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West African Women: Performing as Agents of Change in War and Pandemic

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Abstract

For the last forty years, communities of women performers in Liberia and the United States have endured both an extended civil war and the Ebola pandemic. Drawing on those difficult events, I consider the ways in which these women have made music key to living through the situation in strength and to creating change. I bring themes that have emerged in the war and pandemic periods of Liberia into juxtaposition.

- Liberian women have sung, danced, and performed to center themselves and their audiences during both pandemic and war.
- Performance has informed and educated people during crises.
- Music has become a medium for truth telling when speech was not possible.
- Music making has been deployed as a critical tool of persuasion.
- Music has been engaged to combat post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) that frequently manifests within Liberian communities following war and pandemic.

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Of these five themes, the first demonstrates how music simply helps participants return to a state of calm or the status quo. The subsequent themes progress to the fifth and final theme that accomplishes a healing of deepseated pain produced by war and pandemic. Performance proves to be a potent and powerful force that women deploy deftly and creatively. Music achieves a special purpose as these women move their audiences away from the tortuous pain that the calamities have created and help them to achieve healthier and happier lives.

Keywords: Music and war, Music and pandemic, Music as persuasion, Music and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), Liberia, Kpelle people, Diaspora community, Refugee camp

For the last forty years, beginning in the late 1980s and extending to the present, Liberian women performers, located in Liberia and the United States, have endured both an extended civil war and the Ebola pandemic. I have been privileged to conduct ethnographic field research in Liberia, West Africa, particularly among the Kpelle people in Bong and Montserrado as well as in the diaspora community of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States. Drawing on those difficult events, women performers, in particular, have sung, played instruments such as the gourd rattle, and performed powerfully in order to move and change the horrific scenes in which they have repeatedly found themselves and their larger community. Whether they have been confronted by civil war or by a frightening health contagion like Ebola, they have made music key to living through the situation in strength and to creating change. The Liberian civil war, which began in 1989 and continued until 2003, as well as the Ebola epidemic, which lasted from 2014-2016 proved to be times of extreme stress and tension. These resilient singers engaged music as a weapon, and they deployed music during this war and the pandemic that followed a few years later. Their experience is worthy of our introspection as ethnomusicologists. There are lessons to be learned as we continue to explore performance in its rich and varied dimensions. And there are certainly parallels to the difficult circumstances that women around the world have endured from the Eastern Mediterranean to Africa and beyond.

I would like to consider five themes that have emerged from the war and pandemic in Liberia.

Liberian women have sung, danced, and performed to themselves and their audiences during both pandemic and war.

When communities have been excited by the birth of a child, relieved by the return of a family member from overseas, or burdened by the death of a family member, musicians and their extended communities have searched for a to an inner peace through making music together. The emotions that are stirred by life's various events, can be calmed with performance. This idea was particularly well echoed by Ge-weli-wula, a blacksmith and ritual specialist who expressed the importance of performance in this way:

Menii nga golong e pilang wule mai,
What I know about song,

e kula lii-soli su.
it came from sadness.

...A nee i wolo, i meni kelee ke,
...Even if you cry, you do everything,

fee no i pele-ke.
you must perform.

...Ilii a soli, ifa see tong ngono,
...If your heart hurts, you can't sit quietly again,

Kelee, bifoo ba see tong, fee no i wule too.
But before you sit quietly, you must sing (Stone, 2010: 82).

When the Liberian civil war broke out, Zaye Tete (Tete 2021), a renowned singer from the Liberian National Cultural Troupe, who now lives in Philadelphia, fled to a refugee camp in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire with her family. Despite the difficult living conditions in the camp and the horrifying reports of war from home, she organized some young girls around her, and began to teach them songs and the dances that fit with the songs. Daily she rehearsed with the girls, and together they helped to bring some semblance of stability to their emotional lives. In fact, after a while the United Nations agency that was working with refugees provided some funding so that she was able to make a video of the performing girls, and to distribute that video beyond the camp. Wherever in the world that Liberians found themselves,

they invariably and instinctively turned to music making to center and stabilize themselves as they searched for peace and wellbeing. Performing together proved essential for their calm and mental health, and they shared the power it brought to them and to their community.

A decade after the long civil war concluded, the Ebola epidemic broke out. When I went to Liberia just as the epidemic was concluding in 2016, I met with the Kpelle choir members at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia (Photos 1 and 2). They recounted to me how critical singing had been for them during the epidemic. Though they couldn't physically touch one another at the time, their singing was safe, and if they sat appropriately spaced, they could connect with one another and bring a sense of serenity to themselves at this challenging time. (Stone, 2017; Stone, 2019). (It is important to note here that Ebola was spread primarily by bodily fluids, and not by airborne droplets as is the case with Corona virus-19. Thus, the paths of contagion were slightly different so that singing would not be as safe a form of connection during the Covid-19 pandemic.)

Music served several other roles that move beyond calming and centering communities.

Performance has informed and educated people during crises.

Musicians like Julie Endee composed and performed songs to provide important details about the Ebola disease. These details were presented in appealing songs that helped to counter misinformation that circulated via rumors on social media. Julie Endee worked with the Liberian Ministry of Health and outside non-governmental agencies to travel to areas around Liberia to perform these songs as well as to distribute the songs via compact discs (CDs) and other media. Perhaps the most famous of her songs was "Ebola is Real," which was composed in English in a 1980s style of popular music (Endee, 2016).

My people, Ebola is in Liberia.
Ebola is real.
Ebola can kill.
Let's protect ourselves, oh.
Chorus:
Ebola is real.
Let's protect ourselves and our family.
Ebola can kill.
It has no cure, but it can be prevented.
Ebola, Ebola.
Let's fight it together.

Let's fight it together.

Ebola, Ebola.

Let's protect ourselves, our family, and our nation.

Always wash your hands with soap and water.

Always cook your food very well.

Go to the health facility anytime you have headache, fever, pinkeye, Diarrhea, red eyes, vomiting (Stone, 2017:86).

Musician Endee educated with graphic and specific details as she spelled out the symptoms of Ebola and the steps that the audience should take to prevent the disease.

The third theme that is critical to consider is the following:

Music has become a medium for truth telling when speech was possible

When I arrived in Liberia to begin a Fulbright research fellowship in 1988, the country was on the edge of war. Checkpoints had been set up all along the major roads, and commodities such as gasoline were difficult to obtain. The scene differed sharply from my memories of growing up in Liberia where I had lived as a child from the age of three until twelve. During those years, I had spent carefree hours playing with my Liberian counterparts and visiting nearby farms or creeks to experience daily life around the cooking fires. But now in the late 1980s, the singers from the St. Peter's Lutheran Kpelle Choir came to visit me and spoke in whispered tones about their family members who had been seized by the dictator Samuel Doe and placed in prison. They often arrived directly from visiting an incarcerated relative and reported on the increasingly tense situation in the prison and in Monrovia, the capital city.

One day, I attended a funeral for a beloved expatriate, James Y. Gbarbea, who had died in exile in the United States. His body was brought back to Liberia, and the Kpelle choir, led by Feme Neni-Kole, sang in closely timed precision as they marked this death of a former government minister who Samuel Doe considered to be a dangerous member of the opposition to his rule. Somewhat astonishingly, Feme, the vocal soloist of the choir, sang words such as "Doe must go," and "Jesus is the big, big zoo (ritual priest)." In these phrases she was challenging the power of the dictator and expressing that not only would he be removed from power, but that Jesus, a Christian deity, was a more powerful warrior than the mortal human Doe and would ultimately triumph. She was singing what no person could have spoken without risking imprisonment. But by well accepted convention in Liberia at the time, Feme could sing the truth as she understood it, but which could not otherwise be

voiced. In this instance, women employed music as a form of truth telling and a way to publicize the widely shared views of the Liberian citizens. These musicians knew they had license for expression, but they, nevertheless, took risks to express their views about what was right and what needed to change in this conflict situation. They did not simply sit by as victims, but rather weaponized music to engage with a dictator.

It is vital to note that music has been employed in analogous ways in other political struggles around the world over the centuries. We need only think of the spirituals that African American slaves sang where their texts were disguised messages to one another. We can also recall the long years of struggle in Somalia when poets sang compositions that sometimes served to depose rulers when audiences heard these songs broadcast on the radio.

Feme Neni-Kole, composed her songs at James Gbarbea's funeral in 1988, and sang them boldly with the rest of the choir responding around her. The large crowd of attendees marveled at her audacity to tell the truth both simply and directly, if they but listened carefully. Feme had been to the local prisons to visit family members that Samuel Doe had locked up for alleged offenses, and she now fought back with her voice with the backing of the rest of the women in the choir. She knew that what they sang about would spread far beyond the walls of the church. She was telling the truth as she understood it in a powerful way and pushing back against the injustice that she perceived had been inflicted on her community.

Feme sang the truth as she knew it at a particular funeral in the period leading up to the outbreak of the Liberian civil war. Some women carried music making even further as they persistently and repeatedly worked to bend their opponents to their will.

This leads us to the fourth theme to ponder:

Music making has been deployed as a critical tool of persuasion.

Singing for a Ceasefire

While Feme and other singers expressed key ideas about the political situation leading up to the outbreak of the Liberian civil war as they perceived it, other women singers moved beyond truth telling to persistently perform in order to persuade the warring sides at the end of the war to sign a durable peace treaty as the Liberian civil war had ground on over the years for more than a decade. An interfaith, interethnic group of women, led by Leymah Gbowee, co-winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, began to fast and pray and sing along the main highway leading into the capitol city of Monrovia. They repeated this act daily and without ceasing as they urged the various leaders to stop the fighting and killing. Leaders of the women's coalition

traveled to Accra, Ghana to demonstrate at the entrance to the peace negotiations where representatives from several countries from around the world were gathered. Their efforts have been documented in the film *Pray the Devil back to Hell*, which vividly portrays their efforts. In this case, the women had brought together multiple colleagues from different backgrounds who were much more numerous than the small choir that Feme had led when she started her truth telling just before the war broke out. Now the women were dispirited and worn out from years of death and destruction. They banded together in a bold move that ultimately influenced the peace that was shortly signed on August 18, 2003 and ultimately endured (Reticker and Disney, 2008).

Singing to Disarm Former Soldiers

As Liberians began to rebuild their country and to reconnect with one another, many ex-soldiers retained their weapons. People feared that these ex-combatants might take up their arms and resume conflict. Marie Nyanbo and Tokay Tomah worked along with the United Nations peacekeepers who were stationed in Liberia. They traveled throughout Liberia, singing to these former warriors, and risked their lives in the process. And though this was dangerous work, both women were quite successful in convincing young men with their singing and in helping them decide to disarm. While the Liberian interfaith group of women sang to bring about the peace treaty, they employed persuasion through a large ensemble performance. But after the war, Marie and Tokay performed on a very small scale even as they continued essential tasks of retrieving weapons through musical messages. And Marie composed a song, “Tua” (War) that she sang to persuade communities that they should welcome their children back home—children who in many cases had been forced by the war lords to fight and commit horrible atrocities during the fighting (Shapiro-Phim, 2019:48). There were a range of tasks to be accomplished after the war, and musicians formed an essential core of the workers that set about to perform these tasks of peace and reconciliation.

The effects of war and pandemic have had a long-lasting reach beyond the cease fire period, and the Women’s Chorus in the Liberian community of Philadelphia has been employing music for yet another reason:

Music is engaged to combat post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) that frequently manifest within Liberian communities following war and pandemic.

Based on ethnographic research that several of the Liberian women musicians, supported by the Philadelphia Folklore Project, undertook in the Philadelphia area, they discovered high levels and many kinds of abuse taking place. Spousal abuse, elder abuse, and child abuse topped the list of what

community members cited as they tried to return to normal living following war and their travail in refugee camps. Long after active fighting no longer threatened them and their community, an array of aggression within the diaspora in Philadelphia plagued their lives. They also suffered from discrimination against immigrants in the larger urban area where they had settled.

Out of concern for this PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) that the women had uncovered, five Liberian singers from Philadelphia formed the Liberian Women's Chorus for Change in 2013. And this chorus has composed and performed music even as they have curated critical conversations with their audiences to help effect change. "We want our families and community members to have access to information and resources that will allow them the chance to flourish, with dignity, in their adopted home," says chorus artistic director Fatu Gayflor. Stories evoked publicly, through song, have become the starting point for conversations leading to propositions of imaginative and, it is hoped, realistic paths to addressing pressing concerns (Philadelphia Folklore Project, 2016).

Fatu Gayflor has drawn from a song of her youth to work through the stress that she and members of her community feel. She has molded and transformed "Kweyenge" to connect her past in the women's secret society with the current dilemma which she is facing. As she begins her solo, she is calling the name of her child who she lost in the war, a child she had left with relatives but who disappeared as they were forced to quickly pick up and flee their homes when fighting broke out. "Kweyenge" wells up as a cry for her lost son, that the chorus echoes and reflects to her. As she repeats the call, her vocal timbre resembles breathless sobbing with her voice breaking. What originated as a song in which parents lamented when their children went off into seclusion for education into the secret society, had now morphed into Fatu's personal story of loss (Stone, 2014: 13). Sung in Kpelle by Fatu with the LWCC backing her, this lament became emblematic for the deep loss that Fatu experiences up to today. As she scans audiences to see if anyone looks like someone who might be her now adult son, Fatu prepares the audience for her bone chilling lament with the story of how she had to travel and left her son with relatives. When she could not locate her son upon her return, she experienced the gut-wrenching pain of a mother losing her child, a pain that continues to today. The story and "Kweyenge" become emblematic and iconic for the trauma that so many in her audience—Liberian and African American, and others—have also known in their lives. The lament of "Kweyenge" reminds Fatu of her loss, but it also begins the slow process of healing as she gradually works to come to a place of peace about what happened during the war. The performance also shares her deep-seated grief with others, and in that sharing helps to begin to address their trauma as well.

Conclusion

I want to bring the five themes that have emerged in the war and pandemic periods of Liberia into closer juxtaposition and consider them in relation to one another. Doing so helps us to see more clearly how Liberian women have acted as agents of social change in these times of war and pandemic duress whether they have lived in their home country or abroad.

Liberian women have sung, danced, and performed to center themselves and their audiences during both pandemic and war.

Music has provided a place to return to, and a way of moving back to a calm and centered existence. Over time, women have learned how to employ music effectively in this way no matter what the disruptions to their lives.

Performance has informed and educated people during crises.

Music has been crucial to moving people to learn and to become knowledgeable in a crisis. It is not enough to simply return to a centering point. Women have sung creatively to accomplish this education in delightful and playful ways.

Music has become a medium for truth telling when speech was not possible.

Liberian women have deployed music to mount hard-driving and sometimes dangerous campaigns to express what is right and ethical as they perceive it. In this way, music is so much more than entertainment or pleasant escape. Now music seeks to accomplish critical goals that speaking cannot bring about.

Music making has been deployed as a critical tool of persuasion.

Coupled with the third theme, once people are aware of the truth as musicians have helped to convey it, now music is also deployed by these Liberian women to persuade people to do things such as make peace. These singers urge people to do more than simply know the truth, but they seek in their creative performance to persuade them to quit fighting or to give up their weapons for a just reason.

Music is engaged to combat post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) that frequently manifest within Liberian communities following war and pandemic.

These periods of war and pandemic have the effect of producing deep trauma and stress in Liberian communities, whether in West Africa or America or elsewhere. And music in the final analysis helps to alleviate the trauma

that is deep seated in a community. Liberian women performers work over the years following these episodes of stress to counteract the damage that has been wrought.

In considering these five themes, we began where music simply helped us to return to a state of calm in the first theme and progressed to the fifth and final theme, which worked to accomplish a healing of deep seated pain that results from the war and pandemic. In complex ways these women performed to move their audiences from the status quo as they found it to a more perfect state that they imagined possible to attain. During ordinary times the singers may find the audience simply elated or sad. In that case, their task was simply to bring them back to a centered and calm demeanor. But during war as well as pandemic, the situation became quite a bit more complex. In those times of extreme duress, music can then be deployed to move a whole segment of the nation to demand peace. Or music can guide a wounded community to recover from highly traumatic events that have scarred their minds and bodies. Performance proved to be a potent and powerful force in the hands of these women who have mastered its nuances and potential to heal individuals and change far flung groups who identify together as a community.

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Photo 1: St. Peter's Lutheran Kpelle Choir, Monrovia, Liberia. Verlon L. Stone, 2016.



Photo 2: St. Peter's Lutheran Kpelle Choir, Monrovia, Liberia. Verlon L. Stone, 2016.