

Islam, Music, and Religious Change in Liberia: A Case Study from Vai Country

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Introduction

This paper offers a brief overview of the recent impact of Islam on the musical and religious life of the Vai people of northwest Liberia. It explains how over a ten-year period (1978-88) people in the town of Bulumi restructured the most fundamental aspects of their lives and during the process, conceptually reordered their music and religious systems.

Since the dawn of Islamic penetration into West Africa, the assimilation of the new religious ideology into African life has brought changes in the way people view themselves and their place in the wider universe. At the center of this cultural ambivalence, among the Vai, were two secret societies-Poro (or *beli* for men) and Sande (for women). Set within the strata of Vai social, economic, and political systems that were influenced by Islam laid a rich musical tradition, much of it embedded in and derived from the Secret Societies. Research on the impact of a new religious orientation on music and on other forms of artistic expression among the Vai provides an additional tool for understanding the process of Islamization in West Africa. Not only do changes in Poro and Sande display the profound effect of a new ideology on African aesthetic values, but music also serves as a distinct cultural variable whose transformations mirror those of traditional social and religious institutions.

Islamization and Music in Vai

According to Neimiah Levtzion (1979:215), there are two general types of Islam in West Africa: "normative" and "popular". In the more orthodox, **normative Islam**, strict Islamic law guides local social and moral codes. **Popular Islam**, on the other hand, is that which is practiced by the majority of the populace, people who call themselves Muslims, but who continue to participate in some traditional religious practices that would not be condoned by orthodox Islam. During the years 1978 - 88, Islam in the town of Bulumi was on the **transitional** path from the popular to the normative type.

From the beginning, basic Islamic philosophy questioned Vai perceptions of social and religious order. It slowly changed how people viewed the world and it challenged many deeply rooted notions regarding traditional moral codes and spiritualism. Its entry into Vai life began a long-term dispute between two antagonists--tradition and modernity--and the contradiction between them were everywhere apparent, especially in the conflict between the traditional initiation societies and contemporary Islamic dogma. Until recently, the two factions were willing to compromise, and African and Islamic elements were successfully integrated into Vai social and religious life. By the 1970s, however, a stronger, more conservative Muslim religious order began to emerge. It is in the mid-1970s that this assessment begins.

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Bulumi Town – 1977-78

Bulumi is the largest town in the Tombe chiefdom.

As the most progressive town in the region, the people there often take the lead in initiating social and political reform, and changes in Bulumi subsequently affect the entire chiefdom. Recognizing its strategic importance, Muslims therefore, sought to introduce their beliefs in Bulumi, where Islamic traits would be more readily adopted.

In the 1970s, Poro and Sande were at the center of local and regional life. Because they formed the crux of the ensuing crisis between Islam and traditional practice, it is important to understand how they functioned. As socio-religious institutions, the Societies were strongly locked into the practice of ancestor veneration. The sacred groves of the Poro, for example, were conveniently built near the graves of lineage leaders, where sacrifices to the ancestors were frequently made.

For many Vai people, participation in the Secret Societies was part of a search for meaning. Fundamental to this search was a reality beyond the realm of mortal perception, a powerful supernatural reality, which manifested itself in ancestral and nature spirits and a supreme being. To understand this ultimate reality and to be in complete accord with it, the Vai relied on the powers vested in the spiritual leaders or guardians of Poro and Sande. Hence, the Societies were important factors in an elaborate life-drama. It was the Secret Society component that first combined men and women as corporate units, and, through the traditional belief system, allied them with the forces in the spirit world. In their roles as guardians of sacred and social values, unseen spirits represented the central core of the Vai worldview, which was dramatically played out in Poro/Sande ritual and ceremony.

Poro and Sande cast different intermediary relationships with their respective authoritative entities of the spirit world. In the Sande, the Zooba masked dancer impersonates a male ancestor water spirit. In the Poro, there is no masked impersonation of the nature divinity, a *dadewe*, which is considered more powerful than the ancestral spirits impersonated by *Zooba*, confirming that Poro assumes a higher authoritative role than Sande.



Photo 1: The Sande Masquerade, *Zooba*.

Major occasions associated with the Secret Societies and other communal activities called for the services of music specialists. Bulumi was the home of several professional musicians and eight masqueraders. The male masqueraders included *Bowu*, *Nafali*, *Kɔ̀pɔ̀ɔ̀*, *Joobai*, and *Yavi*.



Photo 2: The male masquerade, Bowu



Photo 3: The male masquerade, Joobai



Photo 4: The male masquerade, Yavi

Male musicians performed on a conical shaped drum, *sangba*; a conical drum, *gbengben* wooden slit-gong, *kelen*; a box-shaped lamellaephone, *kongoma*; and a set of basket rattles, *jeke*.



Photo 5: Professional male musicians performing on the kongoma and jeke.

The Sande society sponsored four Zooba spirit-impersonators, and female instrumentalists were the exclusive players of the gourd rattle, *sasaa*.



Video 1: Vai masquerades, Zooba, Nafali, and Yavi
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Both Poro and Sande maintained dance troupes—*tɔmbɔkɛ bɔɔniɛ-nu* for girls and *wusa* for boys—that provided early, formalized music and dance training to the initiates who showed an aptitude for dance.



Photo 6: Sande Society initiate dancers, *tɔmbɔkɛ bɔɔniɛ-nu*



Photo 7: Poro Society initiate dancers, wusa

Due to the stature and skill of its musicians and dancers, Bulumi gained a reputation throughout the region as a “dance town;” it was the place to go for a good feast or holiday celebration. In 1977-78, Bulumi hosted more feasts and holiday celebrations than any other town in the chiefdom

Institutional Islam at Bulumi Town, 1978

Like all Vai towns, Bulumi had an Imam and a mosque, and though nearly everyone professed a commitment to Islam, a few men stood out as devout Muslims.



Photo 8: The town mosque at Bulumi town

No one in the town, other than the Imam (aimaami), was literate in Arabic. Hence, the Imam was the Islamic teacher, doctor, scribe, song leader, and main interpreter of the Qur'an, Hadith, and other Arabic texts. In 1978, the Imam had several boys in his Qur'anic school; girls did not receive any formal religious training. Every night the boys sat around an open fire near the Imam's house and recited the Qur'an from the inscriptions written on wooden boards called *wala*. While learning around the fire, the boys were taught to chant the Qur'an in a standard, rudimentary style that lacked any semblance of a consistent, creative melodic base.



Photo 9: Qur'an learners



Video 2: Children learning the Qu'ran around the fire
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Further training would enable them to recite in a style called *daabo kule*, or Arabic voice. While this is the Vai stylistic designation, the recitation of men who were said to possess this technique is not stylistically similar to that of Arabic-speaking Qur'an reciters. The *daabo kule* in these instances was merely a clearer pronunciation of the Arabic text.

In 1982, when the ideological crisis escalated in Bulumi, proponents of the Secret Societies emphasized the importance of coexistence. Islam and the Societies had operated side-by-side, and indeed the products of a syncretic process. The integration of traditional and Islamic elements in the fortieth-day death feast is an excellent illustration of that fusion.

Musical and Institutional Transformation at Bulumi

By 1984, two closely related events brought major changes in religious life at Bulumi: the establishment of a Friday mosque and the total decline of the traditional versions of the Secret Societies.

As the men moved to eliminate Poro, pressure mounted to adopt the Muslim version of Sande. Without fanfare, Bulumi voluntarily transformed their Sande into acceptable Muslim version called *mali* Sande. In 1977, a *zoo keŋ* or "zoo house," where the *zoba* masks and other ritual paraphernalia were kept, stood prominently in the center of town. The events of 1984 resulted in the *zoo* house being razed and replaced with a town meeting hall.



Photo 10: The zoo keŋ (zoo house) at Bulumi

While the decree to ban the traditional versions of Poro and Sande was considered a major victory for the Muslim orthodox faction, it was a huge defeat for those who preferred coexistence between the Secret Societies and Islam. Many felt that the town had relinquished its ties with the past to an alien force, and had been persecuted by the

fanatically holy. The Secret Societies were arbiters of culture, the main patrons of the arts, the preservers of tradition, and the institutions that provided training for the skills needed in the society at large. Poro-trained carvers provided the masks for dancers; weavers and seamstresses designed and made the dance costumes for Sande and Poro initiate dancers and masqueraders; instrumentalists and dancers were trained by master teachers; and the various events within the Poro/Sande cycles contributed immensely to communal entertainment and maintenance of the social order.

The change to a Muslim version of Sande was particularly devastating to women, who heretofore had operated thriving Sande lodges throughout the Tombe chiefdom. Women were left to ponder the meaning of their existence, their social responsibilities, their mortality, and their musical roles in society. The decline of Zooba Sande left them without a systematic means to develop musical skills. The Muslim version of Sande offers little hope of preserving traditional songs, since the *zooba* Sande repertoire consists primarily of songs in Vai and the languages of their regional neighbors, the Mende, Gola, and Dei who also practice Sande (or *bundu*).



Video 3: Moli Sande girls singing on mats

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Photo 11: Moli Sande graduate dressed in fine clothes

As noted, the transition to the Muslim version of Sande eliminated several occasions that contributed to a vibrant social life. Though many of the ritual and ceremonial events are retained in *moli Sande*, the absence of the traditional music and dance components, robs them of their former fervor and excitement. A truly orthodox approach to *moli Sande* calls for a ban on all dancing, especially that by the *zooba*, and playing of the gourd rattle, *sasaa*.

The songs of *moli Sande* appeal to God and praise Muhammad, reaffirming Vai Islamic values. Unlike the songs of the traditional Sande, they are not the codified, denotative forms of expression that communicate direct and immediate meaning through a commonly understood language.

Most offensive aspects of *Zooba Sande* were culled out; *moli Sande* retained those elements most acceptable to Islam, including clitoridectomy. While it is a much smaller music repertoire, the corpus of *moli Sande* songs has its own unique richness.

Despite the absence of *Zooba* and the singing of Islamic songs, as well as the secrecy and mystery, which formerly surrounded the institution, the public face of Sande at Bulumi changed very little. The women at Bulumi, do, in fact, attempt to maintain the female bonding role and other essential attributes of *moli Sande*. The most profound impact on Sande affected spirit-impersonation and the rituals formerly carried out inside the bush, those extremely secretive elements that women will not discuss under any circumstance.

Bulumi Town 1987-88

By 1987, even more changes had occurred at Bulumi. The magnitude of these developments provides an interesting contrast with the state of Muslim affairs period ten years earlier. At the individual level, changes had taken place in the occupational roles of religious leaders, musicians, and ordinary worshippers. On another level, we saw changes in the Secret Societies and Muslim sectarian groups. Moreover, by the late

1980s, several categories of music were dropped from the repertoire while Islamic categories were added. Social occasions that had in the past called for traditional musical resources now gave way to new Islamic interpretations. Bulumi had indeed changed, and much of it could be attributed to Islam. A brief look at some of the major developments can help us see the variety of changes that have taken place.

With the newly found commitment to Islam, Muslims sought to solidify their control over religious life in Bulumi. The traditional versions of the Secret Societies had been eliminated and people began to pursue a stronger alliance with the wider Islamic world.

In 1978, Botondo, breaking the Ramadan fast was celebrated with performance on musical instruments, singing, and dancing.



Video 4: Professional musicians performing on the sangba and gbengben.
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Video 5: Botondo tãmbã--Breaking the Ramadan Fast
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Video 6: Procession to the prayer ground by the Ulama at Bulumi
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In 1978, only three major holydays were enacted—Miraj, Maulid, and Id al-fitr. Through the influence of groups of young Muslim scholars, these six celebrations were enacted in Bulumi.

Local Muslim entrepreneurs sought to acquaint the citizenry with universal Islam. From Monrovia they brought foreign-produced cassette recordings of calls-to-prayer (azan), and Qur'anic chant, educating local people on the eloquence of Islamic music and the proper way these components should be rendered. Here are two examples of how the call-to-prayer was affected by the newly introduced cassette culture.



Video 7: Adhan performed by Muslim scholar
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Bulumi gained greater contact with the wider Islamic world when two young townsmen returned from study in Guinea and Iran. In 1988, in addition to memorizing the Qur'an, a number of boys and girls learned to read and write Arabic. Moreover, music had become a very important part of the curriculum. The morning flag-raising ceremony was accompanied with song and students marched to and from classes singing popular Muslim anthems.




Video 8: Qu'ranic Recitation rendered by Muslim scholar
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The two brotherhoods found among the Vai--Qaddiriyya and Tijaniyya--trace their roots to the Sufi sects of North Africa and the Middle East.



Video 9: Tijaniyya dhikr
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For these men, even today, the pilgrimage to Mecca is financially impossible. Therefore, they forgo the external journey and rely instead on the power of their faith as expressed in the dhikr for a purely inner voyage, a voyage to the birthplace of the faith. As sufis, they seek deep within themselves the meaning behind the teachings of the Qur'an. Through the intense ritual procedure of the dhikr they hope to achieve the state of consciousness that made the advent of Muhammad possible. Meditation, reflection, and commitment to the faith are the means toward achieving this inner hadj. It was reported that a Tijaniyya adherent in Bulumi town achieved such a close relationship with God that he was able to miraculously travel to Mecca each night to pray. Such reports and the profound belief that such events actually occur further intensify faith in the power of the sect.

Change was easily observed in community life. People seemed to integrate Muslim practices into their daily lives. Because they were away at work on their farms, few participate in daytime prayers at Bulumi, but evening prayers were well attended. During the 1970s, Bulumi had no Friday prayer service. But a decade later, the town teemed with people from throughout the chiefdom who made the weekly journey to pray.

Not all Vai people were aware of the cultural achievements of Islamic societies. Through their travels and education, whether in the Middle East or other parts of Africa, the young scholars were one of the main conduits for local people to know about a world with an extraordinary intellectual, artistic, religious, history. The influence of these young scholars became a key impetus for further change in religious life at Bulumi.

Conclusion

The assimilation of Muslim ideology and musical practices at Bulumi has been a lengthy process. It has taken several generations for the people of this locale to abandon certain aspects of culture completely and syncretize others with Islam. Along the way there have been episodes of conflict, accommodation, and transformation within traditional social institutions. The outcome has been varied, ranging from complete acceptance to rejection of the new ways. The music system, like other aspects of culture, has changed in response to both internal and external social pressures. While music is a dynamic element of Vai culture, radical and revolutionary shifts in the wider social realm continue to profoundly affect its direction of change. Today, the people of Bulumi are Muslims, but they are West African Muslims. They have accepted many Islamic beliefs and musical practices, reinterpreting them within the context of the traditional norm. Hence, conversion to the orthodox theology of Mecca and total assimilation of its musical values in the lives of people at Bulumi will probably never occur. While the people of Bulumi will continue to embrace those aspects of Islamic music that meet their immediate needs, they will continue to measure these influences against the backdrop of a rich and vital traditional music system. The result will continue to be a synthesis of ideas, Islamic and traditional, which expresses itself within the broad scope of Vai life.