is provided by professional musicians who bear the titles manjah (for men) or kengai (for women). All musicians of professional status have received a part of their training in the secret societies.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Eight different musical instruments are heard on this recording, and the Vai consider six of them as part of their modern-day repertoire: three idiophones -- saa saa, kleng, and kongama; two membranophones -- sangba and gbengbeng; and one aerophone -- buru. All of these instruments are used

for the rhythmic accompaniment of singing and dancing, except the buru which is used primarily as a signaling device. None of the six instruments is conceptually recognized as having melodic capabilities. The two remaining instruments, a chordophone called koningai and a set of basket rattles called jeke, are instruments of minor useage among the Vai. Both were borrowed from neighboring ethnic groups (see descriptions below).

SANGBA

In former times, the single-headed, hand-beaten conical drum called sangba was closely associated with musical activities of the Poro society. It was considered the most favored instrument for accompanying the male masked dancers Nafai, Jobai and Bowu. In addition to these special uses, the sangba is today seen at death feasts, communal dances and numerous other social events.

Sangba-nu (plural of sangba) vary in size but normally average about twenty-five to thirty inches in height, with a head diameter of approximately nine inches. The sangba-nu of smaller dimensions are said to be of the Gola/Dei variety. Extending in a vertical direction from the head of the sangba are two to four pieces of sheet metal called nyeme. Rings of wire are attached to the perimeter of the nyeme and rattle when the head of the sangba is struck. Three distinct pitch levels can be produced on the sangba which correspond to pitch levels in the Mende language. This enables the drummer to communicate with trained dancers.

GBENGBENG

The second membranophone is a double-headed, mallet-beaten cylindrical drum called gbengbeng. The name gbengbeng is derived from the onomatopoeic expression used by the Vai to imitate its sound. This instrument is also constructed in various sizes, but the average size is about fifteen inches in height with a head diameter of approximately twelve inches. The function of the gbengbeng in Vai instrumental music is similar to that of a bass drum in Western marching bands; that is, to maintain a steady beat or pulse. The gbengbeng always accompanies the sangba or kleng in instrumental ensembles.

SAA SAA

The most widely distributed Vai musical instrument is a shaken gourd rattle called saa saa. Among the Vai and other regional ethnic groups, rattles of this type are the only musical instruments played by women. The saa saa is at the very center of female musical activities, particularly at events associated with the Sande society. It is the most important musical instrument used for the accompaniment of the Sande society masked dancer Zoba and initiate dance troupes. Through the use of various rhythmic patterns, highly skilled saa saa players are capable of transmitting

signals to dancers who have been trained by the Sande society.

KLENG

Another widely distributed idiophone is a slit gong called kleng. Today, it is the most favored instrument of male musicians. The kleng is made from a cylindrical log approximately thirty inches long and eight inches in diameter. This log is hollowed and four slits are burned laterally into the side. By striking areas between the slits, three pitch levels are produced. Like the sangba, the kleng is capable of transmitting signals; thus it is known in parts of Liberia as the "talking drum." The kleng is used to accompany recreational and communal dancing. In the past, it had a specialized use throughout the region in accompanying the male masked dancer, Yavi.



PLATE I. The masked dancer Yavi and his entourage of musicians and attendants.

KONGAMA

The third idiophone is a rectangular, box-shaped, plucked lamellaphone called kongama. It could be more specifically considered a plucked-struck idiophone since the performer, in addition to plucking the three lamellae, also strikes the side and top of the resonator box with pieces of metal attached to two or more fingers on both hands.

The kongama is of recent import into Liberia from the Mende/Temne areas of Sierra Leone. It was first reported in Vai areas in the mid-1950's. Although similar in principle to other African plucked idiophones, the kongama is basically a rhythm instrument. Since it normally has only two or three lamellae, it does not possess the melodic capability of instruments such as the mbira, sanza, or kalimba. Its role in ensembles is to supply a basic ostinato pattern on the lamellae. The kongama is used to accompany singing, dancing, and storytelling.

BURU

The only aerophone used by the Vai is a side-blown conical horn called buru. In the past, the buru was closely associated with royalty. During those times, it was made from elephant tusks, partially wrapped with leopard skin, and inlaid with precious stones and metals (Ellis, 1914:45).



PLATE II. The masked dancer, Bowu.

Today it is commonly made from the horns of wild and domesticated animals. According to Vai performance practice, only one tone, the fundamental pitch, is produced, although on most buru several harmonics are possible. The buru does not have a role in any instrumental ensemble. Its most common use is that of a signal device. Informants stated four purposes for its use: 1) to call men to a meeting of the Poro society or its various sub-societies, called gbonji; 2) to announce the arrival of a paramount chief; 3) to aid in the rescue of individuals lost in the bush; and 4) to announce the presence of the two male masked dancers, Jobai and Bowu.

KONINGAI

The koningai is a chordophone of the zither family; more specifically, it is classified as a frame zither. The instrument consists of seven strings of graduated lengths stretched horizontally on a triangular frame. At the base of the frame is attached a half gourd which serves as a resonator. During performance, the gourd is held against the performer's lower chest area with the frame projecting away from the body. Thus, the instrument is commonly referred to as the "belly harp." According to informants, the koningai is not common to the Vai, although an instrument of close descriptive similarity, the bana, is mentioned as a Vai musical instrument by Koelle (1854:145). Its origin is reportedly in Gola country where it is a favorite instrument of storytellers. It is used for the same purpose in Vai areas.

JEKE

The jeke is a set of two raffia-draped basket rattles. These shaken idiophones are made of flexible bamboo strips that are woven into an inverted cone shape with handles at the top. Small rocks or pieces of metal are placed inside and rattle when shaken. The jeke was brought to the Vai from the Gbandi ethnic group of northern Liberia. In performance, the jeke is always played in pairs, one in each hand. It is used by Vai musicians to accompany dancing, storytelling and small group singing.

NOTES ON THE SELECTIONS

SIDE ONE

1. Sande Ziawa Song (1:55)
Performers: Bendu Pussah and townswomen
Location: Latia (Tombe)
Location: Mende

Persons who are not members of Poro or Sande know little about the ceremony called ziawa, other than that several songs of a secretive nature are associated with it and that a ziawa dance is performed at several points in the

Sande/Poro ceremonial cycle. For the Sande society, informants acknowledged that the ziawa dance takes place on two occasions, during a ritual called boomai and at the final graduation exercises called "breaking the bush." In the case of Sande bush schools with large enrollments, the dancing of ziawa begins three nights prior to the bush-breaking day (four before for Poro). The song heard here is used to accompany the publicly-performed dance. Most ziawa songs in the Vai repertoire are in the Mende language. At a boomai ceremony in the town of Bomi in 1978 where ziawa dances were performed, incessant saa saa beating and singing were heard from the confines of the Sande bush throughout the day. When questioned about the purposes of these songs, the male observers who had congregated in various parts of town stressed that ziawa songs are of a highly secretive nature and were forthright in declining to discuss them. Large fines can be assessed on men who violate traditional law by discussing Sande "business." In the late afternoon, music from the bush became increasingly loud and women (Sande members) who were at work in other parts of the town were summoned to the bush. This signalled the beginning of the the grand ziawa dance. The dance was performed by initiated Sande women and led by several Zoba masked dancers and women playing saa saa-nu.



PLATE III. The Sande Society masked dancer, Zoba.

Like most communal dancing, the ziawa dance is very energetic but is cast in simple collective traditional dance movements. After observing several boomai and graduation ceremonies over a six month period, it was discovered that no two events utilized the same format. On several occasions, the singing and dancing of ziawa was confined entirely to the "bush." Informants stated that such inconsistencies were, in fact, normal.

2. Topical Song (3:25)

Performers: Seku Bundah, troupe and townsmen
Location: Konjah (Gawula)
Language: Vai

Seku Bundah has been a musician of prominence in Liberia since the mid-1950s. He was a member of the Liberian National Culture Troupe when it was established in the 1960s. Having retired from the National Troupe, he is currently one of the most sought-after professional musicians in north-western Liberia. Patrons have occasionally postponed events when Seku was not available on the preferred date. Seku's itinerancy is not confined to Vai areas. His popularity also brings invitations to perform in Gola, Dei and Mende areas as well.

In this selection, Seku combines praise words to legendary Vai singers along with phrases based on old Vai parables. He is accompanied by members of his permanent troupe who perform on two kongama-nu and two sets of jeke-nu. Seku is proficient on both instruments and has personally trained each member of the troupe. The chorus consists of men in the town of Konjah. The complex texture created by the multi-layered rhythmic patterns of kongama-nu and jeke-nu is unique to this type of topical song setting and is not duplicated elsewhere in the repertoire.

3. Masked Dancer Song (:55)

Performer: Molley Kiazulo
Location: Senjenama (Gawula)
Language: Mende

This song was most often heard during performances by Nafai and Yavi, but informants hesitated to ascribe it to any particular dancer.

TEXT: Yaa hoo, hoo yaa yo, yaa hoo (vocables)
Ndo kpowie yoo, be soo la bie

Yaa hoo, hoo yaa yo, yaa hoo
The small boy, are you a zo for us?

Furthermore, interpretation of the text offered no clear indication of a special ascription. This problem is often encountered when the Vai interpret songs in the Mende language. The general consensus, however, was that a young boy has become an accomplished masked dancer and the title zo (expert or master) has been ascribed to him. The fact that

this song, like the majority of masked dancer songs in the Vai repertoire, is in the Mende language is a clue that the male masked dancers did not originate with the Vai.

4. Masked Dancer Song for Bowu (1:28)
Performers: Molley Kiazulo and townspeople
Location: Senjenama (Gawula)
Language: Mende

This is another example of a masked dancer song, but specifically for Bowu.

TEXT: Hoo vε vε yaa tɛi huɔ

Oh the breeze has carried the chicken feathers.

Hidden meaning is a common characteristic of these songs, and this one is no exception. The translated text, "Oh, the breeze has carried the chicken feathers," would seem to have little connection with the masked dancer, Bowu. One interpretation is that the Bowu costume (see Plate II) is made of long streams of raffia that extend to the ground. As the Bowu performs its characteristic dance style, that of turning in a circular manner, the long raffia creates a slight turbulence. This movement scatters the lost feathers of chickens that forage throughout the town.

5. Masked Dancer Song for Zoba (1:35)
Performers: Molley Kiazulo and townspeople
Location: Senjenama (Gawula)
Language: Vai

Spirited competition is an ever present factor when two or more masked dancers of the same type perform at an event. This is especially common among the Sande society's masked dancers, Zoba. As a result, this song, like several others for Zoba, encourages competition.

TEXT: Wo zoe kee ai na, ndojo a uya mboe

Ndojo come, my zo is vexed.

The song was composed when a Zoba dancer delayed her exit from the zo house (a special Sande house where Zoba costumes and other Sande regalia are kept) to compete with another excellent Zoba dancer. The song, therefore, encourages the dancer to come out and dance. A woman entones the sound "eh", and the lead singer offers praise words to the Zoba.

6. Sangba Rhythms for Bowu (2:10)
Performer: Boikai Kamara, Sangba
Location: Bomi (Tombe)
Language: Mende (accompanying song)

A chief function of masked dancers is to participate in the entertainment activities at large-scale social events.

This excerpt was recorded at a death feast during the performance of two Bowu dancers. The sangba player controls each segment of the performance with the use of phono-rhythmic drum signals that direct the dancers through various dance sequences. With the sangba, he commands each dancer to enter the arena, tells it which movement to execute, when to stop dancing, etc. This technique is also used to indicate tempo to the accompanying gbengbeng and saa saa players.

7. Historical Song (:52)
Performers: Townspeople
Location: Bomfor (Gawula)
Language: Vai

Factors that contribute to the Vai being a very prestigious ethnic group in Liberia range from their reputation as entrepreneurs to their near total adoption of Islam. The greatest amount of prestige, however, is derived from their invention of the first system of writing in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Bai T. Moore (1970:135), this song commemorates the invention of the Vai script by Duala Bukele. The song Koli Munda was sung by young men as they carried its inventor to the paramount chief.

TEXT: Koli munda, wo taanda manja bala

I am a young leopard, take me to the chief.

Today this song, more than any other, could be considered the Vai national anthem because of the significant contribution it makes to the continuity and stability of Vai society. Koli Munda is sung at various social and political occasions when ethnic unity is vital.

8. Koningai Music and Story (4:44)
Performer: Armah Dasseng
Location: Goa (Tewo)
Language: Vai

The koningai is found in Vai areas where Gola cultural influences are quite strong. Armah Dasseng is from the town of Goa in the northern part of Tewo Chiefdom near Gola country. He readily acknowledges that he and other Vai koningai players had Gola musicians as teachers. Their style of playing and the use of the koningai to accompany storytelling were also inherited from the Gola. In this selection, Armah tells two short stories. The first emphasizes his family's devotion to Islam. He makes the statements: "Kema (his wife's name), let us go pray," meaning that the Vai people's devotion to Islam is important.

The second story tells of a real-life experience that ended in tragedy. A Gola man named Soku was helping Armah and the other men cut firewood in the bush when a large tree fell and killed Soku. A tribute to Soku is the basis of the story. According to Armah, the koningai is capable of "talking in Gola. During the section prior to spoken dialogue, both stories are told using koningai "talk."

9. Topical Song (4:07)
 Performers: Kuna Kiatamba and troupe
 Location: Robertsport
 Language: Vai

Vai artisans receive creative inspiration through dreams. Duala Bukele, for example, reportedly dreamed about the Vai script before inventing it. Musicians like Momakai, composer of the famous kwako song, acknowledges having had a similar experience in 1964. According to him, a man came to him in a dream, taught him the kwako song and said it would be sung all over Vai country. Today, kwako songs are among the most popular topical songs in the Vai repertoire. In this selection, Kuna Kiatamba, a master singer from Bomi (Tombe), includes several Vai parables in a version of the kwako song.

SIDE TWO

1. Children's Game Song (1:36)
 Performers: Zoe Siewana and townschildren
 Location: Tossoh (Tombe)
 Language: Vai

This song is performed by five young girls. Zoe Siewana, the oldest girl, has the responsibility of teaching and explaining the game to the younger girls. As they sit in a circle on the ground, a large rock is passed around as the song is being performed. Whomever finds the rock located in front of her at the end of the song must tell the others the name of her boyfriend. Revealing such a personal secret often creates an embarrassing, yet fun-filled, situation.

TEXT: Ngoo ngoo ng> loso le ng> loso g̃ama le
 gamba la kawo le bana k>> jae jɛ̃ jɛ̃

I fani ngamao kiwe na wei
 a lɛ̃ a lɛ̃ mbaa toi lao

I am older than you. The older brother.
 This is your crab. Under the banana tree.

The bananas are rotting. You lie, I am not the one.
 Suppose you come. It hangs, it hangs. We leave it
 with you.

Textual meaning of Vai children's game songs are often difficult to decipher. This game is quite popular and had been played by most adults when they were children. Yet, interpretations of the text by both children and adults were quite inconsistent and proved to have little bearing on the manner in which the game is played.

- 2.-3. Muslim Anthems (2:22)
 Performers: Townspeople
 Location: Tienemai (Gawula)
 Language: Arabic

Since the Vai have become totally committed to Islam, religious songs in Arabic and Manding have replaced those formerly used for ancestor-worship. In the past, religious songs in Vai were performed during sacrificial rituals at various sacred spiritual abodes, such as bodies of water, large cotton trees, and grave sites. Today, these rituals no longer exist and religious songs are sung at Ramadan and other major Muslim hold day celebrations. These two selections are of congregational singing, recorded during a celebration of Muhammad's birth, a ceremony the Vai call Morodi.

4. Arabic Birthing Song (1:43)
 Performers: Sattah Siewana and townswomen
 Location: Tossoh (Tombe)
 Language: Arabic

In addition to Arabic songs being used in orthodox religious settings, they are also used in other social contexts that require Muhammad's blessings. This birthing song is performed during labor when the mother is secluded in her home, the zo house, or the Sande bush. On occasions when the period of labor is lengthy, Sande-trained midwives may sit for hours singing songs to help comfort the expectant mother. Thus, the songs have an important therapeutic function.

5. Kleng Rhythms for Yavi (2:11)
 Performer: Armah Dasseng
 Location: Goa (Tewo)

As mentioned above, each of the masked dancers is accompanied by special rhythmic patterns which are associated with a particular dance movement. The kleng rhythms heard here are for Yavi. The performer, Armah Dasseng, who plays the koningai, is also considered a master kleng player. This selection is an excellent example of the virtuostic skill that can be attained on the kleng.

6. Dramatic Storytelling (8:34)
 Performers: Boa Kiahon and townswomen
 Location: Bendu Gawula
 Language: Vai, some songs in Mende

Among the Vai, a master storyteller like Boa Kiahon is the main attraction, so to speak, during nighttime entertainment activities. People from surrounding areas often assemble in major towns to anxiously await the start of a storytelling session. In the repertoire of these itinerant artists are stories that have a wide variety of plots and subjects. Many of the stories are "old standards" with which most audiences are familiar; however, this does not detract from storytelling as a major form of communal entertainment. The overall appeal of a storytelling event is not necessarily derived from the stories themselves, but from the various antics used by the storyteller to mimic characters and the techniques he uses to create and raise the level of emotional excitement.

Vai storytellers are also singers. Depending on the structure of the story and mood of the audience, songs are inserted within the narrative for three basic reasons: 1) to raise emotional tension, 2) to create a dramatic effect, and 3) to serve as magic formulae. The songs in Boa Kiahon's stories often have little, if any, narrative content. When two versions of the same story were compared, the songs did not occur at the same points in the narrative. In certain stories, some of the songs could be omitted and not affect the flow of the narrative. The songs are all in call-response structure, wherein the storyteller acts as soloist and a small group of singers or the audience sings response lines. In this selection, the storyteller uses a set of jeke rattles for rhythmic accompaniment. For reasons not entirely known, the majority of songs used by Vai storytellers are in the Mende language.

The excerpt heard here is from a three hour storytelling session. Its ribald plot involves a woman named Bele who claimed that she was being constantly mistreated by men. She complained to the Paramount Chief that men would come and eat her food, but never satisfy her sexually. Her complaints were heard by a man named Dombo who was known for his sexual prowess. In an effort to oblige Bele, he made arrangements to visit her. As the story transpires, Bele and Dombo have a sexual encounter. Bele is overwhelmed and frantically calls to the Paramount Chief to save her. The Chief and other men refuse to assist her, claiming that she had said earlier that no man could satisfy her. The encounter became so intense that Bele magically turned into an animal called mali. "This," says the storyteller, "is why I do not eat mali today."

7. Topical Song (5:10)
 Performers: Seku Bundah, troupe and townspeople
 Location: Konjah (Gawula)
 Language: Vai

This song is an excellent example of a three-part structure used in topical songs. The lead solo part (lombla) is freely improvised, while another solo part (temu) sings call response patterns with a chorus (lombla muenu). The master singer, Seku Bundah, improvises on several well-known Vai parables along with praises to the present author.

END NOTES

¹ Vai words used in the text are written using the Standard International Phonetic Alphabet. Most consonants are similar to those found in English. Other symbols and their approximate English equivalents are as follows:

- | | | | |
|---|--------------|---|-------------|
| a | as in bath | o | as in alone |
| e | as in saute' | ɔ | as in lost |
| ɛ | as in then | u | as in tune |
| i | as in thing | ŋ | as in sing |
- ɖ like the English letter d but with air forced inward (implosive)
 ʙ like the English letter b but with air forces inward (implosive)
 ~ indicates nasalization
- Double consonants kp and gb are pronounced simultaneously.

² The publication of this recording resulted from periods of field study in Liberia in 1977-78 and 1981. Research among the Vai was made possible by grants from the National Fellowships Fund and the University of California. A special thanks is in order to Dorothy Swander, Cynthia Schmidt and Dave Hancock, whose assistance contributed to the completion of this project.

Lester P. Monts.

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BIOGRAPHY

Lester P. Monts is an Assistant Professor of ethnomusicology in the Departments of Music and Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He received the Ph.D. in Musicology from the University of Minnesota in 1980. Dr. Monts is a recent recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to continue field study in Liberia and Sierra Leone.