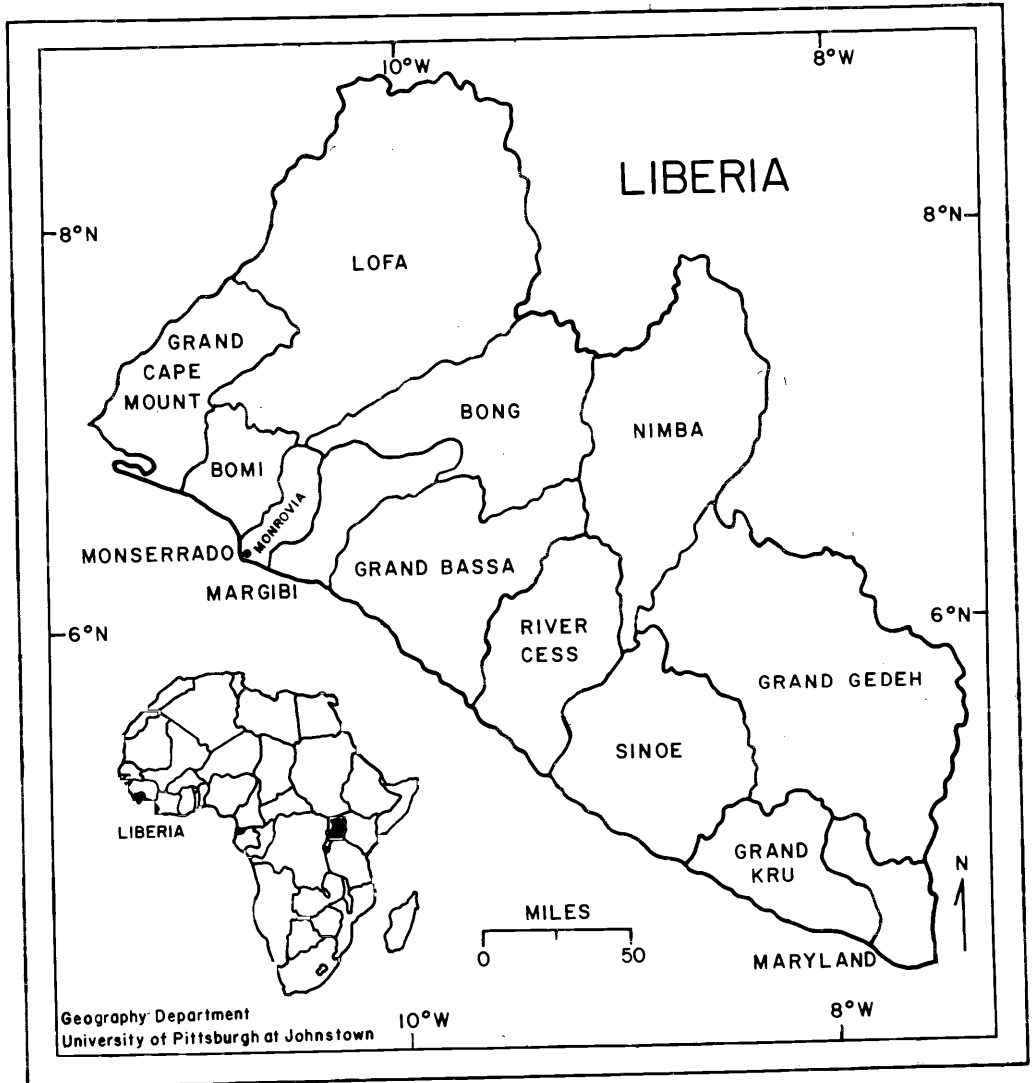


# LIBERIAN STUDIES JOURNAL



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**LIBERIAN STUDIES JOURNAL**

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

**In Memory of**

**Bai Tamia Moore (1920–1988)**

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## Introduction

At the annual meeting of the Liberian Studies Association held in Akron, Ohio in April, 1988, a proposal was made that the Association devote a special issue of the LSA journal to the memory of Bai Tamia Moore, who passed away in January, 1988. Bai T., as he was affectionately known by his friends and colleagues, was a central figure in the development of Liberian cultural studies. For Liberian and foreign scholars alike, he was the quintessential "stranger father," the person from whom advice on Liberian culture was sought. Since the early 1950s until his death, Bai T. had interacted with numerous scholars whose interests span many areas of Liberian cultural studies. For all who relied on his knowledge of Liberian culture, Bai T. comprehended the nature of their research and interests and was willing to provide input into the many complex problems they encountered. It is in the spirit of thanks and gratitude that we dedicated this issue to the memory of a great man.

It is customary for the editor of festschrifts and other dedicatory volumes of this sort to present a lengthy introduction, pulling together the contributions in some coherent fashion. However, due to the length of this issue and to the fact that no central theme emerges, I will forego that task and provide only brief descriptions of the papers. This will allow the reader to derive whatever semblance of order that emerges.

The first article, by Bai T. Moore, was written in 1972 and presented at the Manding Conference held at the University of London. Using the diversity of his own ethnic background as a model, Moore brings to light the often confusing problem of dual and multiple ethnic identity among the peoples of northwest Liberia and southern Sierra Leone.

Diane Oyler's and Arnold Odio's contribution is excerpts from conversations with Bai T. Moore held during the summer of 1987. The texts are word-for-word musings by Bai T. on such topics as his poetry, the Vai language, the concept of the extended family, his walking tours of Liberia, his remembrances about people and places, the United States, Maya Angelou, and other topics of interest to him. The authors have tried as much as possible to preserve Bai T.'s free-ranging manner of conversing, his humor and wit, and the inimitable cadences in the oratory of a man for whom language was in and of itself a sense of discovery and wonderment.

Dorith Scheps-Ofri's paper is a meticulous analysis of Bai T.'s literary style. Capitalizing on Moore's role as a builder of a contemporary Liberian identity, Ofri heralds his creative writing as the triumphant birth of modern Liberian literature. More significantly, the paper illustrates how Moore's writing touches on town and country, past and present, tradition and change, love and death,

Gola and Vai, Africa and beyond, poetry, tales, and a fusion of Liberian creative arts in his literary style.

Through the use of oral and written historical sources, Svend Holsoe documents the life of Zolu Duma, a warrior and ruler of the southern Vai areas during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Holsoe's account lends a degree of clarity to Zolu Duma's position as an historical figure, while p[ro]viding his near mythical status as a culture hero and despot in Vai lore.

My paper discusses the musical and social responses to Islam during the early twentieth century. During this era Islam moved from its [marginal] status and began to take hold in all segments of Vai society. I attempt to show that the beginning of this period was characterized by toleration and coexistence between traditional and Islamic practices. But toward the end of this era, people witnessed abandonment of traditional practices, the infusion of Islamic elements, and a movement toward orthodoxy. Musical elements followed a similar course. At first, traditional music performance was maintained as an important element at major celebrations, but the aniconic views of Islam soon relegated masked dancing, drumming, and singing to less central roles.

John Victor Singler's discussion of Joseph Jeffery Walters' 1891 novel *Guanyia Pau: A Story of an African Princess*, is an interesting discussion of male perceptions of female roles during the late nineteenth century. A young Vai man, Walters wrote this short novel as a polemic to call attention to the plight of women in Vai society. Singler's paper draws on archival material and existing ethnographic studies of the Vai to relate Walters' life to his novel and vice versa.

Ruth M. Stone's paper illustrates that the Kpelle people, like the Vai, developed an indigenous script. Her meticulous study documents examples of the Kpelle script, presents a number of characters that have not appeared in the literature, and discusses the possible connections between the Vai and Kpelle writing systems.

The final paper by Al-Hassan Conteh brings to light some new and interesting concepts on religion and traditional medical practices among the Mandingo. Relying on many personal experiences, he discusses the skills of traditional medical practitioners, illustrating their important role in society. Drawing on a theoretical model developed by Robin Horton, Conteh contrasts the notion of "open" and "closed" predicaments vis-a-vis modern Mandingo reliance on effective medical care within the confines of Liberian belief systems. This paper will no doubt further the debate on the reliability of traditional versus Western medical procedures.

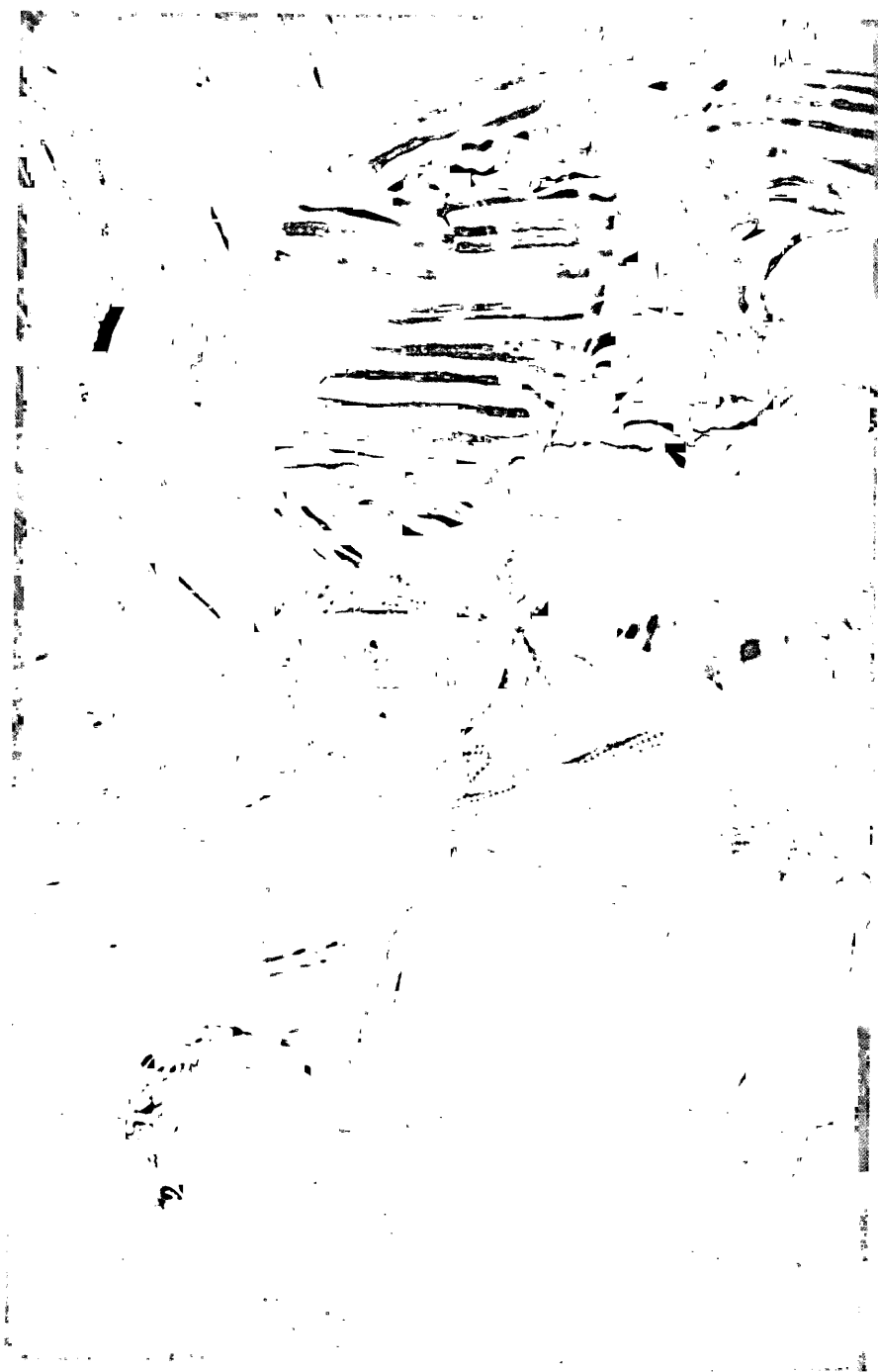
At the time this volume is submitted for publication, Liberia is in the throes of a tragic and devastating civil war. Thousands of people have died, and over a quarter of Liberia's population has sought refuge in neighboring states. The political, social, and economic fabric of Liberia will be forever torn by this

conflict. In the spirit of compassion, the contributors wish to extend the dedication of this special issue to the memory of all those who have suffered during this tumultuous period in Liberian history. Bai T. would have wanted it this way.

I wish to thank the contributors who endured the long wait to bring this project to fruition. Due to the conflict in Liberia, we regret that many of our colleagues in Liberia were unable to contribute to this special issue. We hope their papers can be considered for publication in future issues of the Journal.

Publication costs prevented this from being a "special issue" of the Journal. Hence, a special thanks is in order to D. Elwood Dunn and Similih M. Cordor for their cooperation and editorial comments. We are also grateful to the University of California for its generous support of this project.

Lester P. Monts  
University of California  
Santa Barbara



Bai T. Moore (above), his son, and a relative at the Poro Society graduation in Besao. (January, 1978) Photo by Lester P. Monts.



## Bai Tamia Moore

1920–1988\*

"The Government of the Republic of Liberia announces with profoundest regrets the death in his sixty-seventh year of the Honorable Bai Tamia Moore, B.Sc., K.C. Former Deputy Minister for Research and Planning, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, erudite statesman, scholar, outstanding author, folklorist and educator, Republic of Liberia.

This sad and mournful event occurred at the ELWA Hospital in the City of Paynesville, Montserrado county, Republic of Liberia, on Sunday, January 10, 1988, at the hour of three o'clock post meridian, following a brief period of illness.

The late Honourable Bai Tamia Moore, erudite statesman, scholar, outstanding author, folklorist and educator, was born unto the union of Zolu Zina from the Kaizolu House in Jondu and Goyan Guwo of the Dablo Clan in Gola Koneh, Grand Cape Mount County on October 12, 1920.

The deceased received his early education at the Bendu Industrial Mission School on Lake Piso from 1926–1929. While at Bendu, he was attracted to the Missionaries by the outstanding leadership ability he demonstrated even at that early age. That encouraged Rev. and Mrs. Edward Hunter Bouey to have taken him to the United States of America, and enrolled him in a Richmond Elementary School in the Fifth grade. Bai Tamia later entered Richmond Armstrong High School and graduated as President of his class in 1934. At Richmond, he was known as "Johnson Moore."

Not satisfied with "little learning," Hon. Bai T. Moore then matriculated to the Virginia Union University and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree (B.Sc.) in Biology in 1938. He also did post graduate studies in biology at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1939 and later completed a graduate Diploma program in Education by Radio and Television in New York State. His unwavering interest in his people and the profound love of his country made him change his name from Johnson Moore to Bai T. Moore when he returned home in 1941 so as to better identify with his people.

Religiously, the late Honourable Bai T. Moore converted to the Christian Religion, was baptized, and accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior and became a member of the Friendship Baptist Church, Bendu Industrial Mission, Grand Cape Mount County. In the church as well as in school, Hon. Bai T. Moore continued to exemplify himself as a good ambassador of his country by taking

active part in whatsoever he found to do. He was an active of the Boy Scout, Hi-Y and also Sunday School Superintendent of Moore Street Baptist Church in the U.S. No wonder he was named after that church and its pastor, Dr. R. H. Johnson because it was the Moore Street Baptist church that sponsored his first trip to the United States of America.

The public career of Hon. Bai T. Moore began in 1942 when President Edwin J. Barclay appointed him chief of the Bureau of Agriculture in the Department of the Interior (now Ministry of Internal Affairs) shortly after his return home. It was this first assignment with go t that afforded him the opportunity to travel in all regions of the country and served the basis for the study of the diversity and richness of our African Cultural heritage. At that time, there were very few motor road links in the country and, therefore, much walking was done in performing his duties as an agriculture extension supervisor. By 1944, the first USAID Mission arrived and the team was assigned with the Agriculture Bureau. Hon. Bai T. Moore worked very closely with that team to establish the Government Experimental Agriculture Station now known as CARI in Suacoco, Bong County. Bai T's dedication to duty and pioneering spirit contributed much to the establishment of the now Ministry of Agriculture in 1947.

In 1951, Hon. Bai T. Moore taught Science at the University of Liberia Laboratory High School in Monrovia. He later moved to the ent of Public Instruction (now Ministry of Education.) At the Department of Education, he served as Director of the Joint UNESCO-Liberian Fundamental Education Project and he helped to build the Fundamental Education Training Center in Klay, now Bomi County where he designed a training scheme for community workers at the village level. He received a UNESCO Fellowship to participate in a group training scheme in Fundamental Education in Mysore, India in 1954, and on his way home visited the UNESCO Arab Education Center in Egypt. Thereafter he became the Director of the newly created Bureau of Fundamental Education and Literacy in 1957.

Hon. Bai T. Moore was later chosen by President Tubman to help create and develop the Liberia Information Service, and subsequently became Director of the Audio-Visual Bureau in the Liberia Information Service in 1960. The Bureau of Folkways was then transferred from the t of Interior to the new Liberian Information Service. It was at this time, that together with Dr. Samolu Johnson Mole Jangaba, Bai Tamba Moore completed plans to set in motion a campaign of cultural awareness among the Liberia people. In 1963, these two African Folklorists delivered lectures, o the popular radio and television program "Songs and of Liberia" and promoted writings of cultural manifestations in Liberia and Africa. The prime objective was the construction of the National Cultural Center near Kendeja, ten miles from Monrovia, which was completed in 1964. At this pi e national cultural village, he assembled the finest craftsmen, artists, dancers and musicians from all the tribes and ethnic groups of Liberia. He o the National Cultural Troupe which has

brought many laurels to Liberia in the form of gold and bronze medals, etc., as an apparent reward for his hard work.

This great thinker and scholar of Liberian and African Culture was then commissioned in 1966 by President William V. S. Tubman as Under Secretary for Cultural Affairs and Tourism in the Department of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism. He served as the Deputy Chief of the Liberian Cultural Delegation to the First Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal in 1966, which brought together people from all over the world to witness the greatest display ever of Black African Art in the world. In the following year, he represented Liberia at the seminar on "Problems of the Tourist Industry" held in Spain. He was also a prominent member of the Liberian contingent to the Algiers Festival where he participated at the colloquium in 1969.

During the 10th Independent Anniversary of the Sister Republic of Guinea, Honourable Bai T. Moore headed the Liberian delegation at the celebrations in Conakry, Guinea in 1968. All through the decade of the 1970's, the late Hon. Bai T. Moore exemplified himself as the most outstanding Folklorist, author of many books and a courageous cultural revolutionary who ably planned and executed the Liberian Government's cultural policies. Among the most important conferences and seminars were the O.A.U.-sponsored seminar/workshop on African Folklore, Music, and Dance held in Somalia; the International Conference on "Cultural Diversity and National Understanding within West African Countries" held at the University of Ife, Nigeria. Together with the late Dr. Fatima Massaquoi Fahnbulleh, Chairman of the African Studies Programme at the University of Liberia, the deceased attended the Conference of Mandingo Studies at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. In 1976, even though Dr. Edward B. Kesselly was the Minister of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism, he designated the late Honourable Bai T. Moore to attend the Conference of Ministers of Culture, held in Accra, Ghana, aimed at reviewing the cultural character of African countries.

At the second Festival of Negro Art (FESTAC) held in the Federal Republic of Nigeria in 1977 the late Hon. Bai T. Moore headed a delegation of more than 100 official members from Liberia, and presented at the festival a paper on "Poro and Sande among the Dewoin People of Liberia, an Example of an Indigenous Educational System." The late Honourable Moore led a cultural contingent to Washington, D.C. to participate in the United States Bicentennial Celebrations in 1976; and at the UNESCO Conference on the "African Presence in North and South America and the Caribbean Islands" in Bridgetown, Barbados. He also attended two conferences in Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, on "The Problems of Cultural Policy in Africa" and the 3rd International Tourism Congress in Berlin, in March 1969.

From 1971 to 1977, he was twice commissioned by the late President Tolbert; first, as Assistant Minister for Culture and Tourism and later as Deputy Minister

for Culture and Tourism in the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism. The hosting of the Organization of African unity (O.A.U.) Summit Conference in Monrovia in 1979, was climaxed with a superb cultural extravengaza which was demonstrative of the cultural genius of the man, Bai T. Moore. At the national level, he served as a cultural ambassador, and the Government supported his cultural programs, by publishing several books and booklets which were freely distributed among the official delegates at the Conference. He personally wrote "Liberian Culture at a Glance" which was a monograph published for the O.A.U. Summit. As founding member of the Society of Liberian Authors (SOLA) and Vice President at the time, Hon. Bai T. Moore also made a major contribution to the Anthology of Liberian Literature which was also published and distributed at the conference. By 1981, he became President of the Society following the death of SOLA's President, Dr. A. Doris Banks Henries.

The year 1980 started Liberia's third decade of political and cultural transformation; in particular, the April 12, 1980 Revolution which brought to power the People's Redemption Council (PRC) Government. As of the PRC, Head of State Samuel K. Doe (now President of the Second Republic) commissioned the deceased as Deputy Minister for Research and Planning in the Ministry of Information.

In 1982, this great man of culture attended a conference on "Encounters Between the Cultural Communities of Africa, Europe and the Arab World" in Avignon, France. Other important conferences he attended included the UNESCO Conference on "the Contributions to Africa of Blacks from the Diaspora" held in Cotonou, Benin, in 1983, and the Eighth Film Festival of Arab, African and Latin American Countries in Tashkent, USSR, in 1984. This Film Festival also provided him with the opportunity to observe a variety of features and documents on the socio-economic and political activities of the participating regions. After the conference, Honourable Bai Tamia Moore visited the Historic d which was the center of Islamic Culture in Medieval Ages. In 1985, he travelled to China and was guest of the Society for Friendship with Foreign Countries in the People's Republic of China. The trip took him to Beijing, China's Capital City, and also the great industrial city of Shanghai and the famous resort town of Hangzhou. He finally retired from active service in January 1986.

In 1987, the late Honourable Bai T. Moore made two historic visits that were destined to the end of time in his earthly sojourn. Firstly, he visited the Holy Land in Israel where he toured Holy sites of both Jews and Christians; then in November, 1987 he was also received in audience at the Vatican by Pope John Paul, II.

Among his literary and intellectual contributions in the development of "Positive Africa National Culture," he contributed to the Standardization of the Vai Script at a seminar that brought together Vai Scholars from all sections of Liberia and y in 1962; the production of musical dramas for the radio

and television programs featuring "legends of Liberia," and a systematic collection of Liberian Folkson which he resented to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Asan ou s to his credit distinguished works which include: 1) M Patch (1968); 2) Ebony Dust (1963); 3) The Woman With rt Story, 1974); 4) The Money Doubler, (1977); 5) Categori ous songs, etc. He also had a large collection of artifacts uscripts which include: a) Stranger Sons b) Monkey Dolo the Gari Seller d) God Child, and e) The Senkolor S

He participated in many religious and fraternal organizations. He was a member of the Traditional Poro Society, Zowuloh (Dewoin Jurisdiction); a Master Mason (Prince Hall Affiliation) and a member of the Alpha Phil Alpha (a college fraternity.)

The late Hon. Bai T. Moore was married twice. First to Miss Inez Green of Richmond, Virginia, with whom he had Famata, who lives in the United States. Tragedy struck the first marriage and the lady predeceased him in 1941. His second marriage was to Miss Gillian Loba Tulay of Kolahun which took place in 1968.

In recognition of his outstanding contributions to the development of Liberia, the Government of Liberia conferred upon Hon. Bai T. Moore the distinction of Knight Commander in the Humane Order of African Redemption.

He leaves to mourn his loss, his wife Gillian, five children including Sando, Nimle, Jackie Sange, Bai Tamia Moore, Jr., Goyan Guwo; and a host of other relatives and friends of Liberia and abroad."

\*From The Liberia Official Gazette Extraordinary, Vol. 6, No. 155, January 23, 1988, and *Liberian Studies Journal*, XIII, 1, (1988)

## Problems of Vai Identity in Terms of My Own Experience\*

Bai Tamia Moore

Liberia is located on the western bulge of Africa. Among its major tribes is a Manding group, the Vai. They are found in the County of Grand Cape Mount in western Liberia. It would be well to say that the Vai also occupy a very large area in the neighboring Republic of Sierra Leone.

In Liberia the Vai are divided into four sections or chiefdoms. The chiefdoms too, are sub-divided into smaller family units called clans. Originally, these were very numerous. Some of them comprising of merely one or two villages. To effect an easier political administration, the government of Liberia in 1932, ordered the blending of some of the families into larger units. So that we have presently, each chiefdom comprising the following families:

TOMBE	GAWULA	VAI KONE	<u>TEWO</u>
Kiatamba	Kiazolu	Zoludua	Fahnbulé
Kiakpomgbo	Kiahohn	Kiazolu	Sambola
Sombai Baidalo	Kiadii	Gion	Getawe
Pusaa	Manobaa		Meimasa
Sombai walo	Zogbo		Daseng
Seiwana			Passewe
			Kiawu
			Koloma
			Jaleiba

Most of the clan names, with the exception of the following are of Gola origin. For example:

Koloma (Manding)  
Kiawu (Bassa)  
Passewe (Gbandi)  
Zogbo (Dei)

According to the above statement, the Vai in reality are a mixture of several tribes. But the majority are of Manding and Gola origin.

The Vai made a significant contribution to the science of communication when, in 1814, one of their scholars, Duwalu Bukele of Bandakolo near Jondu, invented a system of writing known as the *Vai kpolo* (Vai book). The Vai script is used widely throughout Liberia and the Republic of Sierra Leone.

The question which often arises is, what makes a person *Vai keseng*, or a real *Vai*? What are the criteria for such identification? Generally, patrilineal descent is one of the criteria for acceptance as being an unquestionable *Vai keseng*. But, because of intermarriage with other groups, the patrilineal formula becomes somewhat fictitious. Hence, you will find families whose *Vai* identity is based on matrilineal descent. There are numerous examples of this, but three are presented below.

1. The late clan chief of Zogbo, Momo Bai, was a descendant of a Loma grandfather but a *Vai* mother. His grandfather, a Loma man, came to sojourn in *Vai* Kone and married a *Vai* woman in Gawula by whom he had a son, and their home being in *Vai* country, the son had to be *Vai*, because both son and father were matrilineal.

2. The present paramount chief of Gawula, Mambu Zowo, is a *Dei* paternally. But he lives in his mother's town of Bendu, one of the leading towns of the *Vai* country, which makes him matrilineal. He lived there until he became a man and was recognized as *Vai*, especially so when he has brothers and sisters who are *Vai keseng*.

3. Another family who are paternally not *Vai* are the Wares of Jondu, Gawula. Their grandfather was a *Gbandi* chief. He was advised to marry a woman of a certain description. Not being able to find her in all *Gbandi* land he came to the *Vai* country and there found what he was looking for. He married the woman and took her back to his home. One of the grandsons of the union, Koli Selle, upon becoming a man, selected to go back to his great grandmother's original home to settle. His children are the family carrying the name of Ware in the town of Jondu in *Vai* country. They are considered *Vai keseng*.

My object for telling all this is to show how my problem of identity as a *Vai* was solved.

My father, Oldman Zolu Zina, was of *Kiazolu* family in the *Vai* country. His home was in Jondu, but migrated with his mother, Sombo Feweh, to the *Dei* country where he remained until he grew up to manhood. He married several *Dei* and *Vai* women. My mother was of *Gola* origin. Her home was *Jene Sese* in *Gola Kone*. My father died while I was a little boy. My uncle from *Gola Kone*, came and took me to *Jene Sese* and made me matrilineal. Up to the time I went to school, I knew nothing about my *Vai* background. This is why when I was in the United States in school, I wrote a short biographical sketch entitled *GOLA BOY IN AMERICA*. The only reference in *GOLA BOY...* to show my *Vai* connection is a line stating that my father came from *Vai* country.

When I returned home from America in the forties, after an absence of eleven years, the first problem which confronted me was, to establish my tribal identity. There was still that strong matrilineal feeling resulting from my childhood. My childhood associates, especially those who were initiated into the *Poru* with me, were all *Gola*, in *Jene Sese*.

Fortunately for me I had living in Demei, my father's adopted home in Dei country, older brothers and sisters who knew about our paternal background. One of the brothers, Fahn Taweh, made it clear to me that we were Vai, because a child belongs to his father (*kai wa tamu deng nda*). He explained the reason for the lack of strong ties between the Demei branch of the Kiazolu, and their Jondu kin was, the lack of communication. During his lifetime, my father made no attempt to pay visits to his relatives in Jondu. This accounts for the reason why after his death, my maternal relatives took me away to Gola Kone.

In the effort to establish my identity I soon realized that it would be of advantage to me to be able to speak Vai fluently. And so I brushed up on my Vai. On my first visit to Jondu, I was enthusiastically received because of this.

In addition to patrilineal descent and the ability to speak the Vai language, I also learned that my Tamia name derived from an uncle of mine, a younger brother of my father.

In conclusion, I may state that my identity as a Vai *keseng* is based on three criteria: patrilineal descent, language, and name.

\*This paper was presented by Bai T. Moore at the Conference on Manding Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1972.



## **Landsman: The Conversations of Bai T. Moore**

**Arnold Odio**

**er (Editors)**

The collection [ghettos like Harle of the Industrial R produced what we low class was dum in o countries build industrial s because this is where the othe

the Ghettos," and I include r country. This is the legacy contributions to society. It le class, and a low class. The there. As these Third World ey have to create ghettos

The only trouble is that catches all those people at the t check ups to Europe and [favorite] poem, ["The Day All Hell Br people look at themselves.

the ghetto it goes up, and it run away and go for medical es they wait too late. My "], is about how the ghetto

Harlem was heaven. When I went, the last time I saw Harlem I cried. I cried because people were walking like this, and they had marihuana and everything. Cruisers with cops and everything. I have looked at the ghettos in my home country, West Point, and many other places, and I say that we should listen to the language of these people. We should hear their plight and see what we can do for them.

Now, the caption of "Echoes From the Ghettos" is the Hallelujah Flower. I'm using Liberian Language—Hallelujah Flower. All these churches rising up, but the one that catches my heart [is] the J. P. Flower, the Justice of the Peace Flower, yeah. The Justice of the Peace lives a simple life and thinks deep. Then I go and look for my favorite "rent" flower. That's another thing. You go into some of these ghettos tonight whether its in Harlem, whether it's in Bombay, whether it's in Calcutta, and you will hear the cries of the Ghettonians.

**The Day All Hell Broke Loose**

Lord, I say.

It was a Hell of a day, one never to be forgotten.

Good God Almighty!

It was the day all Hell broke loose in Ghetto by,  
and men, women, and children, then,  
was runnin' 'round like a bat out of Hell  
lookin' for a hiding place.

Good God Almighty!  
Jesus Christ!

Very soon that morning  
(when the roosters—they were sleeping)  
the old man with the landlord  
a short, bald headed, bow legged sonofabitch.  
He showed up at our door already mad and drunk as hell,  
and his eyes—they was red like palm nuts!  
Good God Almighty!

When the old man bat his eyes,  
balls of fire jumped out of his nose, his mouth and ears.  
Good God Almighty!

What kind of man is this?  
He kicked and pushed and opened our door,  
and the window too—he bust it wide open!  
Good God Almighty!

God damn it now! Eh, Hell!  
I want my rent now, now, now, now, now.  
I'm not runnin' a missionary joint.  
Suppose you don't pay my rent.  
How I go live?  
How I go catch my head?  
I want my rent here now, now, now,  
or get your nasty A-S-S-E-S out of my room.  
Good God Almighty!

Me and my woman and children, then,  
was trembling like I don't know what.  
Good God Almighty!

We started grabbing our things then  
—our mats, our clothes, our pans and pots and buckets then  
—and ran outside to the breadfruit tree,  
trembling like a bunch of bats cast out of torment.  
Good God Almighty!

Lord, hear the flower,  
ohhh, hear the flower.  
Lord, you know we sit around the fire  
We're small, small picking them.  
They started fartin' and poopenin' everywhere,

stinkin' up the neighborhood.  
Good God Almighty!

As if this was not enough, our stomachs then  
—they started doing their parroting.  
Look here!  
All you could hear was chooon—chooon, chooon—chooon,  
like a bunch of kids fenced up in a pen,  
waiting to be fed.  
Good God Almighty!

This is the voice of the keeper of the devil, Hmm!  
Feed me, oh, feed me.  
That's the Ghetto people.  
I take them and this is what I have.  
I have ribs and dry bones.  
Them too.  
They started doing their part of things.  
Boku—baka, boku—baka, up and down, in and out, out and in,  
like a bellow in a blacksmith's shop.  
Good God Almighty!

Hungry.  
Say.  
Hear me, ohhh, my people.  
Good God Almighty!

Goin', ' in' to t t,  
we al mud walls,  
a has n  
broken zinc  
d posts  
tie rope.

Good God Almighty!

Suddenly, yeah suddenly,  
all Hell broke loose in Ghattoby.  
A monstrous rainstorm from the clear blue skies  
just grabbed our shanty.  
Wham! Like a cat and a rat.  
Good God Almighty!

It broke our fine, fine shanty into pieces.  
 Our broken zinc.  
 Our cardboard pieces.  
 All, and chunked 'em in the breeze  
 in the great Atlantic Sea.  
 Good God Almighty!

Here we are without a roof in the cold.  
 Lord, that's the flower.  
 Ohhh, that's the flower, Lord.  
 Voices from Ghattoby.

### Travel in China and other Places

I left here [Liberia], went to Mali, to Bamako and visited Timbuktu and Gao, and all of these places and went from there to Qadafi's country, Libya. From there I went to Budapest; then I went to Moscow; then I went to a great historical [place], the crossroads of the silk trade; then I went to the wine country of Russia, Georgia, and that experience I have written it in a poem, "A Trip to the Land of Ancient History."

A little poem that I wrote—I think I told you about it—it's a poem I wrote for Maya Angelou. I say that 300 years ago she was grabbed, and they threw her in a ship and sent her across the sea, and then she came back and made a big show, and I wrote a poem in her honor.

Here's the one for the little girl in China in Shanghai. She'd never seen a Black person. When I went into the village, all her friends, they all were standing hugging their mothers trembling, and she looked at me a long time and just came to me and grabbed me, and I said, "This is wonderful." It touched me! I had to write a poem, "Pillars of Friendship." [Yeye] and I—her name was [Yeye], and [Yeye] in Gola, my mother's dialect, means mother.

Pillars of Friendship  
 Yeye and I,  
 suddenly discovered,  
 when we met,  
 that she and I,  
 from China and Liberia,  
 possessed just what it takes,  
 a radiant smile and a warm embrace  
 to start bridging the gaps  
 of different tongues  
 vast stretches of lands and seas  
 and ways of life,  
 from way back  
 to bring about that friendship,

which knows no boundaries,  
and the Pillars of Peace  
for all

That little girl helped. I told the Chinese, one of the top fellows, when they invited me to a luncheon, I said, "This is all it takes. This is all it takes! That little girl, you just send her around the world. Let her just go and embrace people and know them, and this is all it. . . ." Yes.

### Maya Angelou

So, oh! This is the "Maya Angelou"; it's written in Vai. The poem is written in Vai, and it is also the script. We transcribed it in the script, you see.

Maya Angelou  
Maya, hello.  
Truly, this one is like a dream.  
The big sailing ship came very slowly  
and lay along the sea very plainly.  
They snatched you quickly,  
and put you on the ship,  
and you floated to the West,  
and the paths between us closed.  
It was not until yesterday,  
the key year in 1821,  
we heard from you,  
saying you were coming.  
Therefore, Maya,  
if today we see you,  
our hearts are filled with joy.  
Maya, hello.  
Hello, Maya, hello.

### The Vai Language

<p>Something else I want to include because I could be here all night. On lake Piso in th gave him a little of and a li this d fellows material</p>	<p>] Bukele had a dream, and in the dream someone Vai language. Some sources said that he had had ied a little Arabic—and he had studied the Koran orking in a slave factory in the Tombe area. So in 'pt to write the Vai language. He and six other e course of time they had put together enough</p>
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<p>Now, an English lieutenant passin peculiar type of writing on the walls of hu College in Sierra Leone, and Boston University got hold of some of the articles</p>	<p>the Tombe area saw this made a report to Fourah Bay</p>
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[from Fourah Bay]; and in the course of time, this is what they had developed: two hundred and five characters to write the Vai language.

Of course, it was written zigzag, upside down and so on, but Hamburg University began a systematic study of the script. They sent one of their scholars here, and he met with some of the scholars like Old Man Jangaba, and they all worked on the script to try to standardize it, and Boston University was interested in it, but they gave up. The Church Missionary Society got them interested, but they gave up.

So in 1962 a group of us who were interested in preserving the language, the system of writing, had a symposium at the University of Liberia, and we came up with this standard script for writing the Vai language. But I wasn't satisfied. I still say it was cumbersome, and there should be an easier way of getting around writing this Vai language. I didn't have a dream. I just—my knowledge of geometry and my knowledge of drawings and everything brought me to the conclusion that the whole system of the Vai language was based on what? These geometric symbols—a circle, a crescent, a dot, a square, and a perpendicular or horizontal.

Now, since 1962 I have been trying to prove this. I've been trying to prove this. And every place I went I've tried to get in touch with scholars to help me prove my theory that the Vai system of writing is based on these five geometric symbols, and here is my name, for instance. My name, for instance, is Bai T. Moore—Bai T. Moore. Now, what do I see there? I see the circle—I see two big circles, a small circle, and the dot. I see the crescent, two crescents joined together. This is all you see! I mean, if you see anything else besides this, you let me know.

Now, here is phrase meaning, "This is the Vai book," and all I see there again is a combination of these five geometric symbols. And the fellows in China—I went to the University of Peking, and I met the fellows who are studying. You know the Chinese characters are three thousands? It would take me a hundred years to learn them. But in Vai you can learn this in six days, or even in one week. All you have to do is draw this.

So my job now, my research now, is to get scholars interested in this so that we can popularize it and get the Vai people to write their language for three reasons. One, to be able to communicate with one another and to be able to read what has been written about the Vai people by the Vai themselves, about their migrations from Mali to where they are now, and the ideas that they have expressed in philosophy and so on. You see, when the \_\_\_\_\_ were trading between Monrovia and the Vai country, all of their records were kept in something like this. [He shows a manuscript]. So this is why the traders were looking for young men who were willing to learn Vai to be working at their outstation \_\_\_\_\_ young men. So, you are working at universities where you are doing linguistics, where they are doing African studies? So "hear the flower, ohhh, hear the flower."

### Wanekowa, The Greedy Chief

Once upon a time—this is a short story—there was a greedy man by the name of Wanekowa. He was so greedy that the news of his greediness went all around the world, and he owned half of the town where he lived; his quarters occupied half of the town. Every year the whole country comes to make farm for him. They brush the farm. They burn the farm. They scratch rice. But his law was that not one grain of rice must be taken away by anybody. That was his law. The only thing that you ate is what he fed you when you were working.

So one day five thousand men came to fell trees in his farm, and he put on his short bush trousers and bush shirt and everything and went to make sure that nobody carried a snail, a bird, a bird egg, or anything out of the farm. He was running from place to place checking.

Suddenly, he heard that a young man had discovered some honey in a tree—a beehive in a tree. He ran and ran and ran until he came to this tree.

"Oh, I want to collect the honey myself. Give me the cutlass. I will go up there. I don't want nobody to go up there so they can't carry any of my honey."

So Wanekowa jumps up in the tree, going up. He got to the honey.

"Oh," he says. "My God! This honey is sweet!"

He puts his hand in there. While he was licking, he lost his balance, and he fell back, and a piece of tree stump pierced him in his stomach, and he started hollering.

"Oh, my people, you all come. Oh, I'm dying. My people you all come. Ohhh, I'm dying. I'm wounded. I'm dying."

So all the people left the village. His wives left the village crying to do something for the chief. They brought the doctor man to see what he could do for the village chief.

The doctor man said, "How did he get hurt?"

They said, "He went up into the tree to collect the honey himself, and he fell and pierced his stomach."

So the [doctor] man said, "Well, this is a horrible case. We have to carry him to the village."

"Doctor, please do something. Don't let me die. I don't want to die and leave my wives and my children."

So they made a makeshift hammock out of tie-tie rope and put him in there, and two of them started carrying him on their shoulders. They had to cross a monkey bridge. So these men had to walk carefully on this monkey bridge to carry Wanekowa to the village. When they got in the middle of the stream, the bridge broke and the chief went down, and another stick pierced him in the back.

"Oh!" he said. "My people, here I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying! My wife, oh, my wife will start crying!"

And they said, "Chief, you ain't dying yet."

So they fought, fought, fought. Then they tied a piece of cloth around him so that he would stop bleeding, and they carried him to the village. They put him under the eave of the big round house and let him rest quietly while they heated some water to bathe him because he was developing a fever fast.

While the chief was sitting under the eave of the house, a green mamba came and bit him on the neck.

"Oh! my goodness" the chief said. "Oh, my people, I'm dying. I can't make it. I'm dying."

"No, you won't die" his people said.

And the good doctor came and said, "You won't die. Tell me what all happened."

And he said, "Oh, I went to collect my honey and all these things happened to me."

So by that time his wives had gotten the water hot enough so they could massage him. And he was lying by the fire when one of his little children playing around the fire tripped over the fire, and hot water scalded the king.

And he said, "Oh, I'm dying, I'm dying. Oh, my people, I'm dying."

So the doctor said, "All right. Let's carry the chief to the sick room on the outskirts of town, and I don't want many people there. I just want one woman to go sleep in the place and make the fire so he can keep warm and to rub him down with oil and do e g."

But the woman went fast asleep, and while she was turning over, a charcoal fell on the chief's cover and the bed caught fire.

And because of the doctor's message the people were not with him. Most of them were asleep.

And by the time they saw the smoke coming out, they also heard the chief yelling, "Oh, my people, I'm dying, I'm dying. Wanekowa is dead."

So you see what greediness is? Five thousand people working and he wanted to check on everybody. So that's why they call that story, "Wanekowa, the Greedy Chief."

Don't make anything an obsession—an extreme. So Wanekowa dies because he was a greedy chief. So I put my finger on the fire and that's the end of my show.



### The Sinkor Area

By the 1850's most of the northwestern tribes were represented here [in Monrovia], the Vai from the Cape Mount region, the Gola from the northwestern part of the country, the Kissi from the Guinea border, the Loma from the Guinea border, the Manding from the Cape Mount region and an interesting group called the Belle, members of the Krahn, in the northwest.

I was trying to learn Belle because the Belle language has six roots, Krahn, Gola, Bandi (my wife is Bandi), Loma, Mende, and another group—I can't remember. I was doing some recording of their music, and I found some expressions from these different languages. This had been the real melting pot in Liberia and many people didn't know. This is a small area, and the people had to learn from each other fast.

The Sande-Poro group accepted Belle and exchanged a lot of ideas. And so I found many Poro-Sande groves in this small area near Monrovia. In fact, where the American Aid Mission is located, they had a Sande Grove and my girl friend, Old Lady Golo—and from what she told me she must be 112-113 years—said that she saw President Arthur Barclay, when he was a young man with goatee and handsome and tall, walking over the cliff coming down to see a Sande grove where the American Aid Mission is located.

And I said, "Did you ever talk with him?"

"No," she said. "But I saw him."

And, then, before she came out of the Sande bush, she saw a young boy who used to follow Arthur Barclay, Daniel Howard, who also became president of Liberia. This was one of the reasons why, when President Arthur Barclay was in the mansion, he had great regard for the cultural institutions of this area—and also President Daniel Howard. And they passed this liking for cultural institutions to other presidents.

President Tubman used to send for me and say, "Bai, don't let the people break up all these other people who have Sande groves in Sinkor; that is part of our roots, and we've got to preserve them."

That was very, very important. Across the street from me is the Sande school, and there is a Sande initiation session going on right now; and it is the oldest Sande grove in the Monrovia area. And to set up this grove they had to go through the Bassa rites and rituals, and you will see some of the paraphernalia that I have been able to recall dating from 1835-38. So much for the history of where I live.

### The Early Life of Bai Tamia Moore

I was born in a small village. Our safari will start from the village in which I was born, Dimeh, 22 miles from Monrovia. (One of the reasons I was not with

you for the poetry reading session, I told you that I was now the head of the extended family of the village, and I told you about the death I had in the village. On that particular day they had made a collection for a feast for the girl who died, and they wanted me to be there for the counting of rocks—the contributions, the donations—and what to do with them. I try to do my best. They said you must go. Everybody else will come and you have to tell us what to do, and so I said okay.)

Dimeh is still a big Poro and Sande center. My father migrated from Cape Mount, his mother, my grandmother, brought him. A war was going on and Grandmother held onto a Zoe mask, a Bundu mask, one that had been in our family for I don't know how many years. It is still in the village and this one of the reasons I have to live in that village, to mind that mask. Several times collectors wanted to pinch it up, buy it out. When I was initiated into some of the Sande and Poro rites, I was told, "Don't ever get rid of this Bundu mask; get rid of it and the whole village is gone!"

You will see that on the spot where I was born is a round house. I tell them to always keep a round house there to remind me of the house in which I was born. See, my mother was not the head wife.

There were three quarters in the village—my father's quarters (and a sister of his came later and joined him and The Old Lady, my grandmother), and old lady [Yaiya] or auntie [Yaiya's] quarters, and then The Old Lady's quarters, for my grandmother had her                      and her son had his quarters.

My mother had six children and all of us were in this little [one room] house. My father's head wife lived in a square house, but it [was] gone and I didn't need it when I came back.

Before the motor road was made, I used to walk from Dimeh to Monrovia and from Monrovia to Dimeh. The people used to come to Monrovia in the morning to buy their salt, tobacco and                      'ng, and they went back in the afternoon. It was a six-hour walk.

My brother, one of my brothers, was the local herbalists in the village, and this lady was partially blind. She had been to the doctors in Monrovia and they had told her she would never regain her sight. So she went to the village to my brother, and after six months she said she could see and could walk to Monrovia and back without a stick or without anyone helping her.

And it was at the time when she gained her sight completely that an eye specialist came to this area and saw what the problems were and he told the President that he needed to get some                      ts because there were a lot of blind people in the country.

There were two Haitian doctors here who were eye specialists and one eye specialist. So they all went up to the village to meet my brother to find out what did he use to restore the sight of this old lady. And the specialists presented the lady with these eye glasses, and this was a great thing.

My brother the herbalist became friendly with many foreign doctors. There was a man here, a foreign man who had a wife who became an alcoholic, and so he wanted to get rid of the woman.

So my brother said, "No, No, don't get rid of her. I can cure her if you want me to and if she wants to be cured."

So they went through me as an interpreter and I took the husband and the wife, and she spent a year and became the best weaver of fishing nets. There's an interesting article about what happened, how this whole process occurred. The doctor said that psychotherapy was used.

The day they carried [away] the woman, I was in a pickup with them on the way to the village, and the first thing he [my brother] asked the husband was where is a bottle to drink. She used to like Boodles gin.

And the man said, "Doc, I'm trying to get the woman to stop drinking and you say bring it."

"You bring it. I know what I'm doing." So my brother gave the bottle to the woman and said, "Take a little bit every day. That's part of the cure."

And believe me, every time she takes a sip he puts in clear water, and when that lady got to the last sip of that bottle, she was drinking clear water. From that day on she stopped drinking and altogether and became the best fishnet weaver in the village.

And he said, "You know what, this woman was capable of doing something but nobody appreciated her, and now you see women come from all parts of this country to buy fishnets from her. She stayed in the village for one solid year and learned how to speak Dei.

So this is the doctor, my brother. He was taught herbs by my father. My father was the big herbalist in the area. People say, why didn't you learn from him? Well, I say that I was in a Kwi school in America. He left some of his magic with his wife, and there's a daughter, and if this daughter's husband permits her, she may be one day be like her father.

My [other] brother was the clan chief of the area during the whole of the Tubman administration, and he was a great hunter. He is dead now. He taught me more biology—gross anatomy—than I was able to learn in college. But he was a great hunter. Many of the little kids, whenever he brought a game to the town, before he butchered it, he sent for all the little kids to come so that he could show them what the liver was, the lungs, the veins and glands, and everything. All the little kids in the village knew their anatomy.

Now I'll tell you something that happened to me. I became infected with a virus. I was sitting in a palaver house not far from the village and suddenly I couldn't see. My eyes were infected with some virus and I couldn't see. I went to the Haitian doctor.

He examined the eye and said, "We don't have the equipment that we need to do a thorough <sup>examination</sup>tion. You need to go to Dakar; that's the nearest place that we can recommend you to go."

I didn't even have the money to go Cape Mount. I went up to my brother and told him what my problem was because I was getting worse.

He said, "Do you believe that I can do something for you?"

I said, "Sure you can do something for me. Who else?"

He said, "Take a leave from your apartment and come, and I will put you in the sick room for one month. You won't sleep in your house in the bed. We will clean a place and you will go and sleep there, and the kids will come at night and keep you company. They will build a fire and keep away snakes and bugs." He told his wife what to put in my eyes. And they used a pink-whatever this thing was. They bring it and put in in my eyes.

"There are certain things you can't eat while you re in the sick room," he said. "And don't read anything."

I'm telling you, in six weeks I could see, I could read. This was in the late sixties.

I was initiated in the first degree of Poro before I went to the United States to school, and when I came back they convened a session for me to take a second degree up in Dimeh. And I learned a certain step, a code language between the drummer and the dancer. No singing. When the man tells you how high to reach your feet and so on, all of it is done in code. If the dancer wants a certain rhythm, he can tell the drummer. I'm telling you, it is not easy at all.

When they are getting ready to have a Sande initiation session [in my village], they built this fence on the outskirts of the village. And the girls are kept inside that fence for three years—no delinquency problems, no misbehaving. Most of the culture of the group is transmitted through these schools, the one for boys for four years. You will see some beautiful Sande dances before you leave, but dancing is not all. The history of the group, the art of the group is transmitted to the younger generation through schools like this.

### **The Extended Family**

The extended family is a web. In our extended family system my father's brothers are my fathers; they are not my uncles. My mother's brothers are my uncles. My mother's sisters are my mothers. So you see, as it spreads, as the web spreads, these become what we call circles or centers where signals can be sent: a circle. You represent a circle; your father represents a circle; your mother represents a circle; your brothers represent a circle; your sisters represent a circle. So that anything that happens within the web, if it happens in your home, all you have to do is press the signal to all these circles, and they too start pressing, and pretty soon, boy, you've got a lot of people reacting, you see?

[About] the niece that I was tellin you about who died, I have gotten word that they are going to have a big feast. Some members of the family want to have a big feast costing x number of dollars. So I have to go back to the village and press against the rocks, the rock meaning your part of the contribution. So, to sum it up, the extended family is a security for members of the family and, therefore, a child is taught to know his family in order that he might enjoy the benefits that this web provides.

For instance, this man knows a lot about my mother's people. He knows. Like he was telling me. We were talking about a certain character and everything, about the rock that he saw, and he told me all the monkey business that took place at the rock, and [unintelligible] were arrested and so on. Now, if I dig deep, deep, he is in the circle.

I hope that your stay will be very fruitful while you are in Liberia. I'm sure it will be fruitful because there is so much to learn. Some things have been written, but a lot has to be written still.

## BAI T. MOORE'S POETRY AND LIBERIAN ID

### *Offering To The Ancestors*<sup>1</sup>

Dorith Ofri-Scheps

#### I. Bai T. Moore On His Poetic Art

An hitherto unknown document i.e., the unpublished manuscript "Foreword" to *Ebony Dust*, which Bai T. Moore handed me some years ago, provides autobiographical glosses, on whose authority his poetry,<sup>2</sup> at large, has been subjected to a critical characterization in terms of its embodiment with Liberian identity in general. Results are presented below.

My reading of Bai T. Moore's poems hinges on three major points he made in that "Foreword,"<sup>3</sup> which are rendered explicit, first of all, in terms of his self-identification as a poet, then, in terms of the human qualities that informed his personality. Secondly, seventeen of his poems establish pragmatically the identity of his poetry as a unified body of narratives and reflections in free verse. Thirdly, two of his poetry's major characteristics, i.e., their polyglotism and their polydisciplinarity, are interpreted through the overriding concept of pluralism, in terms of their embodiment with Liberia's identity hinging on its twofold origins—African, Judeo-Christian—which subtend that identity. Last but not least, the Liberian specificity of his art is discussed in the perspective of contemporary African poetry.

"As a child sitting under my grandmother's feet, gaping at the fantastic stories she told, I had not the least idea that *Ebony Dust* was in the making. The rhythmic pattern of the songs and the manner in which the stories were told left an indelible impression on my mind.

The old lady's stories and those of the elderly people, who were frequent visitors to our big round house, told on animals and insects having human characteristics; of how they hunted, made traps, gathered honey, and even conducted initiation sessions for their children.

At Bendu Mission on Lake Piso in Grand Cape Mount County, where I learned to read and write English, I found myself writing down the stories which had been told me back in the village. Some years later, in Armstrong High School Richmond, Virginia, one of my English teachers asked the class to write a poem about a real or imaginary situation or character, taking into consideration the qualities of a good poem, which

we had been discussing rhythm, rhyme and meter. But one thing she forgot: the unexplainable force which motivates one to write a poem. Before the exercise, the class had gone over the works of leading English and American poets. The names which stuck with me were Edgar Allen Poe, Robert Burns, Walt Whitman, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

I went home and stayed up half of the night fumbling over what real or imaginary situation to write about. I wanted to use an African word which rhymed with bay. I came up with mayugbay, a word without any bearing on my past experiences. I wanted to write a poem showing me sitting across a bay and listening to the song of mayugbay.

In the three verses I wrote, there was a beautiful interplay of the words bay and mayugbay. But in my class, the next morning, when I read the poem, I got a very cold response: it conveyed nothing and no one in the class was moved when they heard it. On the other hand, when my seat-mate got up and read "Negro Boy," admonishing the Negro youth to follow the examples of Booker T. Washington, Benjamin Banaker, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the class burst out in a great applause.

I went home despondent but undefeated. The experience presented me with a challenge. I recalled an adage I had heard from my grandmother, that a bird can cry better in its own tongue.<sup>4</sup> This could mean that, although I was now thinking and writing in English, if I wanted to write a meaningful poem—or prose for that matter—I should draw on my African background which was familiar to me.

The next day I came up with the following poem:

The day was bright and sunny<sup>5</sup>  
 When I set sail for America.  
 I went upon the windy deck  
 To watch the surf boats roll away  
 With friends who came to see me off  
 I watched the Dewoin coast  
 With the giant cotton trees  
 Disappearing bit by bit  
 With the rolling of the waves.  
 I thought of all my relatives  
 And playmates in the village.  
 I was sad to take them from my mind  
 When all I saw was sea and sky.  
 I wiped my tears and changed my thoughts  
 From home, for the land beyond the sea.

The poem had the whole class curious to know more about Monrovia, the port I sailed from to the United States and the tall cottonwood trees I mentioned in the poem. In the next issues of the school paper the "Spirit of \_\_\_\_\_ ng,"<sup>6</sup> "Negro Boy," and "The Day I Sailed Away" appeared prominently in the literary section. This was the actual \_\_\_\_\_ g of *Ebony Dust*.

Although the collection contains essential poems reflecting my experiences abroad, the Liberian scene remains my primary interest. Many of the poems in *Ebony Dust* are stories about Liberian life, a mixture of traditional values and the aspirations of a sophisticated society. Despite the fact that the poems are written in English, they often borrow their form from the art of the village storyteller. They, however, are not transliterations of oral literature, but my interpretation of a dualistic world in terms of my own dichotomous background."

With that conceptually important "Foreword," Bai Tamia, alias Johnson Moore,<sup>7</sup> identified himself, not only as a writer with multiple allegiances to the Liberian people and culture, generally—he was man deeply involved with his people's way of life, or with his country's shaping as one of its policy-makers, and one of the architects and builders of contemporary Liberian identity whose works, imaginative, scientific, philosophical, contributed to herald the birth of a new generation of modern Liberian writers—but, more in particular, as a literary artist, i.e., as the creative being whose young sensitivities, imagination and talent, had come alive with the utterance of stories, been quickened by the rhythm of songs: their sounds, their pulse: as enchanter, in turn, of their words: lord over meaning: the poet.

Moreover, Bai Tamia's "Foreword," makes explicit the writer's own understanding of poetic power-sources, in terms of the three factors crucial to any literary project, i.e.: the motivation, the aim, and the means depended on to communicate them.

"The unexplainable force which motivates one to write a poem" does not spring, according to Bai Tamia, from "art for art's sake" objectives,<sup>8</sup> but from a shared knowledge, i.e., from the conceptual treasure a poet has in common with those for whom he writes, in the heart of his heart, and which forms what Louis J. Prieto theoretically conceptualizes as the "system of intercomprehension."<sup>9</sup> Insofar as that system is inherent to a people's culture, i.e., to the totality of its ways of knowing material reality, which includes the totality of spoken or written texts<sup>10</sup> comprised by its traditions—that "unexplainable force" which kindles poetic desire, then, is the emotional impact of a people's culture upon the creative mind. Though Bai Tamia's abiding fascination for poetry<sup>11</sup> had been stimulated by, and found inspiration in his experiences of the world, its cultures and literatures,<sup>12</sup> that truly "unexplainable force" which, for ever, would mo-



tivate him to produce his deeply engaged, "subjective" lyrics<sup>13</sup> was rooted in the humus of Liberia's culture.

Whilst Liberia's culture, no doubt, nourished Bai Tamia's poetic inspiration, no doubt, too, it met in him a mind endowed with that prodigious gift for total and yet distanced participation in the poems he conceived, which, e.g., made him feel only "despondent but undefeated" after his initial poetic failure as a boy, and which pertains to that grace theoretically conceptualized by Gerald Moore as the "creative confidence."<sup>14</sup>

The aim of a poem, according to Bai Tamia, is to "move" those who read or hear it, by conveying "something" to them, i.e., knowledge relevant to a "background" both the poet and those addressed by his verses are "familiar" with. That knowledge is, of course, the knowledge defining their common system of intercomprehension, and the "something" conveyed, obviously, is a particular knowledge, or concept, which constitutes a particular poem's meaning. Now if, on one hand, a concept is an instrument, which not only results from, but also generates mankind's control of nature, and if moreover, on the other hand, a people's identity by contrast with the identity of an object can be established only in terms of the instruments used by its members,<sup>15</sup> is then, the means of which an artist avails himself to write his poems are aimed at connoting both, their meaning, and dimensions of social identity. Bai Tamia's early decided refusal to become an "art for art's sake" poet, and his conviction, that the energy required to "move" his readers would spring from the experiences and background he shared with Africa's own people, implied that, whatever means Bai Tamia would avail himself of to write a poem, were, not only to connote that poem's meaning, but also the dimensions of his identity as an African, whose "primary interest" would, till the last, remain "the Liberian scene," i.e., basically, as a Liberian. The way Bai Tamia conceptualized it in his "Foreword," the founding dimension of Liberian identity is its "dualism." Therefore, Bai Tamia's defined the aim of his poetic desire as the interpretation of "Liberian life, a mixture of traditional values and the aspirations of a sophisticated society," in the perspective of his "own dichotomous background."

The means at the service of Bai Tamia's poetic desire were, quite globally, identified by himself, on one hand, as the "manner," or "form," which he reported as also inspired by the village story teller's art, and, on the other hand, as the natural language in which the poems were written, i.e.,—he specified—English, whose traditional poetic parameters he noted as "rhythm, rhyme and meter." My paper being founded on Bai Tamia's "Foreword" to *Ebony Dust*, the aspects of his poetry I chose to study as embodiment with Liberia's identity, then, are aspects of those means.

My analysis of his means results in a critique of Bai Tamia's blind spot, which led to a paradox of significance about the language in which he said he wrote his poems, and to no less significant an understatement about the source of his artistic inspiration.

Indeed, whilst English is the language in which Bai Tamia wrote most of his poems, English is not the only language he used. In addition, whilst, indeed, their form often is indebted to the village storyteller's art: an art supposing the music and dancing typical for its traditional matrix<sup>16</sup> (no less than to English literature: but this is only implied in what he wrote in his "Foreword"), he, however, heavily borrowed also from the wide spectrum of Liberia's indigenous handicrafts. Both of Bai Tamia's practices constituted efficient means, so as not only better to embody his art with the knowledge he wanted to communicate through the poem's meaning, but also better to connote the plural "dualism" of Liberia's identity, i.e., that "mixture of traditional values"—generated by the variety of its culture—the "aspirations of its sophisticated society"—brought about by social stratification—which he deemed its founding dimensions.<sup>17</sup> His means for writing poems hence are doubly investigated here, at the level of polyglotism and at the level of polydisciplinarity, in terms of Bai Tamia's pluralism.

The successful realization of a motivated and well-aided poetic desire hinges, undoubtedly, on the quality of an artist's means, but those constitute only one of the conditions involved in it. If "successful realization of a motivated and well-aimed poetic desire" means that the poet finds appreciative readers as well as respectful critical reception, then the second condition on which his poetic desire's realization hinges as well, i.e., the traits of his personality, must be mentioned, so as to suggest the universally human dimensions of his literary stature.<sup>18</sup>

Among the personality traits informing Bai Tamia's creative confidence, then, first the philosophical nature of his imagination. In addition, the visionary power of his inspiration; his quasi-universal range of empathy; the scope and authenticity of his feelings; the capacity of distancing himself from emotion and avoid sentimentalism; keenness of observation; his lyrical responsiveness to reality; his pantheistic vision of nature; his freedom from presumption; self-control; intellectual curiosity; willingness to learn; good humour; his patient teaching; his smiling serenity; his religious skepticism; intuition of the comic; the warmth of his wit; the coolness of his evaluation; his sense of fun; the causticity of his laughter; his tactful critique; open-mindedness; a sharp eye for people; his respect for the lowly; fraternity with the young; veneration of the old; the fierce faithfulness of his friendship; acceptance of the other's weakness; his availability; love for the arts; art of synthesis; a penetrating grasp of the modern world's questions about art; the mildness of his classconscious socially critical views; the steadfastness of his utopias; unshakable creeds and beliefs; his ability to mitigate conflicts; an unforced liberalism; uncalculated generosity; his humbleness in dealing with powerless or powerful alike; a yearning to reconcile; creative energy; recognition of the essential; helping; his poetic hoping against hope.<sup>19</sup>

And, right from the

g, Bai Tamia's final clairvoyance with regard

to the ultimate values, celebrated in *What Counts*—a relatively early poem, from *Ebony Dust* which prefigures the poet's spiritual testament. Aptly, it figures on the marble of his Dime Graves:

It's not the dress we have that counts  
But what we are and what we mean,  
For men will soon or later change  
But what we do will here remain.

Men care not from where we come  
But watch to see what we have done  
And when we've gone and turned out leaf  
They watch the victory we have won.

## II. Seventeen Poems

### maya i seneo

bai t. more

9:5:86

maya i sene

tobaa keme be

ilo keu hee

fila dende ba

nalowani dee

amu a kpemgba

koieja gengee

amu anda i desi sa

anda i fili

fila dendee lo

amu wot kpafoa ka

wo kena tetaa

numu kilaa kpotiana

mu temalo kpan

n mafo kei-a

menuu la

poo sane

1821 bulo

mua ya kule sunda dan

ke i be kila fe

n komu maya

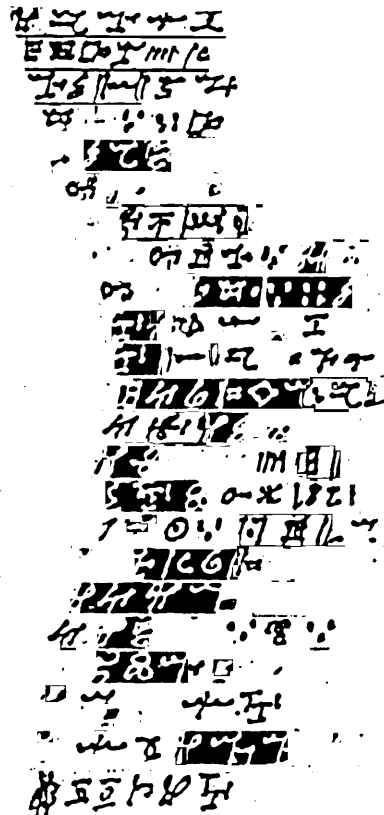
mu koni i fele

wele tele me la

mu fa sale ba mu hee

maya i seneo

i sene maya i sene



maya hello  
 truly this one's  
 like a dream  
 the big sailing ship  
 cane very slowly  
 and lay  
 along the sea  
 very plainly  
 they snatched you quickly  
 and put you on the ship  
 and you floated  
 to the west  
 and the path  
 us closed  
 it was not til  
 yesterday the kwi  
 year in 1821  
 we heard from you  
 saying you were coming  
 therefore maya  
 if today we see you  
 our hearts are filled with joy  
 maya hello  
 hello maya hello

### Ba Nya M Go Koma

#### *Gola*

ba nya m go koma o  
 e koma je jee  
 ba nya m go koma o  
 m jei yei Gola  
 mfe goye joa nyu ndo  
 by nya m go koa o  
 ekoma je jee  
 ba nya m go koma o  
 m jei yei

### They Said I Did Not Born

they said I did not born  
 to have a child is painful  
 they said I had no child  
 so I will sit down so

*English*

I will rear nobody's child  
 they said I had no child  
 to have a child is painful  
 they said I had no child  
 so I will sit down so

THIS VERSION OF THE LEMGBE (GOLA FOLK SONG)  
 BECAME VERY POPULAR AROUND 1956.

o wilhelmina ka

bai t. moore

2:1:86

(a tribute)

in gola o wilhelmina ka  
 a great mortal soul  
 made holy by the power of  
 god daya glepo nyesua  
 with arms wide open  
 and under whose abode  
 humble as it was  
 every living thing there  
 found comfort day and night  
 has passed away suddenly but  
 left people and spots which  
 she touched and built  
 with love, warmth and charity things  
 which will last thruout eternity  
 weinti wilhelmina kwa mu geny hee  
 o daya kpuma m fahn whe ndisia

Peace on the moon and hell on earth

for many million years  
 or, a speck in time and space  
 the man on the moon out yonder  
 has been quietly minding his business  
 except at times he frowns  
 when some people sin  
 by fishing on the sabbath  
 but man, o man on earth  
 with his small inquisitive self  
 has been ploughing  
 digging and dickering until



The Jungle Melody

From pounding sangbas\* far away  
 I hear a jungle melody.  
 The chanter clearly seems to say  
 "In rhythmic steps and graceful charms,  
 The belles with budding breasts  
 Are dancing on fantastic toes,  
 And swarthy lads with well-built chests  
 Filing out to win a jungle love"

*\*ONE OF THE MANY CYLINDRICAL DRUMS  
 WITH SKIN TIED AT ONE END.*

Rock Chunkers

rock chunkers  
 who hide their hands  
 after throwing them  
 at you are not  
 hard to catch  
 just shake the bush  
 they hide behind  
 as hard as you can  
 you'll see them  
 sneaking out softly  
 and trying to run like hell

(written May 12, 1966)

The Moon

From the window of my hut  
 Majestic beauty wings the sky,  
 Some people call it nature  
 In awe I call it God.

*THIS POEM WAS WRITTEN WHILE ATTENDING A PARTY  
 ON THE TERRACE OF MY FRIEND'S (ROLAND  
 T. DEMPSTER) CROWN HILL HOME IN MONROVIA,  
 LIBERIA. THE MOON OVER THE MESURADO  
 RIVER BEHIND THE HOUSE WAS SOMETHING BEYOND  
 DESCRIPTION.*

the shape of our world today  
nepeja

monrovia, r.1.

5:25:86

bai t. moore

h  
u  
m  
o  
r  
c  
o  
l  
o  
g  
y  
this is

one day  
in a small  
integrated school  
in scare-crow  
alabama u s a  
a little ambitious  
teacher asked his  
pupils to tell  
him the shape  
of the world  
the answers  
they were plenty  
such as  
the world is round  
the world is flat  
the world is square  
the world is zig zag  
a bright little  
negro girl in  
the back row  
of the class  
got up and laughed  
my father and my mother  
said last night  
the world is in  
the worst shape  
now than it  
has ever been



Past Glory

I wandered in the moonlit night  
 To view the glory of the past  
 The ruins of those pioneer days  
 Were silhouetted against the light  
 Where once stood mansions decked with pride  
 Now ruled by vipers and the bats  
 Were enough to make one stop and sigh.  
 The broken frames can hardly stand  
 The beating of the constant rains  
 And on the landscape high above  
 The ruins of the parish too  
 Can tell the ghostly story plain.  
 Beneath the grass stand epitaphs,  
 A remnant of some burial ground.  
 A lordly cricket once a while  
 Will break the silence with a sound.  
 Or in some distant woods a drum,  
 A native feast in feverish swing,  
 I wonder after all these years  
 These ancient ruins can rise again  
 And brighten up a dismal scene.

*MY IMPRESSION UPON VISITING THE  
 SETTLEMENT OF CLAYASHLAND ON MY  
 RETURN FROM THE U.S.A., 1941.*

Ko Bomi Hee M Koa

koa mu wo yeye  
 o hinya kpo goo mbe  
 Gola bomi hee m koa  
 ko mi nyinia kei ma  
 ma jeima wuye m zoo

English

go tell my mother  
 to bring my root pot\*  
 to bomi i'm going  
 where i'll do my stuff  
 and sweat it out hard

Gola  
 koa mu wo dada  
 o hinya kpo goo me  
 ko bomi hee m koa  
 ko mi nyinia kei ma  
 ma jeima wuye m zoo

English  
 go tell father  
 to bring my root pot  
 to bomi i'm going  
 where i'll do my stuff  
 and sweat it out hard.

Gola  
 koa mu wo siafa  
 o hinya duaze n noo  
 ko bomi hee m koa  
 ko mi nyiunia kei ma  
 ma jeima wuye m zoo

English  
 go tell siafa  
 to bring his duazet\*\*  
 to bomi i'm going  
 where i'll do my stuff  
 and sweat it out hard

Gola  
 koa mu wo mambu  
 o wande gongoeh  
 ko bomi hee m koa  
 ko mi nyinia kei ma  
 ma jeima wuye m zoo

English  
 go tell mambu  
 to stop his worrying  
 to bomi i'm going  
 where i'll do my stuff  
 and sweat it out hard

Gola  
 koa mu jamba  
 o wande deve eh  
 ko bomi hee m koa  
 ko mi nyinia kei ma  
 ma jeima wuye m zoo

English  
 tell my jamba  
 to cease advising  
 to bomi i'm going  
 where i'll do my stuff  
 and sweat it out hard

\* *CLAY POTS CONTAINING MEDICINAL ROOTS*  
 \*\* *DUAZET IS A TERM USED FOR SECONDHAND CAR*

culture = the common heritage

bai t. moore

hovering ever gently around  
 our beautiful planet—earth  
 time—in its own meticulous  
 manner has seen fit to etch  
 and mould with hands and mind  
 the genesis of our culture  
 found in weird and fathomless caves  
 and—in clay—stone—iron and wood  
 and melodious lyrics and dances  
 done with nimble toes and hands  
 plus an ocean of tales and legends  
 and the wisdom of the elders  
 this is the sacred heritage  
 which mankind  
 be they black o  
 be they white o  
 be they brown o  
 be they what o  
 share in common

CULTURE = OUR COMMON HERITAGE WAS WRITTEN DURING  
 THE 1982 UNESCO MEETING IN AVIGNON, FRANCE, ON  
 CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES OF EUROPE,  
 AFRICA AND THE ARAB WORLD.

ettobli                rats  
 lawd day na  
     break again yah  
     old ma na start  
         singing her  
         old refrain of  
          tino  
          tino  
          tino  
          tino rice  
          tino fish  
          tino oil  
          lawd what does  
          all dis mean  
          eh hell to  
          tell de capin  
          das all I see  
          so what we kids  
          can do now is  
          take our little  
          hungry behinds  
          to de nearest  
          garbage dump  
          to hustle  
          like hell  
          cussing and fighting  
          over rotten  
          greasy left overs  
          just to keep on  
 keeping on

Sande\* Girl  
 Jet black with innocent smiles  
 Warm breast unravished yet  
 Coal black hair beneath head-ties  
 Proportioned hips bedecked with beads  
 Bouncing youth with little care  
 Is Sande beauty in the raw.

*\* SECRET INITIATION SOCIETY FOR GIRLS.*

the disintegrated cockroach

(written May 12, 1966)

good friend

I beg you yah

don't be like

the foolish cockroach

in my shirt at

a formal dinner party

he made me twist and turn

pull off my coat

unbuttoned my sleeves

and tore off my evening shirt

poor fool I let him go

but eh yah poor fool

instead of beating it home

he up and tickled

both my whachumacalls

and he got crushed to death

night

a

n

d

day

a dialogue

bai t. moore

8:8:1985

night said

eh yah

if i coud read and write

jus small small self you see

and put in the ducor post all the

anyama nyama things I see

in ducor and elsewhere

hell would break loose

in monrovia soon every

morning i swear to gawd

day said

night man wait yah

if i coud read and write

jus small self and fot in the

evening papers good gawd almighty

man ducor would be full of so much

the garbage trucks would

find it hard to keep monrovia

clean to gawd

de halleluyah plawa

all dis halleluyah

plawa you see going on

around here all

started in wia

crowded town

ghettobli where

all manners of

manners of people

flocked from every corner

north south east and west right after

de hitler war 1914—1918

very soon one morning while me and my friends

dem were minding all wia small small markets dem

we jus see some people plenty plenty people

rushing to de weekend bar across the road

hollering loud de prophet de prophet de

prophet ol jackoboy had turned into

a prophet halleluyah

me and my friends

dem too wia heart

jumped and ran to

de crowded weekend

bar to lay wia eyes

on jackoboy de prophet

ol jackoboy flat on his back

was trying to fight de holy ghost

halleluyah halleluyah halleluyah

fighting like hell so de

holy ghost couldn't beat

him jackoboy was hollering

loud my people o o o o

ah have a vision for

ghettobli halleluyah halleluyah

halleluyah and gawd sais in

ghettobli he on his way here very soon be ready

he coming to see how all of us are living

good gawd lo mighty halleluyah halleluyah halleluyah

so all you people ah beg your yah try and be prepared

halleluyah halleluyah halleluyah

de vision went on top say all you market women you

charging too much for your market dem halleluyah

listen all you men de vision say you got you

wife and children don't spen

all your money at de

weekend bar halleluyah  
 and de lawd said dis thing  
 of smoking and selling  
 opipn to wia chillon dem  
 eh bad o and if we don't  
 look out and dey turn out  
 to be gronas one day halleluyah plenty  
 tears and pupu will fly in ghettobli  
 and gawd say halleluyah halleluyah  
 try your best and mend your  
 wicked ways yah halleluyah  
 stop de back bitting  
 undermining yah halleluyah  
 if your don listen to me  
 hell will surely boil over  
 and sweep ghettobli clean so  
 help me gawd halleluyah halleluyah  
 everywhere in ghettobli de talk was jackoboy  
 de prophet halleluyah halleluyah halleluyah  
 pretty soon de prophet got some blokwen zinc and planks  
 and built what he called de house of salvation of de  
 lawd gawd lo mighty halleluyah halleluyah halleluyah  
 now ghettobli was something yah halleluyah  
 on one hand was de house of salvation halleluyah  
 and on de other de devil's den de weekend bar  
 good gawd lo mighty halleluyah  
 we jus hope de lawd  
 will hurry up and come  
 so we can straighten up  
 ghettobli wia beloved town  
 halleluyah halleluyah  
 halleluyah thanks be to gawd  
 praise him for wia prophet  
 jackoboy halleluyah halleluyah halleluyah

### Art in Shadows

What master, blending colors  
 And scanning small perspective,  
 Of learned critics of the arts  
 Can justice do the images  
 Reflected by a kerosene lamp  
 On walls of thatch roofed huts?  
 Artistic images perhaps  
 Of farmers doing their usual chores,

Or innocent children in the sand  
 Building castles in the air,  
 Or maybe village elders  
 Sitting round a gourd of palm wine  
 Spinning yarns of yesteryears.  
 Of crafty youths with bow and arrows  
 Imitating hunting games.  
 You see these scenes in shadows  
 Created by the tattered rags  
 Scattered on the beds  
 Or ornate raffia baskets  
 Perched upon some wooden trunks,  
 Infested with the bug-a-bugs.  
 With accent in the modern world  
 For art of humble people  
 The peasant in his thatch-roof hut  
 May offer yet a masterpiece—a mural,  
 Reflected by a kerosene lamp.

### III. Bai Tamia's Pluralism and Liberia's Twofold Origins

Bai Tamia's pluralism philosophically proceeds from a unified vision of the world proper to Liberia's indigenous African cultures, too, and which has determined the polylinguistic and polydisciplinary plurality of traditional African arts at large. Bai Tamia's reliance on more than one language, or on more than one discipline, for "the interpretation of a dualistic world" in terms of his own "dichotomous background," hence, is in keeping with the world vision of his biological family's cultural ancestors. Like many a "sophisticated" Liberian, Bai Tamia, however, was formally educated also outside of his ancestral cultures, and, hence, acquired a second, Judeo Christian, vision of the world, anchored in other types of culture, which developed separate conceptions for each art. It follows that, through his pluralism, Bai Tamia both connoted and amalgamated the two sources of Liberian identity, i.e., that he acknowledged them as his sources of inspiration under their respective identity, whilst, however, simultaneously operating with them as classes whose logical intersection, only, coincides with the class through which one inclusively defines Liberian identity: albeit a logically composed class, resulting in an identity, which can be described as e.g.: plural, pluralistic, dual, dualistic, dichotomous, etc.

Bai Tamia's pluralistic art, connoting Liberian identity through its dual cultural origin, rests on his extraordinary mettle as a creator with language. The poet he was had recognized the self-reflexive nature, the prime realities and ambivalences of language: its paradoxes—and he used them for his purpose. Having distinguished e.g., between spoken and written language, between a literate and a non-literate culture, between a text and its translation, the writer



Bai Tamia was made a paradoxical use of the two major senses implied in our reading or writing of written texts, i.e., seeing and hearing, and, through a pluridisciplinary stratagem involving them in an original manner, concretely made his poem's linguistically irrelevant shapes primarily to imitate principles of musical rhythm in Liberia's African aural/oral culture traditions, and secondarily to realize principles of poetic rhythm in the literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions, whilst he made his poem's linguistically irrelevant sounds not only primarily to imitate *The Holy Bible* and texts from classical English literature, or to embody sophisticated modern theories of poetry, but also secondarily to connote the traditional arts of Liberia's indigenous African cultures.

Bai Tamia thus paid an originally slanted double homage to each of Liberia's two culture-types, whilst connoting, for each of them, a trait characterizing the identity of Liberia on the dimension of—both—its African and its Judeo-Christian cultures.

### 1. Polyglot Pluralism in Bai Tamia's Poetry

#### Conceptual Framework

Bai Tamia's poetry is plurally polyglot. It is polyglot in that it is written in more than one language. It is plurally polyglot in that he sometimes used more than one language in the same group of lines, or stanza. The characteristic of Bai Tamia's polyglotism in poetry is that it is constituted by translation, i.e., by the translation of a non-English poem into an English poem (with but one significant exception confirming the rule). Thus, Bai Tamia's polyglotism evidently pursued his basic poetic aim as a Liberian poet writing for a readership literate in his country's national language, i.e., to "move" those who read one of his poems, by conveying to them a knowledge relevant to their shared familiar background.<sup>20</sup>

Bai Tamia had cogent reasons for writing plurally polyglot (or simply polyglot) poetry, or for writing his non-English poems in Gola or Vai: reasons, which were relevant with regard to Liberian identity, at large, as well as with regard to his own identity, as a Liberian, and as a poet.

On one hand, indeed, up to the time of his death, English was understood, spoken, or read, only by a minority of Liberia's population, most of which belonged to its "sophisticated society." The members of that minority composed Bai Tamia's first readership. In their majority, members of the indigenous Liberian peoples communicated—orally only, in general—by means of their respective African languages.<sup>21</sup> But, in a number of cases, quasi-bilingual groups (i.e., whose members learnt a second language not simultaneously with but after the first one) hinging on an indigenous Liberian language and English, also existed on the "sophisticated society's" margins—Bai T. Moore grew out of such a group—and it is members of those groups (hailing from all of the Liberian peoples), often literate, who constituted Bai Tamia's readership for his poems

written in other Liberian languages he knew. Thus, it was the sociocultural variety at the back of Liberia's y int ting linguistic plurality, as well his own quasi-bilingual, "dichotomous background," which are connoted by the polyglot pluralism of Bai Tamia's poetry.

On the other hand, Bai Tamia's choice of Vai and Gola, as his means to interpret Liberia's inter-cultural polyglot plurality, connotes the precise "dichotomous background," in terms of which his own, primary identity is defined dually, as a Gola through his mother and as a Vai through his father.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Bai Tamia's particular use of Gola, to write the only plurally polyglot poem in his whole poetic output, manifests, by poetic embodiment, Gola culture qua deepest source of his identity as a poet.<sup>23</sup> Bai Tamia's polyglot pluralism, which—since languages codify each a cultural point of view—allowed him to anchor his poetic work in a multiplicity of interrelated points of view, that polyglot pluralism, then, literally embodies with both—the inter-cultural, marginally interpenetrating plurality of polyglot Liberia, in the process of its unification, and with the primary source of his own, private identity as a poet.

1. Bai Tamia's English.— Bai Tamia's English is Liberian English. But what "is" Liberian English? In countries founded, like Liberia, or Commonwealth nations, within a colonial context, and whose national language has been defined constitutionally as English, i.e., whose national populations are supposed to speak English, their English-speaking population generally uses a speech with distinctive characteristics: sound-system, vocabulary, which are pertinent for the identity under which one knows its national language. The pertinency of its identity ensues from the point of view of the country's dominant class, imposed on all of its speakers. It is, hence, the speech of Liberia's "sophisticated"—literate—society, constituting its historically dominant class, which defines the identity of Liberian English.

The speech of Liberia's "sophisticated society," i.e., Liberian English, bears witness to the intimacy of contact between Liberia's "pioneer fathers who landed here in 1822,"<sup>24</sup> with their specific variants of American English,<sup>25</sup> and the diversity of peoples they had come to "civilize,"<sup>26</sup> each with its own Black-African language. Thus, the Liberian English vocabulary, indeed, comprises a central core of two types of standard English words, the second of which enriched with non-standard English meanings, as well as a peripheral core of Liberian English words, borrowed, either under their original bi-facial identity,<sup>27</sup> from an indigenous Liberian language, or only under their phonetic identity (which may realize African or non-African soundsystems, i.e., from a language whose identity cannot always be established with precision).

The central core of vocabulary includes, on one hand, English words figuring in any standard English-language dictionary, and, on the other hand, standard English words meaning is reinvested with a new feature, e.g., "self,"

which, in Liberian speech, also connotes the sense "even,"<sup>28</sup> as Bai Tamia used it in night and day a dialogue. In addition to standard English words, without or with added meanings, Liberian English, then further, also includes wholly or partly borrowed expressions, whose surface sound-structures, seemingly appropriated from the phonemics of Black African languages, may, however, veil their non-African etymology. Some of those expressions constitute borrowings of a correlated sound-and-meaning entity, others, etymological merging. A relatively clear case is the expression "anyama nyama," connoting "bits of odds and ends,"<sup>29</sup> which Bai Tamia used in the same poem, with its [ny] sound characteristic for many Black African phonemic systems,<sup>30</sup> amongst them Vai,<sup>31</sup> and whose probable etymon is the Vai word /nyama/ "bad, evil."<sup>32</sup> A relatively obscure case is the widely used word "kwi," connoting "not of indigenous origin," which figures in Bai Tamia's maya i seneo; its [kw] sound, present in many Black African language names,<sup>33</sup> and characteristic e.g., also for Fante phonemics,<sup>34</sup> may, nevertheless, hark back to the English etymon "queer."<sup>35</sup>

Bai Tamia wrote his poems in the Liberian English of both its literate and its illiterate speakers. The difference between them is grammar. Whereas the members of Liberia's literate society aspire at using an academically correct standard English grammar, their illiterate English-speaking counterparts use a mixture of standard English grammar and grammatical structures transliterated from indigenous language usages. E.g., in Bai Tamia's poem They Said I Did Not Born, the principal verbal proposition: "they said," is in grammatically correct English,<sup>36</sup> whilst the compliment proposition: "I did not born," implicates the irregular past participle form "born" neologically, quasi a lexical verb's regular base form, which actually conforms to the conception of a completive verbal predication in, e.g., Vai.<sup>37</sup> Both the literate and the illiterate English-speaking Liberians however use the same vocabulary, each in terms of its own degree of literacy and formal education, which define the levels of Liberian English. Bai Tamia's poetry implicates all the levels of Liberian English, thus connoting his own identity not only as a member of Liberia's "sophisticated society," but also as a writer deeply familiar with the whole Liberian people.

2. Bai Tamia's poetic diction.—Bai Tamia's poetic diction in English, i.e., his choice of words to connote the poetry's meanings, is, on one hand, "dualistic," i.e., founded on both standard English and Liberian English usage, and, on the other hand, precise and economic.

Looking at details of here reproduced poems, Bai Tamia's dualistic, precise and economic diction is first instanced for maya i seneo, a sinuously polysemic lyric about the first African Republic's much afflicted dual ancestry, whose conversational short phrases and dreamy verses sail and undulate across the printed page, graphically, quasi on the wake of the ship announced in 1821,<sup>38</sup> with its precious load of freed slaves. Bai Tamia renders the poem's Vai text in simple and elegant standard English, where the single Liberian English word "kwi" is enough to constitute a powerful interrogation of Liberia's "dualistic"

identity in terms of its historical background, i.e., from the mythical point of view of the "we" who, in 1821, heard that one of their long ago enslaved people was going to return, foreshadowing the point of view of those who had eventually returned and helped—or been helped—to found Liberia.

In Bai Tamia's English interpretation of his Gola verses They Said I did Not Born, that sentence, plus his twofold use of the little word "so:" first in one of its standard English meanings, i.e., "consequently," and then in its Liberian English meaning: "there," plus the expression "sit down" in its Liberian English meaning "rest, do nothing,"<sup>39</sup> in an o standard English language, express with precision and succinctly the young illiterate Gola woman's stubborn, but totally untraditional refusal to raise anybody else's child,<sup>40</sup> whilst powerlessly having to accept what "they say."<sup>41</sup> The poem's dualistic diction commensurately dramatizes a universal theme of social criticism, in the Liberian perspective, i.e., the non "sophisticated" human being's impotent protest against pressures of nature and culture in society, thus of course simultaneously connoting the pluricultural dimension of Liberia's identity.

In Peace on the moon and hell on earth, one single Liberian English expression: "oyo boy," which familiarly means the elder man with a lot of experience,<sup>42</sup> is enough, for the rest of the long poem in standard English, to describe, hilariously, an average Liberian's cosmological bewilderment after man's 1969 landing on the moon, and his awareness of the event's implied inversion of basic human values, thus connoting a Liberian middle-class point of view, and its critical attitude towards "progress."

Adolescents always and everywhere loved throwing stones at y, but it is (perhaps only?) in Liberia that they "chunk"<sup>43</sup> "rocks." By identifying the urchins of contemporary Liberia's Rock Chunkers as "rock chunkers," with the tender tone Bai Tamia had for young people, he squarely situated his little story about that quasi universal anecdote onto "the Liberian scene," and connoted one of Liberia's minor social problems as one of the dimensions of its identity qua modern nation amongst other modern nations.

In the shape of our world today, with its "bright little negro girl," her "ambitious little teacher" and his disproportionately universalistic questions about the shape of the world, the relatively long, standard English "stanza's" single Liberian English expression: "they were plenty,"<sup>44</sup> not only comically connotes the poet's Liberian identity, but also the emotional distance modern Liberians today take from America, as the colonizatory source of their dualistic identity.

In culture = the common heritage, the Liberian point of view is connoted by the poem's music, since its diction suggests the actual Liberian English intonation, in the four before-last, short, singsong verses: "be they black o/ be they white o/ be they brown o/ be they what o,"<sup>45</sup> in striking contrast with the poem's first, fifteen, longer lines, and their fallaciously simple mixture of repetitively plain or sophisticated standard English words, describing, without any value judgment, time's "genesis of our culture."

In ghettobli garbage rats, it is, on one hand, a non-literate Liberian English grammatical structure, i.e., the term "na," expressing the auxiliary "has," which is followed by "break" and "start" used as past participles, and, on the other hand, a phonetically conceived phrase-word, i.e., [tino] "tin of," in conjunction with the word "ma," a borrowing from Vai, literally meaning "mother but used as a deferential address for women, in Liberia at large,<sup>46</sup> that unambiguously situate Bai Tamia's shantytown scene nowhere else but in Liberia—probably Monrovia<sup>47</sup>—whilst the otherwise standard English text connotes, with warmth and compassion, Liberian identity on the dimension of its vertical plurality, in the perspective of its "little hungry behinds."

Liberian English predominates in the next poem, where it anchors a titillated Liberian's point of view in the disintegrated cockroach's persona, with its characteristic "I beg you yah"<sup>48</sup> address (whose intonation is not missed by Liberian ears), the non-literate phrase: "he up" (instead of "he crawled up"), or the pluralized, phonetically transcribed nominal "watchumacalls" (instead of 'you-knowwhat!'), all of which expressions have Liberians roar with laughter. The comedy of a man in dinner jacket, at a formal party, who is tormented by a pest conventionally not belonging to such a setting, paradoxically connotes also the "sophisticated" Liberian society's contradictions, as a dimension of Liberia's contemporary, third-world identity.

As to Bai Tamia's self-reflexive *Art In Shadows*, where he soberly pondered on art<sup>49</sup> in standard English, Liberian identity, here, is connoted by one term, i.e., the typically Liberian English phrase "bug-a-bugs"<sup>50</sup>—beautifully adapted, with its internal rhyme, to Bai Tamia's theme—which describes the complexly fashioned, eight-or-ten-feet-high, hard-clay or cement *macrotermes natelensis* termite-turrets dotting Liberia's landscape. By implication, Bai Tamia's "bug-a-bugs" also connote the complexity and plurality of Liberian identity as some of its natural dimensions.

Poetic economy in Bai Tamia's diction was, however, on occasion, knowingly turned into inflation, e.g., in *day and night a dialogue*, which, for comic purposes, is crammed with familiar Liberian English, e.g., "eh yah," meaning: alas! Well! My my!; "jus small small self," meaning: even just a little; "anyama nyama things," or "pupu," i.e., in baby-talk: excrement<sup>51</sup> (a rare occurrence in Bai Tamia's poetry of so-called vulgar language: he, by the way, never used erotic language either). Bai Tamia's overflow of Liberian English usage here connotes the Monrovia street, its crowds, its atmosphere, which are the poem's theme, with the urban slang of its common people expressing their view of life in the country's capital: no doubt, one of the founding dimensions of Liberia's political identity.

In *The Jungle Melody*, Bai Tamia's standard English and appropriately ethnocentric diction—e.g., his implicitly sarcastic use of the word "jungle" (instead e.g., of the Liberian English word "bush"<sup>52</sup>), or e.g., his amusingly mocking use of the French-originated words "chantre" and "belles"—hark

back probably also to Hemingway.<sup>53</sup> Ironically embodying a certain "sophisticated" Liberian point of view with his verse, this poem—without a single Liberian English expression—constitutes Bai Tamia's undauntedly expert acknowledgement of the settler-society's cultural origin, as observed by a Liberian poet issued from the indigenous society.

Last but not least, the diction of Bai Tamia's little quatrain *The Moon* confirms a (perhaps unique) instance of Universalist 'neutrality' in his work. By means of two dozen plain standard English words he thus connotes, not only that his pantheistic view of nature to the central feature defining the aspirations of classical philosophy, i.e., universalism, but also that the questions of any human being facing the ultimate realities—"being what o"—are the same everywhere in the world, including Liberia.

3. Bai Tamia's grammar and syntax.—Bai Tamia's masterly control of sophisticated English text-building techniques, i.e., his manipulation of grammar and syntax, is demonstrated by an artful handling of the rules governing either classical standard English or Liberian English at all its levels, both in their observance and in their breach. True to himself, the manipulation is demonstrably always commensurate with his poem's aim.

Thus, in order to connote how a member of Liberia's literate society in Bai Tamia's time felt about mankind's momentous conquest of space and the high technology it involves, his poem *Peace on the moon and hell on earth* was made to rest on a complex propositional structure strictly in observance with the rules of hypotaxis, i.e., a style where temporal, logical or tical relations sentence-parts and sentences all are expressed by words, phrases, clauses.<sup>54</sup>

Again in the 've of "sophisticated" Liberians, but of earlier times, Bai Tamia corrosively chose his technique of text-building, in *The Jungle Melody*, to connote those Liberians' mythically simplified, i.e., frankly exotic "tomtom" perception of Liberia's traditional cultures, who physically heard their "talking drums"<sup>55</sup> or the "frenzy beat of ritual drums,"<sup>56</sup> but distortedly concep their meanings through a "chantre's" unintelligible voice. Bai Tamia connoted that ethnocentric, i.e., non- t perception by means, not only of his diction, as noted above, but also of parataxis, a propositional structure which defines e.g., the American novelist Hemingway's style, i.e., a manner of writing where the members of a sentence, or else a sequence of complete sentences, are put one after the other without any expression of their connection or relations except (at most) the non-committal connective "and."<sup>57</sup> That technique, which, on one hand, expresses how superficially the traditional cultures of Liberia could be perceived, and, on the other hand, symbolizes Bai Tamia's ironical obeisance to the literary stature of Hemingway, in keeping with the kind of emotional distance-taking from the major source of Liberia's originally colonizing culture also expressed in *the shape of our world today*.<sup>58</sup> a technique compounded, moreover, with an intentionally incorrect grammati-

cal usage, in the poem's last line, implicitly mocking the sub-standard education in English of many of those who deemed their culture superior to that of Liberia's indigenous African peoples, that technique, then, connotes the described perception's total inadequacy to reality.

Bai Tamia's Liberian English poetry style is, generally, patterned on a relaxed mode of speech, with short sentences and the easy-going rhythms of conversation (Northrop Fry identifies it through the theoretical concept "demotic" style,<sup>59</sup>) which is current in today's Liberia,<sup>60</sup> and of which the shape of our world today provides a witty example.

Yet Bai Tamia showed himself quite capable of using also the formally more elaborated manner in honour among Liberian writers of former generations,<sup>61</sup> e.g., by occasionally leaning on the periodic sentence structure, where the parts of a sentence are so composed that the completion of its meaning remains suspended until its closure.<sup>62</sup> Thus, in Sande Girl, he expressed, with the sophistication of a highly literate Liberian, not only the latter's rising aesthetic delight in, and expectant feelings for, nubile Sande beauties "in the raw," i.e., in their natural quasi-nudity, but also his awed intuition of the Sande society's jealously guarded mystery excision<sup>63</sup>—whose revelation is as impatiently awaited by the young girls until they eventually reach the age for being initiated within their secret society's physical enclosure, as the sentence's closure is expected by the poem's readers.

Nevertheless, even in his most sophisticated Liberian English poems, Bai Tamia the artist—never once hesitated to avail himself of poetic license, e.g., he never demurred from violating the norms of grammatical or syntactic correction, in order to achieve some rhetorical, dramatic, or farcical affect, invariably relevant, however, to the Liberian people's typical sensitivity.

An instance of the former is the last line of The Jungle Melody, whose grammatically "incorrect" present continuous "filing out"—instead of the required present simple—also constitutes the man Bai Tamia's smiling non-answer to the question not-asked by "the swarthy lads with well-built chests," i.e., whether, that night, they would find their belle . . .

An illustration of grammatical disorder dramatically pointing to Bai Tamia's own emotional disorder, as a young, idealistic Liberian, is his Blakian Past Glory,<sup>64</sup> where an irreparably broken dimension of Liberia's identity gets connoted through the poet's syntactic rupture, in line seven: "Were enough to make one stop and sigh"—a sentence which, formally, is founded on subjectless verbal predication, i.e., a non-existent category in English grammar!<sup>65</sup> . . . Line twenty of the same poem: "These ancient ruins can rise again," instances how Bai Tamia used the "wrong" word-order (following upon "I wonder . . .," we would expect "Can these ancient ruins . . ."), in order to connote his "I"'s traumatic impression—his emotional non-acceptance of, or non-reconciliation with—the "dismal scene" constituted by the quasi-ghost-town Clayashland, as

he met it upon his return from his studies in the U.S.A. Mediating language, the Liberian poet, here, quasi took his symbolic revenge on those responsible for "the ghostly story," by letting its correct structures collapse just as Clayashland had been left to collapse.

A splendid example of Bai Tamia's deliberate usage of structural disruption in order to elicit in particular the Liberian reader's laughter, is, of course, the disintegrated cockroach, where he added, to the above analyzed comic expressions, the verbal phrase: "he made me," (line seven), at first (and correctly) followed by the three bare active infinitives: "twist," "turn," "pull off," but then (incorrectly but with irresistible drollness) followed by the two simple pasts: "unbuttoned" and "tore off," which is doubly funny for "sophisticated" Liberian readers because it reproduces a familiar joking pattern with regard to grammatical "inco" "typical for speakers of indigenous Liberian languages in the process of learning their national language."<sup>66</sup>

A particular case of "incorrect" in Bai Tamia's poems results from his deliberate usage of Liberian slang. Bai Tamia intentionally used the Liberian slang, which he called "liberian patois—grass root english,"<sup>67</sup> with its mixed structures (of which some remind one of the American English from the South: historically of course the source of Liberian English), in order to describe the "lifestyles of shanty or ghettonians in the bitchy ways in which shans express their feelings,"<sup>68</sup> i.e., mostly of Liberia's illiterate urban commoners,<sup>69</sup> its market women,<sup>70</sup> "grona" girls,<sup>71</sup> yana boys,<sup>72</sup> or "hungry mouths,"<sup>73</sup> and which embodies a particular view of Liberia's plural identity on its social dimension. Bai Tamia's usage of the slum-dwellers' "bitchy ways" of expression elicits a mixture of anxiety and hilarity—on one hand, *ettobli rba e rats*, on the other, de halleluyah plawa—connoting the plural quality of life in the Liberian shantytowns, i.e., the underprivileged urban Liberian population's ability to face its miseries with, both, desperate courage and a huge sense of fun.

de halleluyah plawa, in pure "liberian patois," illustrates that ability not only thematically, but also "textually," as it were, through Bai Tamia's systematic phonetic transcriptions of some of the words, which are irresistibly funny for literate readers. The writer he was, who, in principle, refused all esoteric writing, however, never forgot readability; hence, enough of his text is rendered in standard English spellings, through which the poem's can be produced without difficulty.

On the other hand, Bai Tamia—the artist, again—freely used "liberian patois" in poems that incorporate with the sophisticated, literate English-speaking Liberian's point of view, too, y when he wanted to achieve a comical effect. As always, Bai Tamia's linguistic means, however, served more than a purely aesthetic effect. In the disintegrated cockroach the linguistic farce also constitutes a deep bow to the historically most creative of all the English-speaking contemporary comedians, i.e., Charles Chaplin,<sup>74</sup> and, via that bow, to the humanistic ideals for which Chaplin had fought:<sup>75</sup> ideals which basically



coincided with the ensemble of aspirations shared by Liberia's society as Bai Tamia knew it.

### **Bai Tamia's Poetry in Indigeneous Liberian Languages**

1. **Bai Tamia's polyglot pluralism.**— Bai Tamia's poems in English, then, certainly embody Liberian identity in many of its pluralistic dimensions. Bai Tamia's poetry, however, speaks in more than one tongue, and, sometimes, in more than one tongue at a time. That is why I speak of his polyglot pluralism.

Actually, Bai Tamia's polyglot pluralism constitutes a double paradox. Indeed, it is not only English, the language in which he wrote most of his poetry, which is the language of a minority in Liberia—albeit the sophisticated minority in power, whose members can read his work—but also the other two languages in which he wrote some of his non-English poetry, i.e., Vai or Gola, that are spoken only by a small segment of the Liberian population. Moreover, those languages have generated no actual tradition of reading.<sup>76</sup> By resolving, nevertheless, to write in Vai or Gola, Bai Tamia connoted forcefully the whole contemporary Liberian population's aspiration towards literacy for all, which embodies with a unifying dimension characteristic of modern Liberia's plural identity.

Bai Tamia's Vai or Gola poetry, a minute fraction of his poetic output, cannot for obvious reasons of incompetence, on my part—be approached technically, in the same way as his poetry in English. The following notes, therefore, are limited to very few general considerations.

2. **Bai Tamia's Vai and Gola poetry.**—Regarding his Vai poems, Bai Tamia's aspiration towards literacy for all, which manifested itself through his resolve to go ahead and do "as if" he already had readers in Vai, originated with his exalted awareness of the Vai system of writing Vai and of its universal prestige as the first phonetic concept of potential literacy developed south of the Sahara.<sup>77</sup> His pride in the Vai people's achievement shines through his poem *maya i sene*, which is written in the Vai language mediating the Vai characters, as well in phonetics, so as to enable the speakers but non-readers of Vai nevertheless to understand what the poet is saying. For the majority of Bai Tamia's readers, i.e., those who Vai neither speak nor understand, he provided the poem in perfect Liberian English, thus fulfilling his practically most permanent role in life—to put it with Warren d'Azevedo—as Liberia's "cultural ambassador."<sup>78</sup>

As to Bai Tamia's poems in Gola, these lean on a purely oral culture, which is relevant to the majority of indigenous Liberian cultures (though systems of writing were invented in Liberia not only among the Vai, but also among the Bassa, Kpelle, Loma, and Mende.<sup>79</sup>) Reputedly a very difficult language, even for indigenous Liberians with their eviable linguistic faculties, Gola is the only language, Bai Tamia used in his non-English poems, whose words he did not always translate, e.g., in the elegiac poem *o wilhelmina ka*. Language of his

childhood, which perhaps encapsulated for him the impossible to conceive, Gola, here, manifests itself as the instrument of Bai Tamia's intensely private identity as poet. He, who wrote a piece titled you and me,<sup>80</sup> explaining that or why or how he did not permit anything to excite him, the same Bai Tamia, however, abandoned his serenity, and his usually vivacious role as interpreter, translator, and intermediary between people and cultures, when he wrote o wilhelmina ka. For this poem's in \_\_\_\_\_, mostly gola phrases,<sup>81</sup> Bai Tamia—with his finely tuned ear and psychological intuition, bearing witness to his poetic mettle—gave rein to a trance—like state which moved him to forsake all explicative English words.<sup>82</sup>

Bards sing. Poets speak. They do not explain. As if to protect its Gola meanings in the womb of his mother-tongue's sounds, Bai Tamia here left them wrapped in their phoneticity, without a midwife, to let those, who were able to deliver his meanings by their own means, fight alone in order to discover what could not be expressed. As if the death he mourned—with a praise-song in the honour of God<sup>83</sup>—had paralyzed his \_\_\_\_\_ t being. As if his grief had choked sophisticated English articulation. As if the sorrow, which muffled his mature verbal desire, had muted his voice. As if primeval anguish had spared his gut power only in the \_\_\_\_\_ cy of his maternal Gola.

That intense embodiment between Bai Tamia's o wilhelmina ka and his primary language of \_\_\_\_\_ tion as a Liberian, thus is analogous to the embodiment of his poetic art, at large, with his mature age's inclusively plural identity as a Liberian. Just as the polygot pluralism of his art embodies with the plurality of Liberia's peoples in the process of their unification.<sup>84</sup>

## 2. Polydisciplinary Pluralism in Bai Tamia's Poetry

### Conceptual Framework

Bai Tamia's "stories" are not only polygot but also polydisciplinary, i.e., he not only wrote his poems in several languages: English, Vai, Gola, but he also conceived them, conjointly, through a wide range of practices, e.g.: story-telling, versification, dancing, playing, composing, singing, carving, weaving, all of which evidently are relevant to his poetry's embodiment with the richly pluralistic dimension of Liberia's identity. e.g., with the polydisciplinary virtuosity, craftsmanship, professionalism, characterizing his indigenous culture's own song-singing story-tellers, dancers, choreographers, carvers, in brief: the artist in Liberia's traditional African society, and its conception of the arts, which implicates all human senses and faculties into the reproduction of their unifying vision of the world so as to produce its meaning.

The polydisciplinary pluralism of Bai Tamia's poetry, whose sources are, chronologically first, African oral/aural culture in traditionally non-literate societies, and, subsequently, Jud \_\_\_\_\_ tian literate culture traditions, has, therefore, here been approached through two of the major senses—vision and hearing—implicated by his poetry for the creation of its meaning in a paradoxical-

cal way, i.e., on one hand, at the level of sight, and, on the other hand, at the level of sound. At both levels, Bai Tamia produces "rhythm" and connotes the dual origin of contemporary Liberian identity. But his graphic means, paradoxically, connote in the first place Liberia's African oral/aural cultures, in their musical specificity, and only secondarily its literate society's culture traditions, i.e., in particular its basic texts of religious, philosophical, literary reference. Whereas his acoustic means connote in the first place the Judeo-Christian literate culture traditions in their book-oriented specificity, and only secondarily its traditionally non-literate society's stories, e.g., about metamorphoses, or its masks.

### **Bai Tamia's Poems as Sight**

1. Rhythm.—Bai Tamia's own term to speak about the founding dimension of his poems is rhythm: i.e., primarily "the rhythmic pattern of the songs" which, in Gola or Vai cultures, accompany story-telling.

Conventionally, a music's or a poem's rhythm is conceptualized in terms of, e.g., French philosopher Alain's definition, as constituted by "temporal ratios." But this is too narrow a definition for Bai Tamia's broadly proportionate correlation of parts, fundamentally constituted by ratios that are, both heard, as the sounds they constitute when read out aloud, and seen, when read in silence, as the pictures Bai Tamia drew, i.e., by polydisciplinarily conceived space-time correlations. The fact that he conceived of his poetry in terms of visual—plastic—rhythm, i.e., in terms of spatial ratios, too, although not mentioned by him with words, is actually demonstrated by his manipulation of graphic means showing the text of his poems in a dazzling variety of shapes.

Bai Tamia's visualized rhythm in fact emphasizes the paradox of his poetry's deeply literate aur[or]ality, e.g., because its shapes silently mime some of the structural characteristics of "the rhythmic pattern of the songs," or, e.g., because its shapes are relevant to the context of "the rhythmic pattern of the songs," but not to the text of a poem's actual "story."

The purest graphic embodiment of that paradox is perhaps constituted by the Vai text of *maya i seneo* written in Vai characters, whose linguistically irrelevant pictorial qualities are, nevertheless, used pictorially, to connote, as I try to prove, a precise aspect of "the rhythmic patterns of the songs," as sight, on paper.<sup>85</sup> Mediating that particular use, which points, both, to his poetry's written nature, and to the or(aur)ality of his inspirational source, Bai Tamia creatively drives home his point, i.e. that, in the beginning, there were—and there probably always are—"the rhythmic patterns of the songs."<sup>86</sup>

2. Bai Tamia's graphic connotation of oral/aural African culture traditions.—In the main, the figural presentation of his poetry pictorially describes classical shapes and motifs of Liberian handicrafts: the straight line, the zigzag, the oval, the parallelogram, right-angle constructions, or their combinations, which constitute, or adorn, not only the architecture and bodies: plaited hair,

scarification patterns, or woven and carved objects of Vai or Gola daily life, but also their masks and musical instruments.<sup>87</sup>

The straight line motif:

Ba Nya M Go Koma,  
 Peace on the moon and hell on earth  
The Jungle Melody,  
 Sande Girl  
 The Moon  
Past Glory,  
 Ko Bomi Hee M Koa  
Art in Shadows.

The zi motif  
the shape of our world today,  
the maya i seneo text in Roman writing,  
invitation to a come together feast in africa.

The oval motif:

ghettobli garbage rats,  
the disintegrated cockroach,  
(de halleluyah plawa).

The parallelogramme construction:  
night and day a dialogue.

The right-angle construction:  
culture = the common heritage.

Combinations between shapes:

o wilhelmina ka  
 Rock Chunkers  
invitation to a coming together feast in africa

(second version).<sup>88</sup>

To begin with, the graphic narration of Bai Tamia's poetry, in general, connotatively replaces his poetry in its material culture background of village storytelling sessions, with their songs and handclapping, so gourd-rattling, d g, dancing, i.e., in a concretely translated "time-background," which, according to A.M. Jones, is "the fundamental rhythmic feature of African music" at large,<sup>89</sup> a feature at any rate also fully realized in, e.g., Liberia's Vai music.<sup>90</sup>

Secondly, each poem's vertical configuration provides its text with an interaction between its left-hand and its right-hand 'margins'. One of them, only, is patterned on a handicraft motif—usually, the left-hand side, as one would expect in the Western mode of writing from left to right, to which English belongs.<sup>91</sup> The shape of the margin on the other side does, however, not

arise from considerations of linguistic meanings, as one might expect in the same perspective—Bai Tamia actually drew each of his poems' configurations and fitted the words of his lines into them, almost as if colouring a drawing, or, more to the point, like a choreographer who, for a particular dance on a particular music, makes dancers take attitudes and execute steps, in order to fulfil his rhythmic design with the human bodies. It would take expertise in Vai or Gola choreography and masking traditions to transcend those generalities about Bai Tamia's pictorial code, but his shapes evidently are also meant to embody with "the rhythmic patterns of the songs," perhaps even with specific dance patterns, dancing steps, movements, which are part an parcel of the village storyteller's art.

Not improbably, Bai Tamia's choice of the traditional motif, or motifs, into which he configured his texts, was, moreover, also motivated by each "story's" anecdote or anecdotal background, which are, of course, relatively easy to mimic—e.g., de halleluyah plawa's tortuous left-hand margin may reflect a straight-faced, or masked joker's comical commentary of the persona jackoboy's writhing on the floor whilst "trying to fight de holy ghost." Or maya i seneo's zigzag visualizes, perhaps not only the track of a vessel on high-sea, but also the long drawn-out "go-come"<sup>92</sup> journey of Africa's children from their homes overseas, as estranged slaves, and then, centuries later, from overseas back to Africa, as pioneers, to found a new homeland. Or the interplay between plane, sharply protruding parallel angular masses, for night and day a dialogue, may imitate a janus-faced mask,<sup>93</sup> or two heads. Or the interplay between zigzag and oval, in invitation to a coming together feast in africa, may pictorially 'translate' the concept "coming together."

Thirdly, Bai Tamia's insertion of maya i seneo's Vai scripted text into one of the concave spaces of the phonetically scripted text's zigzagging mass (here the lefthand and the right-hand margins run more or less parallel), i.e., his setting of the former's beginning-line somewhat lower than the latter's, may well be his way of connoting a major feature of the indigenous African cultures' free singing style, at large, i.e., syncopation, or the art of phrasing off the music's regulative beat,<sup>94</sup> which is also important in Liberia's customary cultures, e.g., in Vai music.<sup>95</sup>

Fourthly, the polysensorial interaction between a configured poem's sight and its sounds, in oral performance, also connotes the social organization underlying most traditional musical events in Africa,<sup>96</sup> at large, and so in Liberia's Vai culture, too, i.e., the responsorial lead-singer/chorus form.<sup>97</sup>

Fifth, the interplay between regular and irregular visual ratios in Bai Tamia's poem—"picture"s, connotes a "basic principle" of rhythmic construction in African music, i.e., again according to A.M. Jones, "the conflict of polyrhythms in the music"<sup>98</sup> meaning that the participants in a musical occasion: players, singers, handclappers, each produce their own time ratios—a mixture of even, e.g., binary, and uneven, e.g., ternary, patterns—independ-

dently from, and thus 'against', each other: a principle which also seems confirmed in much of Liberia's Vai music.<sup>99</sup>

A sixth way, in which the visual aspect of Bai Tamia's verses synesthetically connotes indigenous Liberian musical art, e.g., in Vai culture, arises from the mixture of even and uneven verse-line lengths, which reproduces symbolically—i.e., connotes a similar pattern in musical phrases lengths of Vai songs, as also reported by Lester P. Monts.<sup>100</sup>

The seventh way, finally, in which graphic features of Bai Tamia's poetry paradoxically connote "the rhythmic patterns of songs" as his source of inspiration, is by enabling readers, reading out aloud the lines, one by one, as they are presented, to generate the "story's" correct stressing-standard, which is to a poem in English (a stress-language) what its "rhythm" is to an African dance and its music.

By means of his figural presentations, Bai Tamia, then, no doubt managed to connote his primary Liberian identities as \_\_\_\_\_ of two of its indigenous cultures: Gola, Vai, and to connote them as the primary source of his poetic desire.

3. Bai Tamia's graphic connotation of literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions—By the token of figural presentation, Bai Tamia, however, also connoted his socio-political identity as a Liberian whose formal schooling had started conscious self-identification as a poet.

The poet's visual poetization, indeed, was not only his own, original way of recreating "the rhythmic pattern of the songs" in oral/aural African culture traditions, but also a major characteristic of the modern American poets' free verse conception of rhythm in poetry, who surrendered the promincing power of traditional versification to graphic representation—text printed non-continuously, lines of irregular length, irrelevance of repetitive grouping. In his "Foreword," Bai Tamia made explicit the importance for him of the American poet Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* (1855), with its lines of variable length, dependent, for their rhythmic effect, on the repetition, balance, and variation of phrases, instead of on \_\_\_\_\_ t metric feet,<sup>101</sup> is a free verse tradition landmark.

Bai Tamia's figuration, one of the main dimensions of his poetry's polydisciplinary pluralism, then surely also connotes the identity he acquired through education outside of his kin group, as member of Liberia's settler-originated society, with its Western-oriented aspirations and literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions.

1. Rh \_\_\_\_\_ Bai Tamia spoke of "the three qualities of a good poem" in the historical context of modern English-language poetry following free verse traditions, i.e.: "rhythm, rhyme and meter."

In the classical science of English versification, "meter" and "rhythm," logically inseparable concepts, relate to each other in terms of logical inclusion, where the latter is the including, and the former, the included term, "meter" being a quantifiable way of knowing "rhythm," but where "rhythm" is not conceptualized in abstraction from "meter:" "meter" 'is' the "rhythm" of classical English prosody.

In the free verse tradition of modern poetry, "rhythm" is, however, not necessarily known through the metric concept—to witness its visualization. Yet, the converse is not true: to know a "meter" supposes knowledge of the "rhythm" it helps to enforce. That conception of "rhythm," which Bai Tamia had in mind, when he mentioned "the three qualities of a good poem" in his autobiographical "Foreword," actually is the rhythm which precedes—i.e., constitutes the necessary condition of—any academic tradition of poetry. Bai Tamia's "rhythm," which determined, e.g., the actual "meter" of Old English poetry,<sup>102</sup> cuts across linguistic boundaries: it is the founding "meter" of text-making—whether poetry or prose—in any language, i.e., that which coincides with the natural rhythm of speech.

Rhythm, quite in general, is the concept through which one knows more or less regularly recurring differences between segments of identified material reality, some of which are perceived as relatively more prominent. Rhythm, therefore, is adequately identifiable only if we know what coded material reality is concerned, e.g., images? tastes? sounds?

In natural speech, the material reality concerned by rhythm is of course vocally produced sound. The "rhythm" Bai Tamia contrasted with "rhyme" and "meter" actually is the sound-feature which enhances linguistic understandability. E.g., in English, a strong-stress-language, i.e.: a language whose vocalic phonemes are articulated with strong stresses—emphases, accents, or beats—alternating, and forming recurring proportions, with weaker ones, it is each strong stress which is perceived as a peak of relative acoustic prominence.<sup>103</sup> In English, each of those peaks of relative sound prominence is defined, for each non-compounded word—of whatever syllabic length—on one of its syllables. Basically, then, in English, the presence of a strong stress reveals the presence of a meaning-endowed entity, e.g., a word, and the presence of a beat-pattern reveals the presence of a logically composed meaning-endowed entity, e.g., a phrase, or sentence, or—semiologically—a seme. Such a beat-pattern constitutes that meaning-endowed entity's linguistic rhythm. That is the kind of "rhythm" Bai Tamia casually contrasted with "rhyme and meter" in his "Foreword."

In every natural language, some sound feature provides relative prominence to sound-entities, which reveals the latter's meaning-endowed presence. It may concern only the phonemes defined as syllable-centres (vocalic or consonantic), articulated, then, with a particular stress, e.g., in English, or with a particular tone (i.e., with a relative pitch) e.g., in Vai or Gola<sup>104</sup> (or with a

length;<sup>105</sup> or with a combination of some of those features,<sup>106</sup> also on more than one word—constitutive syllable.<sup>107</sup>) Alternatively, it might concern the meaning—endowed entities syllabically non—central phonemes (consonantic or vocalic), some of whose presence may signal that no new meaning is being transmitted sometimes in combination with prominencing of syllabically central phonemes, e.g., in Vai.<sup>108</sup> (Or, still alternatively, at least in theory, e.g., for a hypothetically natural language whose sentences would each coincide with a word, the sound—feature in question might concern all of the meaning—endowed entity's phonemes.) Although their definition, then, may vary very widely from language to language, every spoken natural language conceives of some acoustic means for prominencing parts of meaning—endowed utterances to ensure better understandability, which generate their rhythm. Bai Tamia's rhythm, in his poems in English, is the rhythm of English, that of his poems in Vai or in Gola, the rhythm of Vai, respectively Gola. In any of those languages, Bai Tamia's rhythm is always the rhythm of meaning—endowed, whole natural utterances: holophrases, phrases, propositions, sentences, semes. The basis of Bai Tamia's "rhythm" is always natural speech.

Bai Tamia's "rhythm," thus, was primarily not the rhythm of poetic verses, or lines, but, indeed, the first and fundamental quality of any "good" poem, since a poem could only be considered as "good"—according to Bai Tamia's personal judgement—if it "moved" readers through the "story" it told. In coherence with the way he defined the aim of his poetry, the "rhythm" Bai Tamia contrasted with "meter" and "rhyme," then, could not but coincide with the rhythm of natural utterances, endowed each with their meaning in terms of normal speech.

Bai Tamia's teleological option, founded on full and correct undability, consequently, made him consider "rhythm" as the first principle of a "good poem," at large, for two reasons, i.e., on one hand, because a "good" poem "moves" readers through the "story" it tells, which supposes natural speech as its condition, and, on the other hand, because it is "rhythm" that reveals the acoustical presence of a story a—linguistically,—i.e., the actual presence of sounds as possibly connoting verbal meaning—whether or whether not their actual meaning is produced eventually (e.g., if, for linguistic or physical reasons, 'listeners' cannot distinguish aural constituents other than prominencing structures:<sup>109</sup>) in brief, whether or whether not the story eventually is understood.

That conception of "rhythm" parallels Bai Tamia's figural conception transporting "the rhythmic pattern of the songs" into his poetry, which, similarly, reveals the poet's will to have people perceive a poem's presence a—linguistically—as actual image possibly connoting a verbal meaning—i.e., irrelevant to whether or whether not they read it eventually (e.g., if, for linguistic or physical reasons, 'lookers' cannot distinguish visual constituents other than imitating structures.<sup>110</sup>) Bai Tamia's "rhythm," as realized by linguistic sounds, is therefore at all times based on correct pro . . . g<sup>111</sup> which, like the silver—



finger in the hand of a *Torah* recitant pointing to the letters of the Holy Scroll being read out in the Synagogue, both, points to the presence of stories, and facilitates their easiest possible understandability.

Whatever other prosodical means Bai Tamia used when versifying—the meter which quantifies rhythm, the rhyme which reinforces it—he did so with utmost economy, as if to let nothing material stand between the natural rhythm of speech and its meaning. Whenever Bai Tamia did use “rhyme” or “meter”—and he did so not only with the true poet’s technical skill<sup>112</sup> but also with demonstrably specific objectives, either aimed at moving readers in order better to connote his surface story’s meaning, or then, more cunningly, aimed at telling readers a second, or third, or fourth “under the surface” story, whose own respective meanings are, in turn, connoted additionally: in a kind of linguistic arts masquerade—rhyme or meter remained artistic mechanisms of economy, subservient to a poem’s natural speech rhythm.

2. Bai Tamia’s acoustic connotation of literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions.—It is, then, primarily by means of “meter” and “rhyme,” i.e., concepts whose rhythmic relevance is not linguistic but artistic, that, paradoxically, Bai Tamia’s acoustically connoted Liberia’s literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions. His supremely unobtrusive virtuosity in handling them, in total subservience to natural speech rhythm, qua mechanisms of poetic economy, permitted him, not only to mime stories from the Holy Bible, or classical models from English literature, whilst narrating stories about “the Liberian scene” with a truly frolicsome naturalness, but also to have a serious, but discreet flirt with Western philosophy, e.g., through a sophisticated metaphor of art, relevant to aesthetics, and, in particular, to Aesthetic, or: “decadent” theories of poetry, and thus, at the service of his thematic focus on Africa, conceptually to qualify himself as a poet within the mainstream of Liberia’s English-language literacy and Judeo-Christian culture traditions.

a. Holy Bible.—The first seven verses of Peace on the moon and hell on earth are an example of the economy with which Bai Tamia made “meter” and “rhyme” develop an acoustic connotation of *Genesis* within the natural speech rhythm of his tale, by embodying a reading of that First Book of Moses through The Gospels inside a phonetically reinforced quantitative ‘metaphor’, which, covering up the story of creation under an overt story about the conquest of space, reveals both simultaneously, each at its own level:

for many million years  
or, a speck in time and space  
the man on the moon out yonder  
has been quietly minding his business  
except at times he frowns  
when some people sin  
by fishing on the sabbath

The overt story's *persona* hinges on the English locution "the man in the moon," for the marks on the moon.<sup>113</sup> A comically inverted analogy of roles that man "out yonder" and the Pentateuch Jewish God, who created the world in six days and (literally) "striked"—i.e., lay down work: (Hebrew) [*sha'vat*]<sup>114</sup>—on the seventh, is intimated by the moon-man's frowning "when some people sin by fishing on the sabbath," and suggests—overtly—the covert presence of other "stories" under the surface of the one identified by the poem's title.

Bai Tamia's "other stories," both hidden under and revealed through his phonetical 'metaphor', actually consist in a regular trimeter<sup>114</sup> underpinning the six first lines' irregular syllabic feet-structure: a "meter" which then literally "strikes," by getting laid down, on the seventh line, where it is "reduced" to an only two-beat strong-stress verse, or: dimeter. Bai Tamia's variable, irregular and complex syllabic feet-structure of the six first verses "tell" the multiplicity of God-created Nature, whilst their regular three-stress pattern<sup>115</sup> "tells" His Divine order, with its (di)stressingly immutable imposition of hard work, on account of man's original sin. By contrast, the seventh verse strong-stress meter expresses the importance of His sanctifying the Sabbath, whilst its reduced number of stresses expresses the relaxation of "stress" on the day God imposed on man for resting.

The economy of Bai Tamia's Judeo-Christian *Genesis* reading thus paradoxically implicates, both a logical opposition the concepts "three" and "two," and their intersection. The former, i.e., "three," conceptually founding the trimeter, connotes a Christian point of view, e.g., the formula "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost:" an anachronism from the point of view of the Old Testament Book, since the reference are the gospels. The latter, i.e., "two," conceptually founding the dimeter, connotes, first, a Jewish point of view, e.g., "the two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God" and bearing His ten commandments, amongst which the fourth concerns the "sign" God gave the children of Israel to be between Him and them throughout the generations, and whose observation would keep them from harm, i.e., the Sabbath:<sup>116</sup> evidently also an anachronism, from the point of view of *Genesis*, since the reference is The Second Book of Moses. But since Bai Tamia's reference includes the gospels, "two" not only embodies a double anachronism (The New Testament is of course much "younger" than The Books of Moses, but, in addition, also connotes a Christian value judgement about Judaism and the Jewish people, "deprived" of Jesus Christ, i.e., is logically used to connote both Jewish and Christian points of view:

for mány míllion yéars<sup>117</sup>  
 ór, a spéck in time and spáce  
 the mán on the móón out yónder  
 has been quietly mínding his búisness  
 excépt at times he frówns

when sóme péóple sín by  
físhing on the sábbath

Bai Tamia's articulatory sound-pattern devices: alliteration, consonance, assonance, rhyme—in his 'shorthand': "rhyme"—validate my paradoxical Judeo-Christian interpretation of that metric reading, i.e., confirm that Bai Tamia's poetry is an art of strict rhythmic economy subservient to a story and the meaning of its words.

First of all, the sp-alliteration, in the second of those lines, following upon the (at first sight) incongruous comma, after the word "or," actually proves Bai Tamia's trimetric conception—which, in turn, emphasizes his scientifically contemporary conception of the time/space continuum. Moreover, in each of the first six lines, at least one of those devices (albeit partly) reinforces the trimeter. By contrast, any effort to discover even a hint at such a reinforcing phonetic device (valid only for stressed syllables) in the seventh verse, i.e., in the dimeter, is vain: it has no other effect than to prove its absence.

In his seventh verse, Bai Tamia divested the words of all phonetic ornament, so that "fishing" and "sabbath," which define its word-accented strong-stress meter founded on natural speech "rhythm," may better be delivered of some of their meanings, completing his seven-verse "story." Let us then begin with "fishing." Why "fishing," and e.g., not "hunting"? What does "fishing" here mean? In the first place unsurprisingly!—fishing is a practice concerned with... fish, but... fish is also (though not only) an early symbol of Christ,<sup>118</sup> i.e., Bai Tamia's retelling of *Genesis* connotes also a Christian point of view precisely through his seventh-verse word "fishing." As to "sabbath," Bai Tamia's word here connotes the "pure"—unadorned Jewish (overtly the *Genesis*) point of view, albeit through its partial recuperation by Sabbath-oriented Christian sects, e.g., Quakers, or Seventh-Day Adventists. In its presence or in its absence, Bai Tamia's "rhyme," then, reenforcingly connotes also the Jewish origin of the Judeo-Christian week: a norm of six-day-work alternating with rest on the Sabbath.

Bai Tamia's "rhyme," in presence or absence, which, thus, admirably contributes to reveal his stories "under the surface" in the most economic possible manner, always does so at the service of particular moods, which the poet wants to generate in his readers. E.g., in those seven verses, Bai Tamia's rhyme acoustically reinforces the comic feeling generated a contrario by that very serious word-made man in the moon, out yonder, frowning at the sin of some people fishing on the sabbath. Having thus made his readers smile, as a first inversely proportionate reaction to the incongruous moonman's seriousness, Bai Tamia's rhyme then squares their smile into admiring laughter, as a second proportionately inverse reaction, when it makes them realize that, under his seemingly naive, funnily inverted introduction to a poem for children from the prelunar era, Bai Tamia seriously tricked them into listening "in" to a number of other "stories" from The Holy Bible, statements about and commentaries on them, probably as told and retold the Liberian "children of Israel," in

Sunday-schools, and Church sermons, and Bible-reading families, all over the Republic, ever since its foundation, and, obviously, thus acoustically connoting, here in the comic mood, one of Liberia's major literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions: in fact, the text which defines that culture's identity, in religious terms, as "Judeo-Christian."

b. Philosophy.— Bai Tamia's poetry acoustically connotes also the old Greeks' "love of wisdom," i.e., philosophy, which, importantly, merges with the literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions at large. E.g., in those seven verses the poet's self reflexive use of, in particular, "meter," makes them practically embody conceptions of poetry as "objects in themselves." To witness:

for mány mǐllion [yíaz] <sup>119</sup>	three iambs <sup>120</sup>
ór, a spéck in tíme and spáce	four trochees/ catalectic line <sup>121</sup>
the mán on the [mú:n] out yónder	iamb/anapest <sup>122</sup> /iamb + extra light end-syllable
has been [kwáyEtly]      [máynđiN] his búsiness	three anapests + extra light end-syllable
excépt at [táyms] he [fráunz] when síme [pí:pl] sín	three iambs one iamb + two strong stresses
by físhing on the sábbath	"strong-stress"

That scanning, which clarifies how precisely Bai Tamia integrated natural speech rhythms with the meters of his free verse, not only demonstrates his prosodical virtuosity, but also implies a practical statement by the poet on selfreferentiality in—or the self reflexivity of—art.

Considering that, among the names which "stuck with [him]" as authors of the "works of leading English and American poets" studied at school, Edgar Allen Poe figures in the first position, and, considering the influence of Poe's view on Aestheticism or Decadence, that the supreme poem is a "poem written solely for the poem's sake," it seems necessary to admit that Bai Tamia's metric handling of rhythm, e.g., in those seven lines, was deliberately constituted as an ironically latent counter argument to what he had said himself, in his "Foreword," about the importance of drawing on his familiar African background, i.e.: that could in no way preclude him from experimenting with the full range of possibilities offered by the art of poetry in all of its traditions, thus—here—paying an underhand compliment to the aesthetics of "decadent" poetry, and possibly, more in general, a smilingly distanced, but real tribute to aesthetics at large, as a branch of philosophy.

Bai Tamia's poem Art in Shadows confirms his wider interest in problems of aesthetics, generally, and his profound understanding of the selfreflexivity

concept, more in particular. The poem, which seems to unfold a graphically oriented reflection on art, at large identifies the object of an artistic image as the reflection of the reflection of material reality, i.e., in the modern world with accent "for art of the humble people," as "images reflected by a kerosene lamp on walls of thatch roofed huts." But then, Bai Tamia practically shows the deeply selfreferential perception of material reality through culture, in general, when he describes actual objects of possible artistic images, and the place where they are seen, i.e. "in shadows:"

Created by the tattered rags  
 Scattered on the bamboo beds  
 Or ornate raffia baskets  
 Perched upon some wooden trunks,  
 Infested with the bug-a-bugs.  
 e.g., then: village elders  
 Sitting round a gourd of palm wine  
 Spinning yarns of yesteryears.  
 Of crafty youths with bow and arrows  
 Imitating hunting games.

The poem's interrogative g, which questions, in an—at first sight apparently innocuous fashion, the "learned critics of the arts" "blending colors and scanning small perspective" and their capacity to "do justice" to "the images reflected by a kerosene lamp," that beginning selfreflexively, in fact, harks back to the question which, in ancient Greece, founds aesthetics as a domain of philosophy, i.e., identification of what is "beautiful," which concerns the broad question of value judgement in the arts, enlarged, by implication, to the general question of value judgement—a question of particular relevance to the pertinent evaluation of African cultures in the contemporary human sciences, and which also defines one of our contemporary philosophy's central preoccupations.

c. Literature.—Bai Tamia's acoustic connotation of Liberia's Judeo-Christian literary culture traditions concerns, on one hand, actual works from English-language poetry, which marked him, and, on the other hand, concepts of English-language poetry criticism, i.e., means and aims of versification in English-language literature.

Among the actual works of English-language literature, connoted also acoustically through Bai Tamia's poetry figures the poem *London*, from William Blake's *Song's of Innocence and Experience* (1789). Although the name of William Blake (1757-1827), poet, painter and engraver of his own illustrated works, does not figure in Bai Tamia's "Foreword" list of names that stuck with him, the actual first-line words of *London*, and its rhythm, resound throughout his poem *Past Glory*, to witness:

London<sup>123</sup>

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
 Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.  
 And mark in every face I meet  
 Marks of weakness, marks of woe.  
 In every cry of every Man,  
 In every Infants cry of fear,  
 In every voice, in every ban,  
 The mind-forg'd manacles I hear:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
 Every blackning Church appalls,  
 And the hapless Soldier's sigh,  
 Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
 How the youthful Harlot's curse  
 Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
 And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

Past Glory<sup>124</sup>

I wandered in the moonlit night  
 To view the glory of the past  
 The ruins of those pioneer days  
 Were silhouetted against the light  
 Where once stood mansions decked with pride  
 Now ruled by vipers and the bats  
 Were enough to make one stop and sigh.  
 The broken frames can hardly stand  
 The beating of the constant rains  
 And on the landscape high above  
 The ruins of the parish too  
 Can tell the ghostly story plain.  
 Beneath the grass stand epitaphs,  
 A remnant of some burial ground.  
 A lordly cricket once a while  
 Will break the silence with a sound.  
 Or in some distant woods a drum,  
 A native feast in feverish swing,  
 I wonder after all these years  
 These ancient ruins can rise again  
 And brighten up a dismal scene.

Bai Tamia's *Past Glory*, echoing distortedly the 18th c. English poet's feverish pounding in *London*, points to the 20th c. Liberian poet's affinities with Walt Whitman, the 19th c. American poet, and his celebrated *Leaves of Grass*, whose free verse had been anticipated by the rhythmic verse paragraphs of William Blake's *Prophetic Books*.<sup>125</sup> In a way, the free verse of *Past Glory* actually only prefigures Bai Tamia's poetic freedom in the full glory of his eventual development, consisting (as the poem does) of almost perfectly regular octosyllabic, iambic, tetrametric lines, which constitute a lyric of near classical dimensions, except—perhaps—for lines seven and twenty in a rigorous syllabic reading: the syllabic irregularity of line twenty (if it is so construed) would reinforce Bai Tamia's deliberate break of word order in that line, expressing the feeling of tragic impuissance under whose influence he wrote the poem: an irregularity still widely within the boundaries of pre-modern poetry.<sup>126</sup>

In the spirit of free verse, *Past Glory*, however, lacks regular rhyming, although it does comprise some full—or “true”—end rhymes, e.g., between “night” and “light” (lines one and four), or between “ground” and “sound” (lines fourteen and sixteen), expanding the former into a series of near-rhymes with “pride” and “sigh.” The strong-stress weight of those few “masculine” end rhymes on monosyllabic words,<sup>127</sup> reinforces the weightiness of young Bai Tamia's almost desperate feelings regarding Liberia's possible future glory, with the means of classical poetry, then, reconceived through the tradition of free verse. Bai Tamia's meter and actual rhymes, in that poem, hence, acoustically connote more than one tradition of poetry in English literature.

Bai Tamia's acoustic connotation of poetry in the English literature tradition thus, also realizes metric concepts worked out or used by some of the most influential among contemporary free verse poets, e.g., G.M. Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, the difference between which and e.g., Walt Whitman's earlier free verse conception, results from their frequent utilization of strong-stress meters—albeit reconceptualized through the notion of sprung rhythm—and that rhythm's combination with syllable-and-stress meters.<sup>128</sup> That results in a flexible and variable rhythm easily integrating the rhythm of natural speech. Bai Tamia's *Sande Girl* illustrates that type of versification, to witness:<sup>129</sup>

Jét ... bláck with ... ínnocent ... smíle  
 Wárm ... bréast ... únrvashed ... yét  
 Cóal ... bláck ... háir beneath ... héadties  
 Propór ... tioned híps... bedéked... with béads  
 Bóuncing ... yóuth with ... líttle ... cáre  
 Is Sá ... nde beauí ... ty ín ... the ráw

Bai Tamia's metric technique actually encompasses any device that can acoustically better connote natural speech rhythms at the service of his meaning. Thus, *Sande Girl* also realizes the time-honoured “rising” meter concept,<sup>130</sup> classical in English literature criticism: five of its six verses (all except verse three) end on a “masculine” strong stress, a metric configuration which is, of

course, powerfully adequate to compound our rising feeling of suspense, generated—at the level of syntax and —also by the poem's periodic sentence structure. Bai Tamia, then, uses, whenever he needs them, any of the prosodical means traditionally used in the versification of English-language literature.

Bai Tamia's poetry remains, however, basically true to the modern versification tradition in English-language literature, e.g., also in its insistent recourse to imperfect rhyme,<sup>131</sup> to witness line twenty-two of his poem Peace on the moon and hell on earth with its four internal partial rhymes:

with a few atomic bombs (holy smoke)

Those near-rhymes, which add insult to the injury inflicted by the stock-response vulgarism "holy smoke," draw comic attention to the ridicule of the situation depicted by "ojo-boy"—through Bai Tamia's voice—who, with the healthy common-sense of a middle-class Liberian, thus pierces "phonetically" the tragicomic bombast of certain scientific myths and slogans of progress.

Another example of comic mood created by near-rhymes, in association with repeated vowel-and-consonant combinations, is found in lines from Bai Tamia's night and day a dialogue, i.e., from stanza one:

if i coud read and write  
jus small small self you see

and from stanza two:

if i coud read and write  
jus small small self and fot in the

The slant rhymes between "read" and "write," followed by a strongly s-alliterated line in the first stanza, and by a partly-s-/partly-f-alliterated line in stanza two, are comically vulgar devices which aim, half-maliciously, half-tenderly, to counterfeit and grace the poem's popular grassroots slang, as if to say, jokingly: "See? In Monrovia, even 'night' and 'day' "speak" poetry," respectfully (if, no doubt, farfetchedly!) remindful of the spirit of Molière's classical literary parody on Mr. Jourdain's prose.

Bai Tamia's use of "rhyme," in any of its forms, then, is, both, economical and brilliant. When he did implicate phonetic accumulations, they were unfailingly made, first, to contribute to the most obvious meaning of his words. When he, moreover, implicated them accessorially in their own right, they were masterfully made to contribute to the embodiment of 'metaphors' signifying other stories within the words of a story, so as to connote them all at the same time. He thus belongs to those "cunning artificers in verse," e.g., Alexander Pope, who, making "it more than an auxiliary sound effect,"<sup>132</sup> on that account, too, belong to the knightage of English language literature.



Bai Tamia's art of connoting many "stories" within a single poem, by means of precise poetic diction, careful construction of text, subservience of means to meaning and natural speech rhythms, in short, qualify him not only as "cultural ambassador of Liberia" to the world but also as literary ambassador of English-language poetry in the literate Judeo-Christian tradition to Liberia.

3. Bai Tamia's acoustic connotation of oral/aural African culture traditions. - Bai Tamia, the poet of *Ebony Dust*, whose making started (unbeknown to himself) whilst he sat under his grandmother's feet, spellbound by her fantastic stories and songs, their utterance and rhythmic patterns, the poet Bai Tamia, then, told "stories" about "the Liberian scene," which connoted acoustically, not only literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions in Liberia—e.g., The Holy Bible, philosophy, English literature when he wrote his poems in English, but also oral/aural African culture traditions in Liberia—e.g., the masked traditions of Zoba, Yavi, Gbetu, Jobai, Nafali, Kolokpo, observed (under those names or others) among the Vai, Gola, Mende, Dei<sup>133</sup>—when he wrote his poems in Vai or Gola.

Moreover, the oral/aural African culture traditions of Liberia, acoustically connoted by Bai Tamia's poems in Vai or Gola (which only can be made explicit by/for speakers or readers of the concerned languages), are also connoted figuratively, through the acoustic 'metaphor' constituted by the "meter" and "rhyme" of his English poetry, since they, sub-verbally, connote e.g., literate Judeo-Christian culture traditions in Liberia, through miming "stories" of their own whilst the words of a poem unfold its main tale, i.e., through being made to play the ritual role of masks, or the role of stories about animals and insects with human characteristics, in Liberia's oral/aural African culture traditions.

Conceptually, Bai Tamia's art of connoting many "stories" within a single poem's tale, actually harks back to the type of pluridisciplinary traditions where poetry plays an important role (and out of which it may have originated in all of the world's cultures), i.e., traditions where words, music, dance, characters, combine in a public spectacle around some religious or secular, unifying action. Relatively recent, secular examples of such traditions within the literate Judeo-Christian framework, are masque and antimasque,<sup>134</sup> or opera. One of the two basic dimensions of Bai Tamia's polydisciplinary pluralism, then, is no doubt constituted also by his direct *and* indirect acoustic connotation of the masks playing original sacred role, or revalorized secular roles, in the life of Liberia's oral/aural African culture traditions.

#### IV. Bai T. Moore's Art and Contemporary African Poetry

In a recent essay, Nigerian poet Tanure Ojaide analyzed contemporary African poetry through an "old/new" dichotomy, by virtue of which Bai T. Moore primarily is one of Africa's "new" poets. Their "poetic manifesto" is Niyi Osundare's poem Poetry is.<sup>135</sup>

Poetry is  
 not the esoteric whisper  
 of an excluding tongue  
 not a claptrap  
 for a wondering audience  
 not a learned quiz  
 entombed in Grecoroman lore

Poetry is  
 a lifespring  
 which gathers timber  
 the more throats it plucks  
 harbinger of action  
 the more minds it stirs

Poetry is  
 the hawker's ditty  
 the eloquence of the gong  
 the lyric of the marketplace  
 the luminous ray  
 on the grass's morning dew

Poetry is  
 what the soft wind  
 musics to the dancing leaf  
 what the sole tells the dusty path  
 what the bee hums to the alluring nectar  
 what rainfall croons to the lowering eaves

Poetry is  
 no oracle's kernel  
 for a sole philosopher's stone

Poetry  
 is  
 man  
 meaning  
 to man.

Bai T. Moore's poems mostly correspond to Osundare's conception of poetry. Thus, none of them constitutes "the esoteric whisper of an excluding tongue," i.e., refer to any "Grecoroman lore." Although Bai Tamia did write poems in "an excluding tongue," from the point of view of his English-language readership, the 'lore' they refer to is Liberian, and he provided their translations in English, which made them all but "esoteric." Bai T. Moore's poetry, furthermore, is certainly "no oracle's kernel for a sole philosopher's stone," but unfolds a tale of concern and love, whose characters do not represent—though they hinge on—concepts, but life, as experienced in its joys and woes by a blood-and-flesh humanity. However, this in no way stops the Liberian poet from

viewing life and history with the serenity of a "philosopher," who "emphatically" refuses to be excited by anything or anyone.<sup>136</sup>

Bai T. Moore's 'emphasis', then, is non-violent. Osundare's call for an overtly revolutionary poetry—"a lifespring which gathers timber the more throats it plucks harbinger of action the more minds it stirs"—hence finds less response in Bai T. Moore's art than other criteria of what "poetry is" for the "new" African poets. Even though Bai Tamia's descriptions of social evils imply a conceptually vehement critique, they appeal less to action than to empathy. In line with the oblique handling of criticism in probably most oral/aural African cultures, not only in Liberia but continentally, through the slanted use of tales and parables in songs,<sup>137</sup> Bai Tamia's "stories," which do, indeed, stir minds but not pluck throats, thus sound the voice of Liberia in the concert of Africa's "new" poetry.

Bai T. Moore's poems, which also fully embody with Osundare's identification of poetry as a discourse of lyrical eloquence at the exclusive service of "man meaning to man," indeed are unmistakably a Liberian poet's "man meaning to man:" the objective of poetry which, finally, defines the art of Osundare and the "new" poets of Africa.

Bai T. Moore's "meaning to man" stemmed from his love for Liberia, as part of Africa, very much like that of the "new" African poets, whose radicalism Ojaide sees set in their nation-states. Therefore, his "man meaning to man," like theirs according to Ojaide, sought the influence of "the traditional African folk 'literary' techniques," one of whose characteristics is subordination of 'poetic' means to understandability, i.e., non-esoteric meaning. In addition, Bai T. Moore also exploited the polydisciplinary "influence" of traditional oral/aural African cultures, as they flourish in Liberia, i.e., in ways which mark his originality in contemporary African poetry as a "new" Liberian poet.

The poem *My Africa*, which thematically expresses Bai T. Moore's feeling for Liberia, betrays "the rhythmic pattern of the songs" as his heart's perspective: betrays that forest-music—the music of those whom Keëta Fodeba called "les hommes de la danse"<sup>138</sup>—and forest-dancing, in their multidimensional convergence around a single concept, are forever present in his poetry. In *My Africa*, Bai Tamia's "rhyme" thus musically reinforces natural speech rhythm whilst its meter metamorphoses dancing into the poem,<sup>139</sup> so as to more fully embody the meaning of its only theme, i.e., the breathtakingly varied wonders of nature and culture in *his* Africa: Liberia, which Bai Tamia's equally breathtaking density of vocabulary in turn wondrously mirrors and reflects.

The poem's singleness of theme, structurally analogous to the teleological singleness of artistic happenings in the traditional African village framework, or to the quasi-hypnotic quality of its nightlong communal dancing and music-making, is potently mimed by its grammar and syntax, too. Fully thirty-seven—out of the poem's thirty-eight—lines indeed constitute one interrogative sen-

tence, articulated into eight relative sentences each introduced by the relative "where," and comprising numerous complements and subordinated clauses, some of which, in turn, are also relatives: an oral utterance of those lines leaves the speaker as breathless as dancers or musicians after a nightlong feast.

The poem's last verse, answering Bai Tamia's long question, is itself constituted by a rhetorical question opening, like his first verse, with the interrogative "where?." That structure practically circles the poem into a self-propelling body, merging end and beginning into one another, thus to signify what *his* Liberia 'really' is to Bai T. Moore, the bard whom Roland Dempster considered as "one of West Africa's outstanding jungle poets,"<sup>140</sup> i.e.:

### My Africa<sup>141</sup>

Where do pepperbirds tell of dawn  
 And tribesmen hasten to the swamp  
 To drink the palm wine bubbling with  
 The beetles and the squirming worms  
 And spiked with leaves and "seejohn roots"  
 Which bring the aged youth;  
 Where women pound their daily morsels  
 In mortars fashioned out of wood  
 Or drain the tiny brooks and creeks  
 With dip nets made from palm leaf twine  
 In search of fish and crab;  
 Where cunning beasts and insects  
 Roam around the jungles  
 Trying to dodge the spears and arrows  
 Dipped in poison cooked from nuts and leaves;  
 Where witching make the lightening strike  
 An enemy or an innocent tree,  
 Or humans change to snakes and cows  
 That bullets never kill;  
 Were Polon men can span the Duma  
 In the night with vines and twigs  
 A swinging monkey bridge, which  
 Is just as strong as steel;  
 Where genii dwell in groves and streams  
 And offer wealth and fame to those  
 Who dare to keep their laws or die;  
 Where death is just another step  
 To join the unseen spirit world,  
 And Muslim and the Christian prophets  
 Tell the pagan of a heaven  
 Shining with unheard of gems  
 High above the jungles,

Free of all which ache the soul;  
 Where daring feats of warriors gone  
 And powerful kings with mighty harems  
 Are reckoned now in caves and stones  
 Or handed down in fairy tales?  
 Where else but the land of pepperbirds.<sup>142</sup>

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The present essay is offered "to the ancestors" for three reasons. First, because, according to his father's ancestral Vai culture, he now actually belongs to them. Secondly, because, when I first wanted to learn Vai, in 1964, Bai Tamia did for me *everything* the adult Vai do in order to socialize and educate their young. Thirdly, because—metaphorically—this paper constitutes a votive drop "to the ancestors," preceding *On The Object of Ethnology, à propos Vai Culture in Liberia*, i.e., my doctoral dissertation, just as, in many of Liberia's indigenous African cultures, the first draught of any alcoholic drink (in ancient times, palm wine) is spilled onto the ground, precisely as a consecrated offering to the ancestors.

<sup>2</sup>When any material object, e.g. texts, is conventionally valued as the perfectly executed tool of its (semiologically conceived) connotation,, in quasi-total abstraction of the same object's other-than-connotative function, then, in terms of the English language, i.e., ethnocentrically, it is *correctly* identified through the "art" concept, e.g., as "poetry."

<sup>3</sup>Bai T. Moore wrote other forewords, e.g., a "forward" [sic] to his not as yet published *Echoes From The Ghettoes*, a collection of poems "dedicated to all my good good friends who live in ghettos around the world."

<sup>4</sup>With that precise adage, in Vai, Townchief BOima JOmbO ManOBa, in whose Town Sowu (Gawula), I got "broken into" Vai culture, in 1969, began his opening speech of welcome to me, thus justifying that he would speak in Vai and, then, have someone translate into English.

<sup>5</sup>The poem's title reproduced in *Ebony Dust*, is The Day I Sailed Away. At the bottom, Bai T. Moore added the following commentary, whose censorious implications are evident:

These few lines which have been revised a fewtimes, represent perhaps my first attempt to express myself in this type of media. The original copy was handed a high school teacher in Richmond, Va., together with a few fairy tales, in the thirties. Unfortunately they got misplaced.

<sup>6</sup>Armstrong, i.e., the name of the Richmond, Va. school Bai T. Moore attended at that time.

<sup>7</sup>On the title-page of B. T. Moore's first publication, printed in Richmond, Va., in 1937 (written as an adolescent in need to earn some money whilst

studying there), we read: *Golah Boy in America*. By "Bye Tamia" Johnson Moore. *Native of Golah Tribe, Liberia, West Africa*.

<sup>8</sup>Slogan of the "aesthetic" or "decadent" movements in literature.

<sup>9</sup>In Louis J. Prieto's semiology, that system founds any act of communication, because it is the system determining the possible cognitive content of what one may "want to say," by means of any particular code, e.g., in a natural language.

<sup>10</sup>The Latin etymology of "text" is *textus* "fabric, weaving." Bai T. Moore uses the fabric-metaphor in his poem *Art in Shadows*, where he speaks of oral text as "yarn," and of its production in terms of "spinning."

<sup>11</sup>Bai T. Moore's fiction also comprises short stories, at least one of which, i.e., *Murder In The Cassava Patch*, has achieved fame among English-speaking readers. But it is poems, which he kept writing up to his death. The most persisting form of his literary creativity seems to be poetry.

<sup>12</sup>E.g., *Echoes From The Ghettoes* includes a series of five long poems about his voyage through Soviet Russia, in 1984 (journey thru the lands of ancient history, tashkent peace palaver, Samaritan crossroad of the silk road, georgia a small corner in paradise); further, a poem written about his trip to China, in 1985 (pillars of friendship). In *Ebony Dust*, there is an important poem written as result of his visit to the Federal Republic of Germany, in 1962 (The German Bastile), as well as a poem conceived during a trip to India and the Middle East, which, in his words, "finally took shape in the Egyptian Museum of Antiquity in Cairo in the spring of 1955 (Monuments). A whole section concerns "The American Scene" (eleven poems). The Holy Bible, source of literary inspiration for practically all English-language writers of fiction (but Shakespeare), also nourished Bai T. Moore (Triumph and Tragedy in Jerusalem, Poor Judas, What Was Christ, Christ And The Country Devil Meet).

<sup>13</sup>Abrams, 1971: 115.

<sup>14</sup>Gerald Moore, 1966: 42, uses that expression ~a propos both Amos Tutuola and Camera Laye.

<sup>15</sup>Prieto, 1975, 1986.

<sup>16</sup>Alan P. Merriam, 1964.

<sup>17</sup>The term dualism is theoretically so connoted in the history of philosophy that Bai T. Moore's usage of it in his "Foreword" to *Ebony Dust* cannot be but rhetorical.

<sup>18</sup>In his Foreword to *Liberian Writing. Liberia as seen by her own writers as well as by German authors*, Horst Redmond Verlag, 1970, Liberia President William V.S. Tubman acknowledges Bai T. Moore as "well-known in this country." The inclusion in that volume of two of his texts (out of four by Liberian authors), i.e., his short-story *Murder In The Cassava Patch*, and his

scholarly essay *Categories Of Traditional Liberian Songs*, proves that President Tubman was right, i.e., Bai T. Moore had an appreciative readership. By implication, the German editors of *Liberian Writing*, who were responsible for choosing him as major representative of Liberian writing, certainly gave him a "respectful critical reception," at any rate, regarding his status as a writer, at large. As to his poetry, which belongs to fiction (i.e., to the kind of the facts they describe, as distinct from works not due to individual imagination, and which claim to be verifiable with regard to the facts they describe, e.g., scientific papers): the persent paper will, it is hoped, contribute to consolidate the view that his poems deserve—at least!—as respectful a critical reception as his other works of fiction (in the same book, A. Doris Banks Henriès' "Survey of Liberian Literature" including 20th c. poetry since 1945, does not even mention it).

<sup>19</sup>His short-stories ruthlessly acknowledge the deep moral ambiguities of human nature at large.

<sup>20</sup>The poems here reproduced show that Bai T. Moore deemed his aim as so important, that he often also added to them some commentary, in plain prose, e.g., to make the circumstances of a poem's genesis explicit, or, e.g., to make sure that his reader's understanding of a poem be not arrested by a word familiar perhaps only to Liberian readers.

<sup>21</sup>There are sixteen "ethnic groups" in Liberia, i.e., sixteen Liberian peoples, as I call them, identified by name in the 1962, 1974, and 1984 Republic of Liberia's Census of Population. Those sixteen groups, which are listed below by statistically ascending population order (1984 Census spellings), speak each its own language, and own land in common. "Other Liberian tribes" are not identified in the Census, i.e., they are lumped together, but I do not know who they might be, or what "Liberian" or "tribe" here means:

1. Dey
2. Belle
3. Mende
4. Gbandi
5. Vai
6. Krahn
7. Gola
8. Kissi
9. Mandingo
10. Lorma
11. Mano
12. Kru
13. Gio
14. Grebo
15. Kpelle
16. Bassa.

<sup>22</sup>In *Gola Boy In America*, Bai T. Moore explained his double ethnic identity. Significantly, he identified himself *at first* as a Gola. Some expatriates I met in Liberia ethnocentrically called Bai T. Moore a liar, on account of that book. He himself smiled. "Problems of Vai identity," a paper announced for the 1972 London Co on Manding Studies, has—unfortunately—so far not been traced: it may actually never have been presented since its does not figure among the meeting's announced presentations. It may still figure among his papers.

<sup>23</sup>More prosaically, that knowledge is also obtained by reading *Gola Boy In America*, where he identified his mother's family as the framework within which, as he wrote in his "Foreword," he sat under his "grandmother's feet, gaping at the fantastic stories she told," and at which time he still "had not the least idea that *Ebony Dust* was in the making."

<sup>24</sup>Bai T. Moore, in: *Liberian Writing*, page 45.

<sup>25</sup>d'Azevedo, 1970: i.

<sup>26</sup>That was the settlers', i.e., the pioneering fathers', and the American Colonization Society's concept, primarily, with reference to Christianity.

<sup>27</sup>In semiological terms, as conceived through the European linguistics tradition of the School of Prague a "word," broadly defined, constitutes a particular kind of lexeme, i.e., a particular kind of non-grammatical sign, or, in terms of logic, a bi-facial entity, whose two classes correlate sounds and meanings.

<sup>28</sup>d'Azevedo, ib.: 51, also provides other usages of the term "self" in Liberian Speech.

<sup>29</sup>Moore, *Voices From Grassroots* (page 74 "Glossary"), where it figures as "Nyamanyama."

<sup>30</sup>See, e.g., Cresseils, 1989: 63.

<sup>31</sup>ofri, 1978.

<sup>32</sup>Welmers, 1974: 80.

<sup>33</sup>E.g., Kwa, Kwanyama, Kwara, Kweli, Kweni (Westermann).

<sup>34</sup>Welmers, 1973: 52.

<sup>35</sup>According to the linguistic feeling of a Liberia-born native speaker of English, i.e., Ms Janet Thomas, World Council of Churches, Geneva, who is herself a writer, and without whose dedicated reading through Bai T. Moore's poems with me, in search not only of Liberian English expressions I might have ignored, but also of the possible of meanings hidden in his poem, I could not have done the present essay. A false etymology can, however, not be excluded. Warren d'Azevedo says nothing on that item.



<sup>36</sup>The reference work on English grammar I used for this paper is Quirk et al., 1972

<sup>37</sup>Welmers, 1976: 96, *passim*.

<sup>38</sup>According to the chronology provided in Dunn & Holsoe, 1985: xiii, the first colonists sailed for Africa in 1820. In 1821, Eli Aires was appointed principal agent of the American Colonization Society; Cape Mesurado was obtained by Eli Aires and Robert Stockton from the rulers of the Mahnbahn and Dei; and the first settlement was founded at Cape Mesurado. Bai T. Moore may well be repeating "the kwi year in 1821" as an informative sentence orally transmitted e.g., through village story-tellers. Perhaps subject to no historiographic validation, it may constitute a myth in the Gola or Vai traditions Bai T. Moore remembered, and whose conceptual elucidation would define a fundamental human science object.

<sup>39</sup>d'Azevedo, *op.cit.*: 51.

<sup>40</sup>The classificatory kinship terminologies current in most Liberian indigenous cultures conceive of one's natural "children," not as one's biological offspring, but as the young ones for whom a close kin-group takes responsibility. Hence, the notion "to raise someone else's child" does not correspond to a traditional, or customary, indigenous concept. I.e., illiterate as such a woman may be supposed to be, she lives in an acculturating universe, which, of course, explains her emotional confusion, or, with a theoretical term, her "cognitive dissonance" (A.F.C. Wallace, 1956).

<sup>41</sup>She might have born but "they" may either not be aware of the fact, or, then, attempt to malign her by ignoring the fact deliberately—which would imply that the young woman is living, not with her own people, but with other people; probably at their service, and probably in an urban context: a similar implication might also be induced from her most contemptuous use of the non differentiating pronoun "they."

<sup>42</sup>Source of information is Ms J. Thomas.

<sup>43</sup>d'Azevedo, *op.cit.*: 9.

<sup>44</sup>*Ib.*: 44.

<sup>45</sup>Indigenous Liberian languages mark often end of sentence intonation by adding "o" or some other vowel, e.g., in Vai, it is often [e] [we] or [wE].

<sup>46</sup>d'Azevedo, *ib.*: 35, 38.

<sup>47</sup>Whilst the Italian origin of ghetto poses no problem, its "-bli" suffix does: Ms Thomas thinks, she can recall a Bassa-speech connotation. Ghetobli, then, might refer to the Monrovia Bassa Community shantytown.

<sup>48</sup>Meaning also "Please!" d'Azevedo, *op.cit.*: 3.

<sup>49</sup>See "Bai T. Moore's art and contemporary African poetry," here below.

<sup>50</sup>d'Azevedo, *ib.*: 5.

<sup>51</sup>*Ib.*: 76; d'Azevedo spells it "popo."

<sup>52</sup>*Ib.*: 6.

<sup>53</sup>The link between Bai T. Moore's "belles" and Hemingway's *For Whom The Bells Toll*, which, on the surface, is a purely phonetical association, may, at first seem too tenuous to be worth being pointed out. There are additional reasons of style, analyzed in "Bai Tamia's grammar and syntax," which seem, however, to make the link appear more relevant than it seemed at first, and to confirm his oh how slanted allusion to the great American in this poem.

<sup>54</sup>Abrams, *op.cit.*: 167.

<sup>55</sup>Lester Parker Monts, 1980: 77: "Informants state that learning to "talk" on the sangba is much more difficult than on the kleng because the various sounds are produced by the bare hands as opposed to the use of sticks." So, even nowadays Africa's drums "talk."

<sup>56</sup>Bai T. Moore, *Voices From Grassroots*, Th P Grand t page 18.

<sup>57</sup>Abrams, *op.cit.*: *ib.*

<sup>58</sup>That attitude prevails among any Liberians nowadays.

<sup>59</sup>Abrams, *ib.*: 166.

<sup>60</sup>"Today's Liberia" refers to the post-1980 era, i.e., to the period g Liberia's Second Republic, whose daily press publishes poems and short stories of young writers confirming a diction and grammar shying generally away from a stilted classicism.

<sup>61</sup>E.g., Edward Wilmot Blyden.

<sup>62</sup>Abrams, *ib.*

<sup>63</sup>Probably clitorideectomy. Still in honour. Bai T. Moore told me, he had tried to help introducing an awareness of hygiene into the practice, which is suspected by some specialists to be at the origin of cases of sterility in women, as a consequence of infections due to non-sterilized surgical tools.

<sup>64</sup>See juxtaposition of both poems herebelow, in "Poems as sound," on literature.

<sup>65</sup>Or in natural language grammar, at large

<sup>66</sup>According to a well-known Liberian intellectual, decades ago already, Liberia's Albert Porte, fabled journalist and critic ("An Explanation," 1927, "Mr Albert Porte Explains," 1942, "A Little Child Shall Lead Them," 1966, "Li tion Or Gobbling Business," 1974, "A Return To tic Principles, 1977," etc.), in one of his notorious pamphlets, had made famous the

stereotype of such a pattern, which evidences the profound difference between ways of *speaking about—or conceiving of—*actions, depending on what type of language speakers operate with, i.e.: “What to does but to ate and slept,” used and re-used on every possible occasion, in order to deride e.g., political opponents, and of which Bai T. Moore “he made me unbuttoned my sleeves and tore off my evening shirt” is but a mild analogy. What those expressions also demonstrate is that “tense” or “time” is generally an irrelevant category in indigenous Liberian languages; except for the future, verbs refer to the manner in which actions occur, or are performed, i.e., they answer the question “how?,” and not the question “when?”

<sup>67</sup>“Forward” to *Echoes From The Echoes*.

<sup>68</sup>I quote from that “forward:”

the urge to write echoes from shantytas’ stems from several years of keen observation of ghetto life and behaviour in many parts of the world where i have had the occasion to travel. from all these experiences, i have come to the conclusion that, all shanty town or ghetto dwellers, whether in monrovia, liberia; bombay and culcutta, india; new york, u.s.a.; lagos, nigeria, among others, face the same problems, and have the same aspirations—to enjoy a good standard of living, education and job opportunities like every one else. in the middle of the 18th century, there was set in motion the industrial revolution in england. the revolution was characterized by the gradual replacement of the slow hand method of producing essential goods by fast and efficient methods, using machines. many social changes were brought about by the industrial revolution. the pooling of machines, skilled and semi skilled men and women and raw materials at strategic centers, or factories, usually located in cities, lured thousands of unemployed young people to the cities, looking for jobs. these new comers to the cities invariably ended up in congested communities—shantytas or ghettoes, where rents were very cheap and lifestyle freer.

<sup>69</sup>Despite the fact that the above “forward” was written for *Echoes From The Ghettoes*, which contains some of his last poems, it also comprizes some of his earliest pieces.

<sup>70</sup>Monrovia market women (page 1-3) ends with:

come good friend  
buy my part me  
I go dash you  
goes on endlessly till dusk

<sup>71</sup>d’Azevedo, op.cit.: 22: “grona: urchin; delinquent, orphaned. (Apparently from the Sierra Leone Creole meaning “growing up” and refers to children and young people, living untended in the city.)” Bai T. Moore’s grona

girl (page 5-8) is a young prostitute persona, with slangy—but not particularly “Liberia patois”—lines, e.g.:

the savior  
ba  
got damn mad

<sup>72</sup>d’Azevedo, op.cit.: 62: “yana boy: street peddler. An urban petty trader who carries his wares about the streets.” Bai T. Moore’s poem *Yana Boys* figures in *Ebony Dust* (page 39), without either “Liberia patois” nor slang. Obviously, however, they are among the slum-dwellers whose “bitchy” speech is described, e.g., in *rent plawa*, *Echoes From The Ghettoes*, page 8.

<sup>73</sup>hungry mouths cry chopi chopi, *Echoes From The Ghettoes*, page 49. Paradoxically, here the only “Liberia patois” expression (if it is that) is in the poem’s very title, i.e., the words “chopi chopi,” which render the average indigenous language speakers’ habit of adding an end-vowel to every foreign word finishing on a consonant, because apparently all of their own languages’ syllabic systems conceive only of “open” syllables, i.e., syllables ending on a vowel or on a syllabic consonant.

<sup>74</sup>The reference is of course to Chaplin’s sketch on Phyllis and Henry, the fleas, in his film *Limelight*.

<sup>75</sup>See e.g., David Robins, *Chaplin, His Life And Art*, McGraw, 1989.

<sup>76</sup>UNESCO Project Number 0603 finances my project promoting literacy in Vai in the Vai script, for the \_\_\_\_\_ nt of Education R.L. The idea, as old and basic as all too often ‘forgotten’ in the context of efforts at promoting literacy in Africa, is that literacy, at large, rests on existing texts, written in the language spoken and understood by its prospective readers, and, either issued from, or since ancient times intimately interwoven with, their people’s culture. A blue-print in Vai and in Vai writing of the Vai people’s textual culture—i.e., neither the Bible, nor the Qur’an is, thus, to be made available to the Government of Liberia by the end of the International Literacy Year 1990. Thereafter, UNESCO will probably finance the printing of a number of copies, to be used experimentally—as first reading-matter in the primary schools of Grand Cape Mount County’s Vai-speaking areas. The undertaking, which is a pilot-project, is a model to be backed-up by an adult literacy project financed by WHO, and to be followed by similar projects for other languages of Liberia.

<sup>77</sup>See, e.g., David Dalby, “A Survey of the Indigenous Scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone: Vai, Mende, Loma, Kpelle and Bassa:” pp. 1-51 in *Liberian Language Studies*. Vol. VIII, Nx 1.

<sup>78</sup>d’Azevedo, W.L., “Bai Tamia Moore: Cultural Ambassador of the Liberian People:” pp. 3-7 in *Liberia Forum*. Vol.4, Nx6.

<sup>79</sup>Those latter scripts were invented around the 1920s, i.e., about one hundred years after Duwalu BukeIE fathered “the Vai book”—in Vai, the

word for "book" is also the word for "skin," for "health," for "writing." This lexical conceptualization induces some Vai I know to call themselves "the Jews of West Africa," or "the People of the Book," even though Vai writing has produced no written tradition so far.

<sup>80</sup>*Echoes From The Ghettoes*, unnumbered page:

you can't be me  
 6 and I can't be you  
 emphatically impossible  
 we come from different geni  
 maybe you from a jackass  
 or a snake in the grass  
 and I a hellava tree or  
 jacko hollering ganku!  
 we criss and cross  
 up in the elements  
 I mean way up in the heavens  
 where the zowoes play  
 with magic and with science  
 with suke gowns and  
 lightning rods killing  
 enemies in their tracts  
 we may look alike  
 but you can't be me  
 and I can't be you

<sup>81</sup>*Ib.*: page 54.

<sup>82</sup>Bai T. Moore did—perhaps—not forsake all explicative words. Ms J. Thomas thinks that, e.g., the words "daya glepo nyesua" of line four, are equivalents—in other Liberian languages—of the line's first word, i.e., "god," although she is not sure to which language(s) they belong: Kru? Bassa?. Fact is, that—for English-speaking readers—that internal 'explication' (if it be one) is equivalent to an intense densification of meaning, referring them back to their primitive gut-feeling, and encouraging them to bypass rationality, or the logic of language.

<sup>83</sup>Ms. J. Thomas identified the two last lines of that poem as praise-lines to the power of God. If she is right, that would certainly be coherent with indigenous Liberian mourning traditions (or with other similar traditions around the world, e.g., the Jewish prayer for the death *kaddish*).

<sup>84</sup>"Unification"—a fruitful concept born under the Tubman's Administration, now, again in honour in Liberia—cannot but be one of *the* processes generating popular consensus on national identity.

<sup>85</sup>Vai script was discovered to the academic world (Dalby, 1967: 6-7) after a British officer, riding through Vai country in 1848, saw drawings on the

people's outer house-walls, which, upon questioning, turned out to be written Vai language characters. The linguistically quite irrelevant pictorial characteristics of writing, at large, have, of course, always and everywhere been used pictorially, e.g., the Middle Age prayer-book illuminations.

As regards the Vai character text of maya i seneo, as it figures here, we note, *first*, that the phonetically written text comprises twenty-six lines, and the Vai character counterpart, twenty-three; *secondly*, that the last line is constituted by the signature of its "scribe" [nga MOMOlu kowu] = "I, MOMOlu Cole;" *thirdly*, that, g line nine of the transcription, there are discrepancies between it and the phonetic text. Bai T. Moore's *original* poem actually was written in phonetic characters: he had entrusted the "job" to his relative Mr Cole (Bai Tamia's Vai literacy was poor), who, by the way, taught me most of what I know regarding Vai writing. Mr Cole, for whom Bai Tamia's phonetic text in Vai, or versified Vai, were suspect, because he was literate in Vai and Arabic but not in English, did, nevertheless, his best to do justice to Bai T. Moore's request. A best however limited by his linguistic feeling, and prevalent habits of Vai literacy, e.g., the habit to "s . . ." what one means to write down (Fr. K. Kandakai, literate in all three codes of writing, insisted on that habit, whilst he taught me Vai, and assisted me (with others, e.o., Bai Tamia) in the description of the Vai manuscript corpus at the Berlin State Library, for its catalogue—reading old "summarized" manuscripts created big difficulties: thus, lines nine and ten of the phonetic original are condensed in line nine of the transcript, and so, also, for lines fifteen/sixteen, seventeen/eighteen, and twenty-two/twenty-three, which are summarized in the Vai character text's respective lines fourteen, fifteen, and nineteen.

<sup>86</sup>The (though not sufficient) condition of literature, i.e., of any written textual culture, is natural language, which is normally everywhere manifested through sounds, i.e., through audible frequencies—the physicist's way of knowing rhythm—produced by the instrument of both speech and singing, i.e., voice.

<sup>87</sup>The title-page of *Echoes From The Ghettoes* fittingly bears the ink-drawing of a six-string-/koniNai/ stringed 'belly'-harp mounted on half-gourd [*Liberia Arts And Crafts*, 1971: 41, shows an exemplar without the strings but with a bell], reproduced as "kru harp" with seven strings in Baumann/Westermann, 1967: 383; also called "konny" (Gola/Kelle), "koninghi" (Gbande, Kani, Sapo) in Tabman, 1966: many of its dimensions are indeed graphically defined by those motifs (whose overall Manding characteristics are documented in e.g., Hommel, 1974).

<sup>88</sup>Bai T. Moore wrote two analogous "invitations," following each other in *Echoes From The Ghettoes* (pages 55 and 56). The variant in their title corresponds to variants in their respective shapes and texts. Regarding content, the four first lines of both are exactly the same. Apparently only slight differences their respective ends correspond, however, to a significant shift in the poet's orientation:

there's no reason  
 why we can't create  
 a vibrant black  
 society based  
 in mother africa

there's no reason  
 why we can't  
 create a vibrant  
 black society  
 in the world  
 based in africa

<sup>89</sup>Jones, op.cit: 3.

<sup>90</sup>Ofri, 1972.

<sup>91</sup>My interpretation of Bai T. Moore's graphically configured left (or, if parallel, left-and-right) poem-margins, through geometrical motifs basic to customary indigenous Liberian cultures, as connoting his poem's rhythm visually, evidently is an hypothesis determined by that particular point of view. That hypothesis is pertinent because it was generated by Bai T. Moore's own perspective, as formulated in his "Foreword"—and, hence, also operationally fruitful: to witness, the results it yields.

That hypothesis, nevertheless, was only the first of two, theoretically complementary, hypotheses that had to be made, in order to find a balanced interpretation of Bai T. Moore's graphically configured poem-margins. For, indeed, Bai T. Moore's primary identities, as a Gola or as a Vai, are logically included in his national, Liberian identity. Thus, since each identity anchors a point of view, a Western point of view is, theoretically, just as relevant, as a Vai or a Gola point of view, to an unbiased interpretation of Bai T. Moore's graphically configured poem margins. From that point of view, I therefore looked at the motifs formed by those margins through their orientation on the page, towards the left, or towards the right, and observed, that the first *left-hand* side margin-motif is conceived *either concave* (in case of the oval, or quasi concave, in case of the zigzag), i.e., that the first motif, in those poems, juts out towards the *right-hand* side of the page, or *convexly*, i.e., the motif juts out towards the left.

The conceptual opposition between "*left*" and "*right*" is of course a stereotype from the Western point of view as anchored also in the English language, e.g., correct vs. incorrect, good vs. bad, lawful vs. unlawful, proper vs. improper, etc. etc. etc.: an opposition which is irrelevant, in that sense, in the indigenous Liberian languages or cultures, as far as I know. The attempt at correlating those graphic differences jutting out towards the left, jutting out towards the right—as they figure in Bai T. Moore's poem-margins, with his respective poems' meanings is, however, sterile: such a correlation does not

exist. The hypothesis, that—at least in some cases—his margin-shape's orientation on the page might be interpreted in terms of the West's conceptual opposition between "left" and "right," as we know it in cultures of Western origin, was, hence, rejected.

<sup>92</sup>Liberian English expression, connoting departure from and return to the same point.

<sup>93</sup>See, e.g., the Bassa or Mano Janus-faced objects at the Africana Museum of the Cuttington University College in Suakoko (*Rock Of The Ancestors*, pages 32 and 45); or the Janus-faced Mended female society mask, in the Imre Patku collection, Budapest (Bodrogi, page 239).

<sup>94</sup>Nketia, 1962: 64-93.

<sup>95</sup>Monts, op.cit.: 297: "The off-beat phrasing of melodic accents, which represents syncopation, exists in fifteen [out of twenty-six transcribed] songs," i.e., in over half of the transcribed repertoire.

<sup>96</sup>Nketia, op.cit.: 107, writes: "A study of the incidence of [African] music [in Ghana] in various communities shows that music making is socially controlled. A variety of musical types are created for use in recognized situations. Although there is scope for spontaneous expressions or raneous creations, such events usually derive their inspiration from existing musical types or dance forms."

<sup>97</sup>Monts, ib.: 297: "Twenty-two songs [on twenty six that were transcribed] are in call-response (leader-chorus) structures," i.e., over eighty-five percent of the songs which Monts transcribed are in that structure.

<sup>98</sup>Jones, op.cit.: 4.

<sup>99</sup>Monts, ib.: 308, fig. XXII, shows ten [in his transcriptions, I count eleven] "overlapping of parts," which, I think, coincides, at least partly, with what Jones means when he speaks of the "conflict of polyrhythms in the music."

<sup>100</sup>Monts, ib.: 294. On recent scholarly contributions to the question of rhythm concepts in African music, see Stone, 1986; Koetting, 1986; Agawu, 1986.

<sup>101</sup>Abrams, op.cit.: 67.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid. 66-67.

<sup>103</sup>See e.g., the discussion of rhythm in English in Quirk & al.'s (op.cit.: 1034).

<sup>104</sup>Vai is a two-tone language, Gola is said to comprize seven tones. Whereas the tonemic dichotomy of Vai might make it possible to identify one of the two tones as providing relative pro (in view of intonation-patterns, one might think that it is the high tone which could be thus perceived by native speakers of Vai), the identity of prominencing elements in languages



with more than two tones is logically not foreseeable, except hypothetically, in terms of 'patterns': which is vague.

<sup>105</sup>E.g., Italian /fo:la/:fo:la "tale" and /fo:la/:folla "mass of people."

<sup>106</sup>E.g., German /überzEtsn/ "translate" and /überzEtsn/ "carry across a river."

<sup>107</sup>The above e German, shows such a combination, since the two words differ, not only on account of their first phoneme's relative length, but also on account of word-accent which coincides with each word's long phoneme.

<sup>108</sup>The phonemic structure of noncentral phonemes: o initial position, the latter vs. /- [mgb] /, etc. (Ofri, 1978) two systems of syllabically on, the other, for word-non- /j-/ vs. /- [nj] -/, or /gb-/

<sup>109</sup>From the most to the least interpretation, those constituent articulations, its phonematic ending-endowed structure's atted intonation, its syllabic

<sup>110</sup>Paradoxically, it is only poetry can be made some sense of 'tten text that Bai Tamia's literate public.

<sup>111</sup>English prosody known accent enforcing alteration of in the works of great poets, while like Byron, in *Don Juan* (Abr accents could, then, however not figure among Bai Tamia's technical means achieving comic effects. ched accent," i.e., a metrical nt, e.g., in the folk ballad, or se it to achieve comic effects, eoretical reasons, wrenched

<sup>112</sup>To the best of my knowledge, mine is the first published analysis of Bai Tamia's prosodical technique.

<sup>113</sup>Leach, ed., 1950: 744-

<sup>114</sup>A "trimeter" is a metric line consisting of three "feet"—a foot being the combination of a strong stress and the associated weak stress or stresses which make up the recurrent unit of a line—i.e., three "stresses," "accents" or "beats," as they synonymously.

<sup>115</sup>The number of lines define metric patterns and their name, i.e.: monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter, heptameter, octameter, nonameter, decameter, dodecameter.

<sup>116</sup>*Exodus* 31: 12-18.

<sup>117</sup>1. Double underlinings indicate: a) alliterated sounds (m/, sp/, s); b) assonance (i).

2. Accents indicate stressed sounds.

3. Italicized letters indicate consonantal sound-reinforcement (all through those seven lines, m and n accumulations emphasize nasality).

4. My phonetic interpretation is classical, except for item 3.: "true" consonance in English (repetition of a sequence of consonants in nearby stressed syllables but with a change of intervening stressed vowel: Abrams, op.cit.: 7) is not involved here, yet a nasal 'consonantality' pervades these lines).

<sup>118</sup>Leach, ed., ib: 391.

<sup>119</sup>Square brackets, which include the phonetic 'spelling' of a word, are used either when the orthographic spelling of a word does not permit readers easily to 'see' important sound similarities, or when the added accent indicating stress on one phone falls on more than one letter representing that phoneme.

<sup>120</sup>An "iamb" is a syllabic entity—or "foot"—constituted by two syllables: a light followed by a stressed one (Abrams, op.cit.: 94).

<sup>121</sup>A "catalectic" line is constituted by a "trochaic" verse—i.e., each of whose feet (= "trochee") consists in a stressed followed by a light syllable—where the final syllable is however missing (ib.).

<sup>122</sup>An "anapest" is a foot constituted by two light syllables followed by one stressed syllable (ib.).

<sup>123</sup>Johnson/Grant, ed.s, 1979: 53.

<sup>124</sup>*Ebony Dust*, page 69.

<sup>125</sup>Borges, 1965: 49.

<sup>126</sup>E . g ., Keats, *Endymion* (Abrams, op. cit .: 96-97).

<sup>127</sup>A "                e" rhyme is a rhyme consisting of a single stressed syllable (ib.: 151).

<sup>128</sup>ib. 98.

<sup>129</sup>To make my analysis explicit I separated each "foot" from the preceding foot in the same line by means of dots. The three first tetrameters' general metric character is that of Hopkins' "sprung rhythm," where each foot begins with a stressed syllable, which may stand alone, or else be associated with from one to three, or more, light syllables (ib.). Lines four and six are regular iambic octosyllabic                Line five is a trochaic catalectic (seven syllables, or: heptasyllabic)                . Note Bai Tamia's mixture of sprung rhythm and syllable-and-stress meters within a classical tetrametric structure.

<sup>130</sup>A rising meter is defined by strong stress at the end of a line, which is said to have a masculine ending (ib.: 95, 96).

<sup>131</sup>"Imperfect" or "approximate"—"partial," "near," or "slant"—rhyme is a correspondence between rhymed sounds which is not exact (ib.: 151).

<sup>132</sup>Ib. 152.

<sup>133</sup>Johnson, 1954: 38/; Ofri, 1972, 1973, 1974; Monts, 1980: 192ff.

<sup>134</sup>Abrams, op.cit.: 90-91.

<sup>135</sup>Quoted in Ojaide, 1989: 121: Niyi Osundare, *Songs Of The Marketplace*, Ibadan: New Horn 1983, p. 35.

<sup>136</sup>See Bai T. Moore's poem you and me note (80).

<sup>137</sup>Merriam, 1964: 190-204, passim, provides many examples confirming that songs in Africa are attached also to the enforcement of social norms through song-texts expressing criticism.

<sup>138</sup>Huet/Fodeba, 1954.

<sup>139</sup> 1. Trimeters and , i.e., binary and ternary principles of rhythm, whose alternation (according to Jones, 1959: 3) defines the widespread clap- or bellpattern's "African signature tune," alternate, in various groupings (but for line fifteen "dipped in poison...").

2. Relatively long verses, comprising lines of an almost absolutely equal number of syllables (e.g., the first five lines each of thirteen syllables; or the five regularly octosyllabic lines g "Where genii dwell..."), form solid blocks, suddenly broken by shorter or longer lines.

3. Whoever witnessed dancing in one of Liberia's oral/aural African cultures cannot help remembering the alternation between a group, dancing collectively for some time, and then, individual dancers breaking out of the circle for relatively short but brilliant personal performances, usually at some lead-singer's encouraging prompting (see e.g., Monts, 1985).

<sup>140</sup>Cited in the 1976 reprint of *Ebony Dust's* "Introduction" by Rosina Robinson.

<sup>141</sup>*Ebony Dust*, pages 11-12.

<sup>142</sup>Transcription of non-English words: 1. Original text fonts not available to me are transcribed as follows: 1. a) N = "ng". b) E, O represent degree-aperture 4 vocalic phonemes (sometimes = "è," "i"). c) <sup>n</sup>, <sup>E<sup>n</sup></sup>, <sup>O<sup>n</sup></sup> represent the nasal counterparts of the oral vowel phonemes /a, E, O/ (so = "an, En, On). B, D represent the implosive counterparts of the explosive consonant phonemes /b, d/. H represents the nasal counterpart of the oral consonant phoneme /h/ (sometimes = "hn.").

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**Zolu Duma, Ruler of the Southern Vai, 177?-1828:  
A Problem in Historical Interpretation**

Svend E. Holsoe

**Preface**

This article focuses on the interpretation of a group of oral traditions about Zolu Duma, a man who ruled in the southern Vai area (now part of Liberia) during the latter half of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> The problem lies in unders of use of the traditions in contrast to what seem to be hi retations from the Western point of view.

Zolu Duma represents th eader<sup>2</sup> who was able to manipulate the traditional Vai 's own purposes (for more detail see Holsoe 1974). Politi had the following characteristics. Their origins were u rea they eventually dominated. Their access to power was not ou e traditional mechanism of kinship relations; usually as outsiders they had no kinship ties to the local families. These individuals used an alternative base for achieving their positions, usually a combination of special access to economic resources outside the traditional society—most often European trade goods—and great astuteness in understanding the local political structure and manipulating it to their own purposes.

Information concerning Zolu Duma's life is fragmentary, and with the exception of a few written references, depends mainly on oral traditions. Nevertheless, he is one of the earliest Vai leaders about whom it is possible to write a coherent short biography. From the point of view of traditional historians in the Liberian Vai country, he is generally well remembered; any good historian will know at least one or two important incidents about his life. But significantly these accounts are not fixed in wording. They are clearly not memorized texts using mnemonic devices of metered phrasing or music but are relatively free form, embodying a series of basic thematic elements which are told with verve and style, or mundanely, depending on the skill of the particular historian.

In addition, there is no evidence that the Vai had specifically designated individuals, who were responsible for praise songs and historical tales, as are found in other northern Mande-speaking societies. There are today, no special categories of historians *per se*. An individual who has sufficient interest, and who has been able to listen to the older generation knowledgeable in history, can become an historian. Nevertheless, it should be noted that emphasis was placed

in the past on historical knowledge before an individual could hold a political position, for a typical Vai saying is that "history is power". In other words, what one knows about another man's past may be politically useful at a time when one's own position and legitimacy is challenged. The important point is that any individual could become an historian.

In spite of the lack of fixed historical texts, there is a coherence and detail about Zolu Duma's life which Vai historians have retained, unlike the more vague accounts given for earlier Vai leaders. The uniform treatment of the basic themes concerning Zolu Duma was leading to a 'cycle' (of which he was the center) of narratives, and possibly contained germs of a larger epic.<sup>3</sup> In its simplest form, the epic hero has a special or unusual birth. At an early stage circumstances select him out from the rest of the individuals in the society and attribute to him special powers, usually through the assistance of other worldly creatures. During his lifetime he exhibits special characteristics, and performs unusual feats. He is brave and dauntless, and finally his life ends dramatically. Zolu Duma's life as portrayed by the oral traditions has qualities of the epic pattern and with sufficient time the traditions might have been shaped more fully to completely fit it. However, this metamorphosis has been terminated with the dying out of the traditions.

The oral traditions which have been collected, in spite of the supernatural qualities which have been added to Zolu Duma's life, nevertheless seem to retain a considerable core of historical reality as can be demonstrated when checked against similar patterns in the surrounding traditions and the available documentary evidence. The more ambiguous aspects of the traditions, though undoubtedly accretions provided by the tellers of the traditions, are understandable when viewed as the means whereby Vai historians justify Zolu Duma's atypical rise to great power.

The historical justification by the Vai is important to understand. The telling of the Zolu Duma story in the context of Vai society is clearly recognized as history, in contrast to the Vai category, folktale. Thus, the biography plays an important enculturative function. For the Vai people today, Zolu Duma was in many ways the epitome of the "modern" man. He was an individual who built his position on personal achievement rather than through the traditional mode of ascribed status based on kinship ties. In this sense, Zolu Duma is illustrative of a model a young Vai might follow to adapt to today's world.

### Introduction

Zolu Duma during his lifetime established a political entity in the southern Vai and neighboring Gola areas, within what is now the modern Republic of Liberia. Although there is no documentary evidence with which to establish a date of his birth, what he achieved in his lifetime was part of a process of political change in the greater Vai area. Certainly one of the pressures for change was the potential of increased trade with Europeans for a variety of local products, particularly slaves.



There is evidence that during the eighteenth century slave trading along the Vai coast increased (Martin 1931:188, 452; Curtin 1969: 150, 167, 200; Jones & Johnson: 1980) and with the abolition of the trade by the British in 1807, and the Americans in 1808, the illicit trade maintained the same volume because other nationals took the place of British and American traders. During the early part of the nineteenth century many European mercantile houses, most especially the French, established ties with local Vai traders (Ashmu 1827: 242). In return for consignments of goods, these Europeans received regular shipments of slaves. With the trade came economic power which local Vai men could translate into wives, mercenaries and domestic slaves, thereby increasing their subject population. Zolu Duma was one such individual who by the beginning of the nineteenth century had succeeded in consolidating his political power through economic means.

### His Birth

Nothing is known from the documentary evidence concerning Zolu Duma's birth, except that he was Gola in origin (Cates 1819:66). The oral traditions vary concerning the exact place of his birth. There are at least three different places mentioned. One is Gohn Koko (Soni 1966), a town in the Kongbaa area of northern Liberia. Kongbaa was the reputed homeland of the Gola peoples (d'Azevedo 1968-69:5-6). The second is Jawajei, a town in the Vai Kone area (Lami 1966), the region where Zolu Duma later settled. The last location, Mano Gobla, was a town located in the Gobla area of the modern Lofa-Gola chiefdom (Noa 1965a). Both Vai Kone and Gobla were originally Gola areas, but the former is now considered Vai. All of the sites of his birth are plausible, and we must remain uncertain until further evidence is forthcoming.

Whatever the case, all the evidence indicates that his father's family did not reside in the area in which he would later establish his town, though there is possible evidence from one of the sources that his mother's family may have come from Vai Kone. However, since both the Gola and Vai emphasize their patrilineal ties, in general an individual's most important kinship linkages are with one's paternal family.

### Zolu Duma's Overseas Training and Return

According to one of the oral traditions, while visiting the Gola town Jangama, a Vai man, Nyor, from Vonzua in the Vai Kiadii Clan, was offered Zolu Duma as a ward. In this relationship Zolu Duma was placed as a client to Nyor, his patron. Nyor accepted Zolu Duma and returned to the Vai country. In time, Nyor placed Zolu Duma with a Bassa man, Wuling, who was acting as a trading agent between the Vai people and the Europeans (Kiadii 1966a). An alternative version of the tradition states that Zolu Duma's father himself placed his son with Wuling, since the latter was a wealthy man. The practice of having one's son raised by important individuals was common, as it made possible an extra kin linkage between the two families, presumably to their mutual benefit.

Zolu Duma followed in the footsteps of other local people who were sent abroad to be educated.<sup>4</sup> Such had been the case of the man who trained Wuling. According to Vai traditions, a young man named Jangba from the Bassa area was captured by Europeans and carried off to Europe. There he was trained in their language and trading practices. Eventually he was returned to the Bassa country. Jangba then began training others among whom was Wuling. After Wuling had completed his education, he moved north and settled at Cape Mount, eventually founding the town of Bendu on the shore of Lake Pisu. From his new location Wuling began trading with the Europeans. At the same time, he too began to train several local youths. One was a man named Kpana who would eventually settle in Bongma in the Tewor Vai area (Getawe, B.S. 1966c). Another was Zolu Duma.

There is no indication who took Zolu Duma and to what country. The oral traditions never distinguish Europeans from each other, all of them being called *Po'o moenu* and their country being referred to as merely *Po'o*, meaning West-erners and a European country respectively (Welmers and Kandakai 1974:84). After a period of time, Zolu Duma returned prepared to initiate his own trading establishment.

The practice of sending youths abroad for training grew out of the increasing commerce between coastal peoples, particularly the Vai, and European traders. Part of the trade expansion can be linked to greater demands for slaves. What in the past had been rather casual interactions between scattered African leaders and various European traders was now increasingly formalized. One of the mechanisms used was to appoint certain local men to act as agents for the European traders. The traders encouraged this as it alleviated the problem of negotiating with many people and the consequent interminable discussions over prices and resultant delays in obtaining cargoes. An agent was either recommended to a European trader by a fellow local agent farther up the coast, or several prospective agents came to the ship to obtain the trade of the vessel. Each man had letters of recommendation from previous Europeans who had dealt with the particular person and on this basis a suitable agent could be chosen (Swan n. d.; Billesen 1744). However, this practice was not sufficiently secure to the European traders and so the system evolved one step farther. Some traders, hoping to have more honest, dependable and loyal agents on the coast, obtained the children of prominent individuals whom they took to Europe to be educated (An account 1789:5). These individuals were eventually returned to the coast to act as the European's personal agent and representative.

Zolu Duma's training was an example of this policy by the European traders. The training provided Zolu Duma special opportunities to gain power not granted to most Gola and Vai youths who remained within the framework of the traditional social structure. Vai historians, however, viewed Zolu Duma's success from another point of view.

### Zolu Duma at Gohn Koko

There are several versions in the oral traditions pertaining to Zolu Duma's visit to the town, Gohn Koko. No supportive documentary evidence exists, yet, the reasons for the trip are understandable. If, as one version of the oral traditions states, Zolu Duma was born in Gohn Koko, the trip was a return home. But, even if this were not the case, the visit to the Gola heartland, Kongbaa, where Gohn Koko was located, has the purpose of revalidating his Gola kinship and cultural ties.

From the point of view of Vai historians the trip had another function. It was during this visit that Zolu Duma gained spiritual support for the great tasks which lay ahead. In Gohn Koko Zolu Duma saw and met an anthropomorphic spirit, a *jinai* (jinn). At the same time, the latter realized that Zolu Duma had the potential to be a great fearless leader. In order to test Zolu Duma's bravery, she demanded that Zolu Duma kill the chief's daughter. When Zolu Duma did so, the *jinai* knew she had found her man and decided to "follow" him, giving Zolu Duma the spiritual support necessary for his future success. Together, the *jinai* and Zolu Duma fled the wrath of the chief whose daughter had been murdered. The two proceeded southward eventually settling on a site along the Gbai Creek, and there founded the town of Gohn, commonly known as Gohn Zolu Duma, that is, Zolu Duma's fortified town (Getawe, F. 1966; Noa 1965a).

### Zolu Duma Settles at Gohn

Gohn, continues to exist today and is located in the center of what came to be called the Zolu Duma Clan of the Vai Kone Chiefdom. Originally this was Gola territory and was known simply as Kone.

Whether Zolu Duma himself actually founded the town, or whether there has been an earlier settlement located on the site must await archaeological excavation. In addition, it is not known who granted him permission to settle there.

The location was at the headwaters of a navigable stream, Gbai Creek, up which small canoes could be paddled. From this site it was easy to transport trade goods, including slaves, from the interior to the coast via the Mofi river, and at the same time have access to trade goods brought by the Europeans. For instance, to this day European cannons can be found in Gohn which could only have been transported from the coast by means of boats, there being no beasts of burden available in its rainforest region. Gohn was located, not unlike many other important Vai towns, at a transshipment point in which cargoes had to be transferred from boats to the backs and heads of carriers. Thus, it was a strategic site for an individual such as Zolu Duma, who was to build his political power on the base of the European-African trade.

### The Muslim Diviner

From the point of view of Vai historians, however, a far more important contributor to his success was Zolu Duma's *jinai*. In addition, his success was predicted well before it occurred. The single best known portion of Zolu Duma's story recalled by Vai historians concerns a Manding Muslim.

During the latter part of the eighteenth century when Zolu Duma began his rise to power, there were several travelling Manding Muslim teachers, called specifically *kamor* in Vai, who visited the Vai and Gola areas. In fact, by 1826, one observer noted that Islam was prevalent among the prominent Vaimen. Mosques were common and Manding travellers who visited various towns acted as teachers of the faith. In addition, these Manding were often for several years by wealthy chiefs as priests and religious instructors (Ashmun 1827: 244–46).<sup>5</sup>

Zolu Duma's relationship to one such visiting Manding Muslim was not particularly harmonious. This Muslim, in the traditions usually called Kamor Nyei, came to Zolu Duma just as the latter was beginning to gain political strength. As a consequence, Zolu Duma asked the Kamor to pray for him that he might gain additional power. The Muslim agreed to do this and after some initial prayers told Zolu Duma to stand on a rice fanner. The Muslim then made the fanner rise high in the sky at the same time telling Zolu Duma to look in all directions. Once he had done this, Kamor Nyei brought the fanner and Zolu Duma back to earth. He then told Zolu Duma that all the area which he had seen from the great height would come under his control.

The traditions state that Zolu Duma was pleased, but not wanting others to obtain similar power through this Muslim, he ordered that Kamor Nyei be killed. The Muslim after initially protesting, accepted his fate. However, before being put to death he asked permission to say his prayers. Then he informed Zolu Duma that, although his prediction would come true, upon Zolu Duma's death, his successors would never maintain such power, and in fact, because of his foul act, Zolu Duma's successors would be doomed to humble status (Soni 1966; Kiadii 1966b; Getawe, F. 1966; Getawe, B.S. 1966b & 1966c; Sewan 1966; Lami 1966; Kiawii 1966; Kiatamba 1966).

Through this incident Vai historians make it clear that Zolu Duma's career was an exception to the Vai norm. It was occasionally possible for an individual to become exceedingly powerful and to use his power in a brutal and arbitrary manner, but such concentrated power and behavior could not be tolerated for most men and certainly would not be institutionalized and ted from one generation to the next.

### Trade Relations, Ma Malia and the Expansion of Territory

From the early part of the nineteenth century the export slave trade from the Vai country continued at a high rate.<sup>6</sup> For Zolu Duma, this was an important

export item. Gohn was a collecting point for slaves being brought down from the interior (Noa 1965a). There is little question that Zolu Duma established a series of trading relations with minor chiefs throughout the hinterland of Gohn from whom he was able to obtain, by subdividing a major European contract, the numbers of slaves which were being demanded. Such was the pattern other Vai chiefs followed (Sierra Leone Commissioners 1823).

The oral traditions describe another mode in which Zolu Duma, at least on one occasion, was able to acquire on short order a number of slaves demanded by a European trader (Lami 1966; Noa 1965a). In the incident told by Vai historians, Zolu Duma tricked his sister, Ma Malia, who was the head of a woman's traditional school, the Sande Society. Zolu Duma on false grounds encouraged Ma Malia's Sande Society girls to visit a European ship. Having previously made an agreement with the European traders, once the girls were on board, the vessel set sail. Ma Malia was dismayed at what Zolu Duma had done and openly expressed her anger. For that, Zolu Duma had her killed. A woman, even, his sister, he said, had no right to challenge his actions.

It is hard to conceive of a ruler enslaving his own people with any regularity and not causing serious disruption to his political control. Nevertheless, Zolu Duma was apparently able to do so. Part of the purpose that Vai historians have in telling the story is to demonstrate how considerable Zolu Duma's power was, and that he even had the audacity to enslave his own people and kill his own sister. At the same time it makes clear to everyone that although Zolu Duma might do these deeds, he was distorting the social structure of the society.

In the beginning it is likely that Zolu Duma maintained trading ties with his mentor, Wuling, and in fact for a time may have been his agent in the interior. We know, for instance, that descendents of Zolu Duma were the rulers of the coastal trading town, Gambia (Curtis 1831). It is reasonable to presume that this town originally had been Wuling's outlet to the sea and the European traders off-shore. In time, Zolu Duma also would make use of the island, Masating (*lit.* chief's island) in Lake Pisu as another trading site (Robertson 1819:31).

As Zolu Duma's trade increased, he began to consolidate his relations with the interior and neighboring rulers. To the east his area of control abutted that of Sao Boso, the ruler of the Condo Confederation with its capital at Bopolu.<sup>7</sup> It is said that a treaty of peace and non-aggression existed between the two rulers (Whitehurst 1836:273). As a consequence, there were relatively few disturbances between the two leaders. This meant that Zolu Duma, resting assured that his rear was not threatened, was able to turn his attentions in other directions.

Not unlike Wuling at an earlier date, Zolu Duma began to attract young men to his side, whose parents desired to have their sons "educated". One such individual, Fahn Fila Jenge was born in Maima Gobla, the area from which, at least one tradition says, Zolu Duma's father had derived. Jenge was sent by his parents to Zolu Duma's town to become his ward and apprentice (African Belief 1844).

In a similar manner, the parents of Fahn Torlor (Gotolo) sent him to live with Zolu Duma. From Zolu Duma's point of view, this particular relationship was mutually beneficial, as Fahn Torlor's father came from the town of Torsor in the Tombe area and his mother came from the town of Tiehnehmai, Manoballa Clan, in the Gawula area. Thus through this one individual, Zolu Duma extended his relationships to at least two families in two different areas of the Vai country.

As Zolu Duma's economic wealth and consequent political power increased, he began to look for means to expand his trading outlets. Initially the Tombe and Gawula areas were outside his political control. They were, however, intervening areas between his own territory and the sea. Thus, it was natural that in time frictions would increase between Zolu Duma and the rulers of these areas.

The oral traditions allude to problems. Initially, a war broke out between the leaders of Gawula and Zolu Duma's people in which the former with the assistance of outsiders seem to have won the day (Saliff 1950). In time new difficulties arose. One account mentions that Zolu Duma smarted under ethnic slurs cast by Vai against his Gola people. According to this tradition, Zolu Duma organized an army which easily marched from Cape Mount through Tombe subduing all the towns on their way. They then moved into Gawula conquering great stretches of this area halting their attack at the gates of Bendu, the town of Zolu Duma's teacher and trading partner, Wuling (Saliff 1950; Noa 1965a). Whatever may have been the actual cause and timing for the attack on Tombe and Gawula, Zolu Duma came to dominate these areas, usurping the political control of the traditional leader of Gawula at Mando, Dwalu Fagbana, also known as King Gray (Robertson 1819:29; Mechlin 1831:34).<sup>8</sup>

Zolu Duma had now gained unhindered access to the coast. Not only did he obtain control of the coastal town of Fanima, which had belonged to Dwalu Fagbana (Mechlin 1831:34), but he was able to establish an additional outlet at the mouth of the Lofa river.<sup>9</sup>

There is little evidence available concerning Zolu Duma's power south of the Lofa River. He may have controlled the Gobla area, and he probably had a certain amount of influence over the Dei people intervening at times when he had a special interest in the area (Bacon 1821:14).

#### Manas Visit to Zolu Duma

To the west, Zolu Duma's influence did not extend beyond the Mafa River and in fact he may have had only minimal influence between the Mafa and Mofi rivers. This is not to say that his reputation had not been spread much farther afield.

To the far west on the coast in the Vai area known as the Gallinas, today a part of southern Sierra Leone, there was a ruler named Siaka. He too had gained

considerable political power through trade with the Europeans. Vai historians retain a story about the two rulers (Getawe, B.S. 1966a, & 1966c; Dosi 1966; Kiatamba 1966; Kamara 1966). According to the traditions, Siaka had heard several reports to the effect that there was a powerful ruler living to the interior who possessed some wealth and power. He could not believe, however, that anyone could surpass his own political strength. In order to ascertain the truth of the reports, he decided to send his son, Mana, to visit and see for himself.

Mana was dispatched with a bag of gold and other gifts. After several days of travelling, Mana approached a village near Gohn Zolu Duma where he met children playing. They were all well-dressed. In fact, they were dressed in cloth better than that which Mana had reserved to clad himself when he arrived in Gohn.

On entering the village, he saw a noble looking man who was well-dressed. Assuming that he had arrived at Gohn and that the man was Zolu Duma, he bowed and addressed him humbly. Much to his embarrassment, he learned that the man was only Zolu Duma's chief warrior and slave.<sup>10</sup> Attempting to regain his composure, Mana was given directions and set off for Gohn itself, where he was welcomed.

After being provided with a house, Mana was eventually taken before Zolu Duma, and there he presented his bag of gold. This time he learned to his surprise that Zolu Duma already had many chests full of gold. In fact, one account states that all of his own chests, as well as those of his wives, were so full that they did not know where to put the new bag of gold! Thus, the gift which Siaka and Mana thought would truly impress this interior ruler turned out to be a commonplace.

Following a brief stay at Gohn, Mana was provided with presents to carry back to Siaka. One version states that Mana was so embarrassed that he left Gohn without even saying goodbye. On his return, Mana reported what he had done and what he had seen, much to the disbelief and bewilderment of Siaka.

As in the earlier traditions, Vai historians use this account to demonstrate the power and authority which Zolu Duma commanded. Everyone in the area knows about Siaka's power, but as the oral traditions indicated, Zolu Duma's power was even greater, at least greater than thought probable for an "interior" ruler. In addition, one has to assume that there is at least a grain of chauvinism on the part of the historians who tell the tale.

Beginning with this tradition Zolu Duma's story can be linked to written sources. References to Siaka date from 1808 when he was involved in consolidating his control over the Gallinas area (African Institution 1812).

In 1814, we have the earliest European description of Zolu Duma and his town. The accounts describes the town, which is for some reason called "Couscea", the etymology of which is not clear, and states that:

Couscea contains from fifteen to twenty thousand inhabitants; it is walled by barks, placed horizontally in two rows about three feet distance, the interspace filled with clay. The town was strong, with four gates, at each of which there are cannons, that are in tolerably good order (Robertson 1819:31)

The account also notes that it was possible to sail from the sea by canoe to the town, and that Zolu Duma, who is called "Peter Careful" was spoken of with great respect, y since he had treated his visitors with kindness (Robertson 1819:30-31).

Items of trade included camwood, ivory, locally woven cotton cloth and rice (Robertson 1819:32). There is no mention of slaves, but then it is possible that this trade was hidden from most European eyes, particularly since it was forbidden by the British and Americans.

A personal description of Zolu Duma written by a Church Missionary Society traveller in 1819 was far less complimentary. Given what we have seen of Zolu Duma's tactics, it was probably not too far off the mark.

The present King [Peter] is a native of the Golah country but has continued partly by force and partly by fraud to secure to himself the government of Cape Mount. He is a quarrelsome and cruel man generally at war with his neighbors, whom he seldom fails putting to death if they fall into his hands. He has also stopped and plundered several strangers passing through his dominions, white as well as black, and is generally looked upon and spoken of as an object of terror by all around (Cates 1819:66).

Again in March 1821, Zolu Duma was referred to in the following manner:

This part of the coast we had previously learned to be the occupancy of King Peter, one of the most powerful and warlike Chiefs in West Africa, and more deeply engaged in the Slave Trade than any of his neighbors. The known hostility of his views to the objects of the American Government and Society, dissuaded us from incurring any loss of time or expense in procuring an interview with him (Bacon 1821:13).

Needless to say, reports on Zolu Duma by these Europeans and Americans created an unfavorable impression. Liberian settlers would also view him with considerable caution.

### **Zolu Duma and the Liberian Settlers**

During the five years prior to Zolu Duma's death, he came under increasing pressure from outsiders, especially the Afro-Americans who had settled at Cape Mesurado to form what would be the colony of Liberia. Zolu Duma's role



in the negotiations for the original tract of land which was obtained by Robert Stockton and Eli Ayres in December 1821 is obscure. Although Zolu Duma is often mentioned as a participant in the negotiations (e.g. Beysolow 1924:3-4), he was not a signatory to the treaty.<sup>11</sup>

By 1826, there were indications that the ruler of Cape Mount, presumably Zolu Duma, though it may have been his son, was anxious to welcome missionaries in his territory. There was apparently an intense interest in acquiring a Western education (Cary & Holton 1826; Ashmun 1827: 244-46). Undoubtedly the model was already planted in their midst, as exemplified by Zolu Duma himself, who had been trained abroad. One of the results of that training was self-evident to all: he was ruler of the area.

Zolu Duma was beginning to feel the pressure of the peoples under his subjugation who wished to be free. In particular, the Vai of Tombe and Gawula resented his political domination. There was also some indication that the slave population, estimated as high as 3/4 of all the people, were in revolt (Ashmun 1826a: 258; Ashmun 1826b: 377). If a large proportion of the population consisted of domestic slaves, it remained imperative for a leader to maintain a firm grip over all the population. In addition, the "normal" flow of export slaves was being hampered (Ashmun 1826a), which must have affected the whole economic structure.

In October, and again in December, 1826, Liberian commissioners, and then the Agent for the Colony, went to Cape Mount to negotiate for control of the trade from that area. However, on both occasions, it was impossible to conclude any firm agreement. The difficulty was attributed to "the unsettled state of their government" and the fact that there had been "a very great commotion among the nation during the year past" (Gurley 1835:329; Cary 1827:304).

There were indications that the political stability of Zolu Duma's territory was beginning to crack. Although the exact date of his death cannot be ascertained, by November 28, 1827, he was reported dead. If during the previous year he was having health problems, this would have accounted for the political instability. One of the characteristics of the various polities created in the Gola-Vai area was the fact that leadership was not hereditary, but rather fell to one strong individual. When his strength wavered, so did his political power.<sup>12</sup>

### Zolu Duma's Death

As with Zolu Duma's birth, there is scanty information concerning his death, and at that, it is somewhat contradictory. The possibility exists that he died a natural death after a period of illness (Kiadii 1966b). There is also a tradition that he became lost while following an elephant (Sewan 1966). Finally, there was the prediction in one of the accounts of the Muslim diviner, Kamor Nyei, that Zolu Duma would die from chiggers, a small worm-like insect that digs into the feet (Kiawu 1966).<sup>13</sup>

Whatever the cause, Zolu Duma, as befitted such a great ruler, was immediately buried with a large quantity of silver cups, spoons and bowls (African Belief 1844). The final observance, the so-called forty day funeral ceremony, was held on February 12, 1828 (Revey 1828). Large crowds of people from all the surrounding towns attended.

From the Vai point of view, the funeral was a festive occasion. "They have all the feasts. They do everything until everyone is satisfied" (Noa 1965a), but as improperly understood by a Baptist missionary:

The funeral commenced . . . with firing of guns, crying, singing, and dancing in so much that the whole town was nothing but confusion (Revey 1828).

The final ceremonies had been celebrated for Zolu Duma. But this was not the end of the story.

Shortly after Zolu Duma's death a three way struggle took place among the two individuals he had raised, Fahn Fila Jenge and Fahn Torlor, and Zolu Duma's son, Jala Finji. Jala Finji quickly lost control over large areas formerly controlled by his father. However, it was an attack on Gohn by Fahn Fila Jenge and his subsequent actions which shocked everyone. Not only did Jenge sack the town killing all his captives, but prior to burning the town, he exhumed Zolu Duma's skull and the silver, leaving Zolu Duma's body to be consumed in the burning town (African Belief 1844).

Zolu Duma's life had been filled with violence. His remains were destroyed in violence.

### Conclusions

From an historiographic point of view, the evidence for Zolu Duma's life presents us with two types of data, the oral traditions and the documents written by outsiders, and two types of possible interpretations. Zolu Duma was an important ruler, though not unique, among the southern Vai and the neighboring Gola (cf. Hosoe 1974). The documentary evidence supports the oral traditions in this matter. However, in order to explain Zolu Duma's considerable power, the Vai oral historians have used supernatural explanations. It was a rare phenomenon for an individual to be able to break away from the multitudinous constraints which existed in both Vai and Gola societies, all of which worked toward dampening individual achievement and success at the expense of the larger group, whether it be the family, the lineage, or the town and its elders. More importantly the traditions demonstrate his atypical behavior in several instances, particularly the three murders, all of which indicated his illegitimate control of political power. In the end he paid the ultimate price—his remains, deliberately exhumed by Fahn Fila Jenge, were consumed by fire and thus his continuing role as an ancestor was obliterated.

For Westerners the supernatural explanations of Zolu Duma's success are less satisfactory. Rather, his success can be explained by other means, such as his early training abroad, his success as a trader and thus with his access to trade goods, his ability to convert these goods into wealth as defined by the Vai and Gola, namely human support whether by wives, slaves, indentured servants or mercenaries.

It is possible then to understand an historical process and a particular individual's role through the use of oral traditions. The traditions must be subjected to careful scrutiny and interpretation. There is a logic to the evidence presented by the local historians from their society's point of view to explain an individual's special behavior. However, it is also possible using this same evidence to subject the traditions to alternative interpretations which are not dependent on supernatural justification.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>See the appendix for the actual oral tradition texts which have been used for this chapter.

<sup>2</sup>For reasons of simplicity, I have chosen to identify Zolu Duma as Vai since the Vai people themselves do. Only when pressed do they agree that he really was Gola by birth. This is a good example of the ease with which ethnic boundaries could be crossed and ethnic identification changed to suit one's particular purposes. The question is complex and needs further investigation.

<sup>3</sup>For a very brief summary of this pattern, see Bird (1974) and Knappert 1967.

<sup>4</sup>For another example of a Vai man who was trained abroad, see Thompson (1778:5)

<sup>5</sup>For greater detail concerning Islam and the Vai, see (Holsoe 1987).

<sup>6</sup>For a more complete exposition, see Holsoe (1973; 1977).

<sup>7</sup>For further information on this confederation, see Holsoe (1966),

<sup>8</sup>These events had to have occurred prior to 1814, see Robertson (1819:30-32).

<sup>9</sup>See reference to slaves being exported from the river in 1820, Collier (1820).

<sup>10</sup>The impact of such a situation on a Vai audience is considerable. The

disgrace and embarrassment of a free-born man bowing and speaking humbly to a slave was unthinkable. The freeborn Vai maintained very considerable social distance from their slaves. For further discussion on this topic see Holsoe (1977).

<sup>11</sup>For the text of the treaty as well as an identification of the signatories, see Holsoe (1971b:336, 357–358).

<sup>12</sup>For further discussion of this phenomena, see Holsoe (1974).

<sup>13</sup>This tradition is interesting in that the reason for Zolu Duma's death, chiggers, is a cause "invented" after 1881 when the first chiggers arrived in the Cape Mount area from down the coast (Penick 1881:146). It demonstrates that often the specific details of traditions cannot be taken literally.

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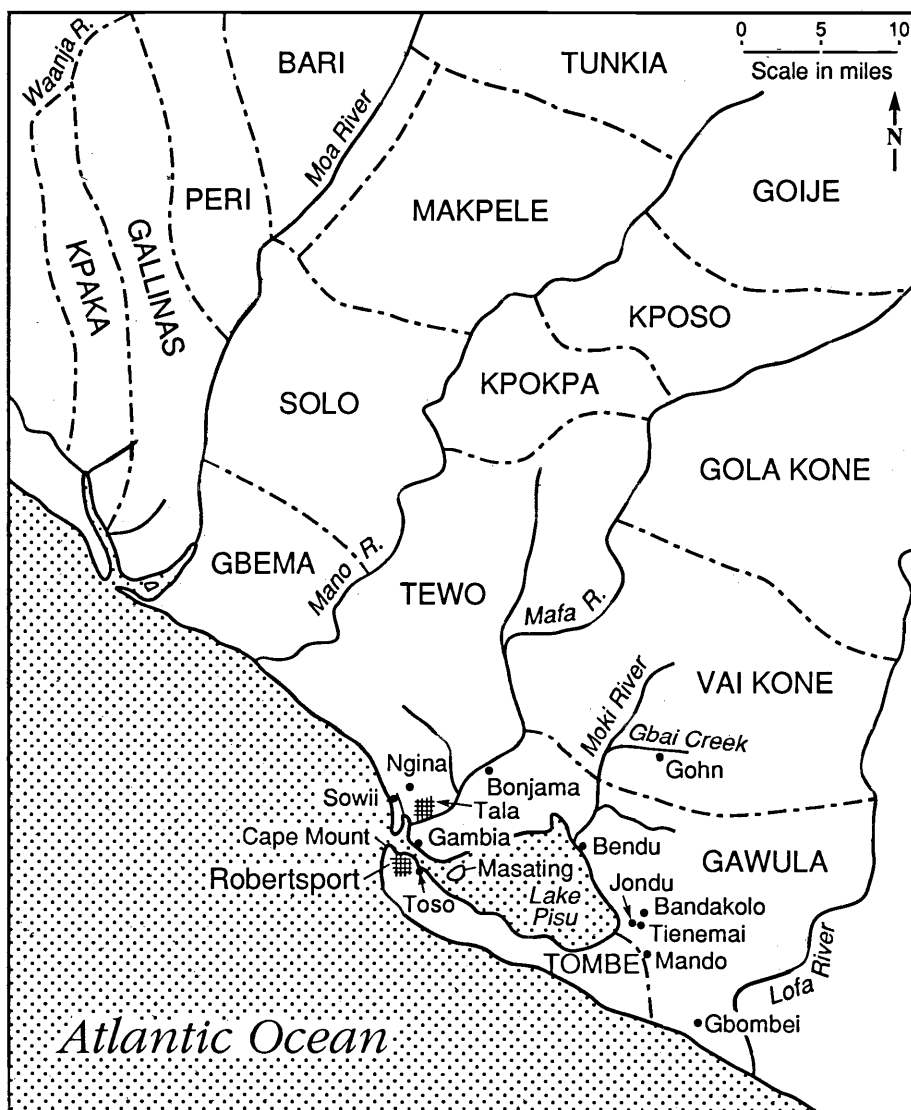
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**Social and Musical Responses  
to Islam Among the Vai  
During the Early Twentieth Century**

Lester P. Monts

**Introduction**

A critical dialectic developed between Islam and indigenous religious practices in the coastal region of present-day Liberia and Sierra Leone during the early 1900s<sup>1</sup>. During this era, the religious activities of Muslim proselytizers were perceived by coastal peoples as useful but tangential to the core elements of social life. Realizing the opposition Islam held to many traditional religious practices, some ethnic groups in the region believed that the newly emerging religious order posed a threat to their belief in spheres of life embodied and manifested in spiritual forces both ancestral and inanimate (Corby 1988:43). Hence, the spiritual guardians of social institutions and other traditional religious forces, in some cases, potentially resisted Islamic dogma. Although many indigenous people made use of the talismans, accoutrements, prestige goods, and magico-medical skills of Muslims, Islam operated primarily along the periphery of traditional beliefs and practices.

Through their commercial ties and cultural similarities with the Manding carriers of the faith, the Vai emerged as the one ethnic group in the region that seemed more receptive to Islam. Muslim elements were subtly adopted into several facets of Vai social life, creating a precarious balance between Islam and local ritual prescriptions. During the early 1900s, however, Islam was far from being the primary cultural focus among the Vai. The Vai response to Islam's cultural offerings was, at this time, carefully measured. Some segments of traditional society were affected more than others. Whereas funerary rites were infused with many Muslim elements, social and religious life, which were controlled by the Secret Societies remained reticent to Muslim influence.

In this paper, I will employ both musical and cultural data to explain the evolution of Islam and Vai responses to it. Such an attempt to reconstruct the events and attitudes of the past could be considered an exercise in futility, since there are few written sources that accurately depict Vai religious culture during this era. Many of the early sources were written by observers who were ignorant of both Islam and traditional African life. For the most part, these Christian-influenced writers of the early twentieth century abhorred both Islam and traditional African religion, which resulted in gross misinterpretations and misconceptions of socio-religious interaction. However, a critical evaluation of

these sources, along with a rich pool of recently collected oral data, can provide a fairly clear picture of Vai social and musical responses to Islam. Although it is not the main intention here to present a detailed examination of the many Vai responses, it is necessary to discuss those that had the greatest impact.

### Accommodation and Transformation

To assess the conceptual nature of early Vai responses to Islam, one major question is in order. What path did Islam take to assimilate into Vai social and musical life, and how did Vai attitudes adjust as the new religious orientation unfolded? We can begin this explanation by proposing a general assumption that suggests a gradual evolution recognized by key characteristics in the Islamic/traditional syncretic process. This is followed by an examination of the reliability of such an assumption in the Vai context. The third concern is understanding the agents of change: those individuals and groups who served as a catalyst for the spread of Islam and how their influence penetrated and deeply affected the Vai world view. And finally, how were once-stable beliefs surrounding one sequence of events—funerary rites—affected by Islamic psychological conditioning, resulting in the transformation of these events and creation of new beliefs surrounding life and afterlife?

The subtle nature of a process such as Islamization makes it extremely problematic to determine beginnings, or, for that matter, endings. Questions about when the Vai became Muslims or when Islam appeared as a primary force are of dubious value, especially when placed into the general context of Vai religious history. The main difficulties lie in the application of strict periodic junctures to the process. A paradigm suggesting that conversion to Islam follows a set pattern, i.e. preparation, conversion, and full assimilation,<sup>2</sup> cannot be fully applied. Such a model has some applicability at the macro level, but at the micro level, evaluating the conversion process in individual locales, problems emerge.

The initial Vai response to Islamic dogma and its influence on traditional practices was marked by varying degrees of success and intensity. Not all Vais were exposed to Islam in the same manner, and as a result religious patterns differed. Some locales in Vai country appear to follow the pattern proposed by Trimmingham. Yet others, due to different forms of indoctrination, moved immediately to the second, or even the third stage. Towns located in remote areas and those that did not contain enclaves of Koniaka people, or towns that were not within the general sphere of influence of the "Muslim towns,"<sup>3</sup> resisted Islamic influence on traditional practices for longer periods than did others. In some areas, the proverbial 'pagan wall'<sup>4</sup> was built, deriving its fortitude from the traditional religion. One purpose of this symbolic wall was to forestall the spread of Islam, especially when people learned of the Muslims' seething opposition to Sande and Poro. This is particularly true in the TewOO<sup>5</sup> and KOnE areas. Notwithstanding, Muslims strove to penetrate and become a part of the

cultural milieu. The obstacles before them in one social context were offset to some extent by the considerable influence of Islam in another—in funerary ritual,<sup>6</sup> for example.

Surely, there were strong accommodative-inclusive<sup>7</sup> forces which enhanced the spread of Islam. Had these acculturative tendencies not been a part of the process, Islam would not have made such major inroads in Vai society. This syncretic<sup>8</sup> model has been applied to many disparate Islamic peoples in Africa, and the overall development of Vai Islam does, to a great extent, conform to this pattern. The notion purported by Trimmingham and others, however, implies that once the syncretic process has matured then the elements of both Islam and customary practice are content to coexist:

What Islamic culture assimilates from animist culture is transformed in the process, for it is assimilated, not adopted, into Islam; at the same time Islam is affected by what it assimilates. The result is not a fusion but a synthesis. (1959:41)

Field data reveal that Muslims were not content with coexistence. Their ultimate goal was to continue toward total reform, a religious orientation intent on eradicating those aspects of traditional lifeways that do not conform to Islamic dogma as they perceive it. The move toward Islamic reform has, in fact, followed a particular pattern, yet it has by no means been a predictable one in the whole of Vai country. Even during this era, the accommodative spirit of Islam was short-lived. Their newly-found interpretations of the Qur'an spoke of only one way, that of Islam. A similar notion is suggested by I.M. Lewis:

When the adoption of Muslim theological and cosmological elements is considered from the point of view of the old religion in terms of a dynamic process of adjustment and adaptation, it is appropriate, at least in some phases of religious change, to refer to 'syncretism' between Muslim and traditional concepts and ritual. From the point of view of Islam, however, (and a fortiori of the Arabist), this new syncretism is to be regarded merely as a temporary stage in the long journey towards a more perfect comprehension of the faith. (1966:67)

I am therefore hesitant to accept fully the commonly applied stages of Islamization in West Africa. When viewed from a broad perspective, however, the level of Vai religious interaction during the early 1900s is in many ways comparable to the second stage of a processual construct derived from work by Trimmingham, Fisher, and others. Using a theoretical framework first modeled by Trimmingham (1959:34), Humphrey Fisher (1973:31) constructs a three-stage conversion process - quarantine, mixing, and reform.<sup>9</sup> As a basic point of departure, I will operate under the assumption that prior to early 1900s, Islam among the Vai was "quarantined." Although there was a Muslim presence,<sup>10</sup> it

was compartmentalized, and did not seriously disrupt Vai social order. From the quarantine stage, Muslims began making inroads into the most fundamental aspects of Vai life: changes in funerary rites, greater involvement in curing, and instilling a burning curiosity about the magical power of Islam in local populations. Gradual assimilation led to the "mixing" stage, when the two formerly separate cultural entities (Islam and African traditional religion) left their parallel paths and began to syncretize. The fusion of these beliefs and practices was not without problems. From the beginning, it involved conflict, accommodation, and transformation of both Islamic and traditional practices, leading, in Fisher's opinion, toward total "reform," though total reform never in fact occurred during this era.

The ethnographic data upon which I base this assumption is derived in part from Ellis's 1914 monograph on the Vai. He considers Islam "a potent force in the religious life of the Vais" (1914:96), but emphasizes that "among the Vais there are two long established religions,—the pagan and the Islamic, emanating from which there are two separate and distinct moral influences" (1914:122). Ellis's work points to an important juncture in the compromise between traditional religious practice and Islam. His monograph describes traditional practices, however, without mentioning how they were affected by Islam. Islam is treated as a wholly separate cultural element, appealing to a small segment of the population. He seems to recognize a dual religious presence, but sees Islam as a "separate but potent" religion that offered a higher order of individual intelligence and moral consciousness, an ideal many Vai sought to achieve.<sup>11</sup>

Ellis was not the first observer to mention Islam among the Vai; earlier writers had tried to calculate the percentage of Muslims among the Vai population. A Cape Mount Christian missionary quoted by Ellis (1914:96) estimated that 95% of the Vai considered themselves Muslims. Fifty years earlier S.W. Koelle (1854:238) estimated that less than 25% of the Vai had converted, and Maurice Delafosse (1900:139-40) reported that a majority of the Vai were Muslims by the turn of the century. But can we count on these estimates by people who were only remotely involved in Vai life to provide a clear picture of the impact of Islam? Are these numbers accurate, and if so, what is their significance given the concept of separate and distinct moral influences?

Considering the possibility that there was a majority of Muslims during the early 1900s, from what we can determine, the practice of Islam was kept separate, having only marginal influence on core aspects of Vai life. Hence, the Vai response during this early period was to maintain Islam as a highly visible yet effectively stagnant phenomenon.

Islam and traditional practices operated in distinct spheres, serving different social functions. It is quite conceivable that many Muslims were full-fledged members of the Secret Societies. Dual allegiance to two separate, nonconflicting religious orders possibly accounts for why both Ellis's description of the Vai and Alldridge's (1901, 1910) descriptions of the Mende and Sherbro in Sierra Leone

portray the Secret Societies as solidly based social institutions essentially devoid of Islam's controlling influences.<sup>12</sup> Direct challenges to the spirit-veneration component of the Secret Societies in Vai country began some twenty-five years later. Oral testimony<sup>13</sup> indicates major confrontations between Islam and Poro activities in the Tombe and Gawula chiefdoms during the 1920s and 30s.

### The Agents of Reform: Zoluduma and the *MOli* Man

Another Vai response to Islam was the reaction to the influence of key Muslim agents, and none was so influential as the itinerant, and often sedentary, *mOli* (Muslim) man. Moving along a protracted course, these subtle purveyors quietly demonstrated the sacrilege of certain traditional practices. Through their sometimes miraculous deeds, they convinced people that the protection they sought from traditional modes of worship could be increased several times fold should they convert to Islam.

The literature on Islam in West Africa abounds with information on the trader as one of the main proselytizers of the faith. The role and influence of the cleric as a separate crusader, however, is often left unnoticed. Among the first Muslims in the forest region were the seers, advisors, and mediators, those who served under the patronage of kings and warriors. These Muslims became key figures in the sociopolitical structure. Patrons sought the advice of their Muslim advisers before making major social and political decisions. It was the cleric who provided the amulets<sup>14</sup> for warriors, and special medicines for hunters, farmers, and musicians. The mystical powers controlled and possessed by individual clerics became legendary, and no story is more widely told than that of the *mOli* man and Zoluduma.

Zoluduma (or King Peter) was the great chief and warrior who resided in the town of GOn (also Gohn) during the early part of the nineteenth century. His role as a leader and his military exploits have been chronicled in several documentary sources.<sup>15</sup> Zoluduma had brought a large portion of the coastal region under his influence, but he was still dissatisfied with the amount of territory he controlled. Fearful of attack by his adversaries, Zoluduma enlisted the services of a powerful *mOli* man. The *mOli* man, believed to be a *kalamO* Nyei, asked what he would be given as payment for his services. Zoluduma offered to pay him the worth of ten slaves, to which Nyei agreed.

For several weeks, *kalamO* Nyei set about his work, gathering medicines and reciting prayers. One day he informed Zoluduma that he was ready to perform a special act, which called for a new mortar and rice fanner. When these were brought, Zoluduma would be shown the fruits of his labors. The mortar upon which Zoluduma was asked to sit was placed on the rice fanner. The *mOli* man took out his prayer beads (*tasabia*) and began reciting sections from the Qur'an. As he counted the beads, the fanner began to rise. The *mOli* man told Zoluduma that all the land as far as he could see would be under his control. Zoluduma rose higher than the clouds and from that height, could survey a

large area. The *mOli* man began to count his beads backward, and the fanner began to come down. Overwhelmed by nature of this experience, Zoluduma proceeded to reward the *mOli* man. When his work was completed, the *mOli* man asked permission to leave, and Zoluduma escorted him out of town and bid him farewell. Upon his return to town, Zoluduma began to fear that Nyei could perform similar feats for others, feats that would result in a usurpation of his power. To prevent such an occurrence, Zoluduma instructed his chief warrior to follow and kill the *mOli* man, and as proof of his demise, ordered that his head be brought back on a stick.

After travelling for several days the warrior met the *mOli* man and told him of Zoluduma's directive. As a final request, the *mOli* man asked for permission to pray, and proceeded to place a curse on Zoluduma's territory. What is now known as the Oracle of GOn stated that Zoluduma would retain his power, but none of his descendants would ever become rich or achieve greatness. The warrior killed the *mOli* man and carried his head to Zoluduma. According to tradition, Zoluduma lived the remainder of his life in splendor, but to the present day, there are people in GOn who attribute the lack of economic development in their area to the curse of the *mOli* man.

The Oracle of GOn gained even greater credence in the context of widespread performance of miraculous acts by Muslim doctors who cured the sick and predicted the future. The magico-religious power of these agents was a major factor in both the conversions and institutional transformations that ensued. It was a relatively simple matter for people to comprehend and correlate this power with other benefits that Islam sought to provide. The thaumaturgical prowess of the *mOli* man was but a higher and perhaps more sophisticated attribute already known through the work of a *boli-mOO*, or traditional medicine person.

### Influence from the *mOli* sanja-nu

The early agents of Islam made only minor attempts to disrupt traditional practices, demanding little from those who sought an association with the new faith. Early Vai adherents of Islam continued their basic traditional lives without a noticeable intrusion from Islam. But as Islam moved from the quarantine stage and began to spread its influence into core aspects of Vai ritual practices, the maker of amulets became the learned man who spoke out against the sacrilege in Vai ritual and ceremonial behavior.

The growth and influence of Koniaka Muslim populations brought tensions between traditionalists and those who had adopted orthodox Islamic views. Leaders of both factions agreed that if Muslims had their own separate land to settle, day-to-day conflicts would be minimized. Recorded accounts indicate that several new Muslim towns, were, in fact, established. At first the Muslim towns (*mOli* sanja-nu) were inclined to remain separate, only occasionally dealing with their Vai neighbors along commercial, marital, and Muslim

educational lines. The Koniaka towns of MakbOuma and Manivolu became centers of Islamic learning, and young Vai men were sent there for study. Once their training was complete, they became the indigenous clergy, the main proselytizers in their respective towns, serving as imams and setting up their own Qur'anic schools. As interpreters of the Qur'an and Islamic law, they constituted one of the most effective agencies for spreading the faith in various locales. It was one thing to be admonished by or to heed the advice of a "stranger," but to hear the same instructions from a Vai man lent trust to the new ideas.

In spite of their magico-religious powers, the impact of these agents, whether Vai or Koniaka, was challenged and often minimized by the power of the Secret Societies. Although their influence was felt to greater or lesser degrees in functions such as making , healing the sick, and officiating at rituals associated with birth and death, their religious ideologies remained distinctly remote from the society at large. The Secret Societies stood firm as the main authorities over community life.

### Early Responses

To assess the musical response to Islam during this era, we must first understand what new musical concepts were introduced. The agents of Islam who traveled to Cape Mount from Bopulo<sup>16</sup> (also Bopolo, Bopolu, and Boporo) and other areas were also carriers of new ideas about music, ideas that challenged the most fundamental concepts about music making. But here too two separate and distinct cultural orientations prevailed. Unlike in other regions of West Africa, Islam did not introduce new musical instruments (Nketia 1974); nor were there written prohibitions against certain musical practices (Erlmann 1986) or the presence of a political system that called for groups of musicians under the patronage of an Islamic leader (Ames 1973). However, new genres and practices were introduced and identified exclusively with Islam.

There are no written accounts that thoroughly elucidate an Islamic musical presence in the Cape Mount region. Islamic musical practices during the 1860s and 1870s have been documented in Bopulo,<sup>17</sup> however, and since Vai Islam was being influenced by traders and clerics from Bopolo during this era, descriptions by early writers on that region provide some clues as to the kind of Muslim musical traits carried to the Vai. The writings of Anderson (1874) and Blyden (1871a,b,c) give specific details on the Bopulo region of Liberia in the 1860s. Blyden's descriptions are especially stimulating in light of other accounts of the period and later. There are several accounts of the highly biased writings of Christian missionaries who viewed Islam as a major obstacle to their efforts. On the other hand, Blyden's and Anderson's assessments of Muslim musicality provides some proof that the early Muslims also brought with them new musical orientations, and there is no reason to believe that these concepts did not have an influence on the Vai.<sup>18</sup> By the 1860s, Bopulo had evolved as a major trade



town, drawing people from various ethnic origins. Sensitive to the cultural heterogeneity that prevailed in that setting, both Blyden and Anderson describe the unique character of the music performed by Mandingos<sup>19</sup> and its association with Islam:

The Mandingos are scrupulously attentive to their worship. They regularly attend their services three times a day: five o'clock in the morning; three o'clock in the afternoon; and seven o'clock in the evening.

In these services I was particularly attracted by the manner in which they chanted the cardinal article of their creed; and many a morning have I been reminded of my own duty, by their solemn musical voices reciting:



(Anderson 1874:40-41)

Blyden's description of Muslim occasions at Bopulo gives the impression that there was something different about the music-making there:

I often lay in bed between four and five o'clock in the morning listening for the cry of the "Muezzin." There was a simple and solemn melody in the chant at that still hour which, despite myself, would sometimes draw me out to the mosque. (1871c:324-25)

Recitation of the Qur'an is by far the most pervasive "musical" element introduced by Islam. The uniqueness of the chant style impressed Blyden.

They love to read and recite it [the Qur'an] aloud for hours together. They seem to possess an enthusiastic appreciation of the rhythmic harmony in which it is written. But we cannot attribute its power over them altogether to the jingling sounds, wordplays, and refrains in which it abounds. These, it is true, please the ear and amuse the fancy, especially of the uncultivated. But there is something higher, of which these rhyming lines are the vehicle; something possessing a deeper power to rouse the imagination, mould the feelings, and generate action. (1871a:137)

Blyden describes the style of Muslim music-making with these words:

We may remark, by the way, that their tunes are not set in the minor key, as is almost always the case among the Arabs.

Their natures are more joyful. They exult in the diatonic scale of life, and leave their Oriental co-religionists to wail in the sad and mournful chromatics of the desert. (1871a:144)

These are some of the best accounts of the kind of music taken from Bopulo to the Cape Mount region during the latter nineteenth-century. Blyden indicates that non-Islamic people in Bopulo were often impressed by these musical practices. When introduced to the Cape Mount region, the new Muslim musical orientation led to the rejection and/or reinterpretation of concepts governing the role of music in Vai rituals and ceremonies.

A universal belief among Muslims is there is no music in Islam. This has been a hotly debated issue among Islamic scholars in the Middle East for some time, and the fervor of that controversy obviously trailed Islam into Africa as well (al Faruqi 1986:441-42). Al Faruqi has dismissed the Arabic term *musiqqa* as a viable equivalent for "music" in an Islamic context, i.e. *azan*, Qur'anic chant. To describe the system of sounds used in Islam she coined the phrase *Handasah al Sawt*, meaning "the art of sound." Reconciliation of the problem that underlies this concept has sparked the rise of unique response strategies among the Vai. For musical performance in certain ritual contexts, the Vai approached this particular problem through a complex reinterpretation of concepts governing song text, music category, and music terminology. Words derived from Arabic were introduced to designate the new system of organized sound.

There is no equivalent generic term for "music" in the Vai language, though there are terms for song (*DON*), dance (*tOmbO*), and performance on musical instruments (*seNfeN*). Since instrumental performance is customarily not a part of Vai Islamic music-making, performance centers on song, and to a lesser extent on dance. For song used in a socio-religious context, the Koniaka Muslims introduced the term *suku*,<sup>20</sup> from the Arabic *shukran*, meaning "to give thanks." Ideally, the texts of *suku* are in Arabic, but in Vai practice, some are, and have been for some time, combinations of Arabic and African languages, mainly Vai and Koniaka. A distinct and separate music terminology ascribed to traditional and Islamic music is but one of several adaptive strategies used by the Vai to respond to the conceptual changes introduced by Islam.

In general, the Vai did not absorb the system of melodic and rhythmic modes of Arabic music style, since it was presumably unknown to the Koniaka immigrants who introduced Islam. It is fairly accurate to say that, stylistically, Islamic music introduced by the Koniaka had already absorbed some of the fundamental features of West African musical practices: two-part, call-response structures; sporadic harmony at the interval of the fourth; polyphonic and heterophonic textures; and complex rhythmic structures. But Islamic music also carried within it characteristics that were not common to the region: songs and prayers with Arabic text; monodic chant with long, extended melodic contours; different behaviors and posturings during performance, and distinct timbral elements used for singing and recitation of prayers and the Qur'an. These

features did not manifest themselves in Vai songs for rice pounding, funerary processions, or other "communal functions," but primarily in ritual/liturgical genres, including call-to-prayer (*azan*), ritual prayer, and Qur'anic chant. It was highly unlikely that newly introduced Islamic elements could be detected in a Poro or Sande song. Hence, though its influence was a potent one Islamic music during this era constituted a mere substratum within the Vai musical system.

Given the large number of similar and compatible elements with traditional Vai music, it is difficult to determine how Islamic music was assimilated. Analysis of the current repertoire, reveals that there was very little blending of traditional and Islamic musical elements.<sup>21</sup> Islamic music was a separate, compartmentalized repertoire with its own style, structure, and contextual boundaries. The primary form of musical assimilation during this era took the form of substitution, whereas Islamic music replaced extant traditional genres in activities such as funerary rites.<sup>22</sup> Chanted prayers and Qur'an recitation replaced spoken dialogue when appealing to higher powers. Once these practices were firmly established, the Vai shared basically the same Islamic music repertoire as other Muslims in the region, especially those who were influenced by the Koniaka.

### New Views on Death and Afterlife

As noted, the celebration of death assimilated Islamic practice relatively smoothly. The early documentary sources provide a framework for understanding of the Vai response to this transformation. Ellis's account of death feasts (1914:87-92) tells us about the structure of various rituals and ceremonies.<sup>23</sup> He highlights, for example, celebratory elements, conspicuous consumption, symbols of mourning, and the behavior and roles of individuals, such as musicians, and family members.

A later account by Klingenhoben (1939) includes a description of Vai funerary rites held on the 3rd, 7th, and 40th days after death. The sequence of events held on these days shows the influence of Islam, yet Klingenhoben describes a scenario about the fate of the soul and torment by ancestral spirits to those who engaged in evil deeds. This account does not conform to Islamic eschatology. Trimmingham cites the basic differences between Islamic philosophies of death and afterlife and the traditional African belief of continuity of the soul through ancestral spirits:

Islamic ideas which all people acquire relate to the next life. These are the examination as to whether one is a Muslim or a pagan, reckoning-up of good and bad deeds, Day of Judgement, and heaven and hell; all of which were basic in the early teaching of the Prophet. Islam exerts its greatest influence upon belief through after-death ritual and this inevitably makes a great difference. Death comes to be thought of as a break in the continuity of life, whether the soul is thought to be asleep

in the grave or in some form of intermediate state before the Day of Resurrection. The continuous tradition of eternity of the African family is snapped, for the possibility of rewards and punishments, of members being consigned to different quarters of purgatory and eventually to heaven or hell, means that families may be separated. (1959:61-62)

Adoption of a three-feast sequence, however, is understandable, as it was common for non-Islamic peoples to adopt Islamic funerary practices without converting to the religion itself. Another part of Klingenberg's account indicates that the Vai had adopted some of the salient eschatological features of Islam, hinting at notions of heaven, hell, and final judgement. Variants of the Islamic terms *jahannama* (hell) and *jina*<sup>24</sup> (jinn) had been adopted even as early as the mid-nineteenth-century (Koelle 1854:13,164).

The notion of heaven for the good and hell for the evil held little significance in the traditional religion. The Vai believed that through proper propitiation of their ancestors, the living sustained a moral order through which they could prosper. Those living exemplary lives expected immediate rewards for their good deeds. The ancestors, they believed, would see that the living escaped misfortunes that could be brought about by natural disasters and witchcraft. Moreover, according to Klingenberg, even those who led wretched lives could receive salvation after their worldly debts were settled in the afterlife.

Notions of heaven and hell were introduced primarily by Islamic influence, though some would argue that Christianity also played a significant role in this regard. Christianity, however, was never able to infiltrate activities like funerary ritual. It was this infiltration which allowed Islam to enter, even by a circuitous route, the core of Vai life, challenging the spiritual integrity of the Secret Societies and their roles in the society at large. Celebrations of death offer a prime example of assimilation: both its ritual framework and new beliefs concerning death were inspired by Islam. Trimmingham (1959:42), identifies the point of transition between traditional and Muslim attitudes toward the dead: "When people pray for the dead instead of to the dead they are Muslims..."

Assimilation, however, was not complete, nor did it proceed in a single direction. Several accounts tell us that staunch Muslims limited their participation in these early funerary activities to those parts they deemed acceptable. Ellis (1914:128) observed such an instance.

In many a Vai town I avail myself of the opportunity to see both sides. I recall no instance more striking than my experience at Boma. The king had just died. Boma was crowded for a week with people from the neighboring towns and half-towns. The feast was spread. E y ate. The drinkers drank, the singers sang, and there was music and the revelry

of the dance. But amid all the revelry and debauchery of the town the Muhammadans went regularly five times a day to their mosques to render homage and devotion to their God. To lessen the evils of such an occasion Islam has done a great deal for the Vais and no doubt in the future will do more. As it was, many refused to participate in the revelry and many turned away in disgust.

Ellis' quotation points to an often occurring conflict, that of music and the behaviors displayed in contexts where it is performed. As a stronger orthodoxy developed, Muslims became increasingly intolerant of certain kinds of music performance. Music performed for funerary rites had to be sanitized. In other words, a traditional practice was often allowed to continue, but Islamic elements were infused. Muslims slowly gained control of various parts of these ceremonies, displacing traditional practices with chanted prayers and Qur'an recitation, as well as dirges and other songs with Arabic texts. Left untouched, however, were the large-scale celebrations, especially those that occurred at the 40-day feast. One Muslim assessed the separate nature of these past events: "We Muslim people must be certain that we do things by the Qur'an. Those other people can do foolish things [drinking, dancing, fornication, etc.] if they wish. We Muslims will not put our hands inside" (Interview: Varni Kamara, April 24, 1988).

The curious fact is that during this era, many of the people engaged in festive activities considered themselves Muslims. Staunch Muslims and those who were less devout, however, participated in separate spheres of musical behavior. Trimmingham observes that most Islamized people in West Africa continued to participate in traditional music and dancing, clergy and chiefs did not.

Islam ... has not had a negative effect upon music and dancing, the African's natural means of expressing his feelings. Whilst music is the specialty of the griot caste, the dance is the pastime of all classes, young and old, men and women, Muslim and pagan; only clergy and chiefs do not take part out of concern for their dignity. (1959:199)

Trimmingham's observation does characterize past attitudes among the Vai. However, in later years, Islam increasingly tighten its hold on Vai ceremonial practice, resulting in a more fundamental change in the role of music and dance in these contexts. In music, some forms of funerary songs with Vai texts were replaced by Islamic songs in Arabic, or combinations of Arabic and vernacular languages. For events such as the procession to the gravesite or prayers over the body before burial, Islamic songs were added where there had been no song performance in the old practice. The Vai also adopted funerary songs in Arabic praising Allah and Muhammed. These songs displaced those

Vai songs used in the past to honor the recently deceased and the ancestors. Moreover, the new melodic styles and vocal timbres introduced by Muslim during this era were primarily restricted exclusively to Islamic contexts.

An example of the fusion of the new and the old can be seen in the activities surrounding the preparation of the rice powder called *DEE*, which Vai women prepared for use as part of the sacrifice. Rice pounding and the use of rice as a sacrificial food stuff in funerary ritual predates Muslim influence. Although the activity remained as part of Islamic influenced funerary practices, songs with Arabic texts replaced those formerly in vernacular languages. Through these songs, women asked for God's blessing and for the sanctification of the sacrificial food. These practices led to the development of new song genres and new musical aesthetic judgments derived from Islam. Hence, changes in Vai religious conceptions have had a direct effect on both the language and textual content of their music and on funerary rites. Such musical changes reflected the g of broader social changes, indeed, an entirely new eschatology. The new orientation challenged the practice of ancestor veneration and opened lines of communication directed to different supernatural authorities.

The concept of "music" itself and its role in religious life were highly scrutinized. The enfranchisement of Islamic agents and their subsequent influence led to the displacement of traditional ritual and musical specialists. Muslim officiates introduced new ritual procedures and a new song repertoire. New music participatory roles were also in store for general audiences. Islam called for a restructured ritual procedure, affecting the musical behavior of both individuals and groups in ritual and ceremonial contexts. A somber element prevailed during burial rites, replacing the jubilant displays of past years. Gender roles in ritual were redefined. Women were no longer allowed to serves as officiates, to participate in graveside ceremonies, or to pray along side men. With these developments, one aspect of religious life was affected, and Islam continued to seek additional ways to change the religious consciousness of the Vai.

### Conclusion

I have gone through this exercise not only to illuminate aspects of mutual accommodation between traditional Vai religion and Islam, but also to circumvent any tendency to view early Vai Islam as a mere extension of the orthodox theology and musical influence of Mecca. Vai Islam and its associative musical types, especially during the early twentieth century, are several times removed from the orthodox traditions of classical Islam. Vai Islam underwent modification to serve the pragmatic needs of the local population. Just how acceptable these modifications were during this early era is difficult to determine. We can only speculate, and hope that present-day developments provide us with some clues of the past. An tion of the historical and cultural data lead to the guarded conclusion that as in other areas of social life, Islamic music during this

early era was also compartmentalized. It was primarily used for the new religious activities it accompanied. It was not used for recreational purposes, nor did it penetrate into the arcane realm of musical activities associated with the Secret Societies.

The value and power of Islam and its associative musical types are obvious. Islam carried with it a high level of prestige. Upward social mobility was almost guaranteed for its adherents. As the new religious orientation gained a stronger hold in Vai life Islamic music became more pervasive. The ability to chant the Qur'an or call prayer were just as viable ways of manipulating the prestigious symbols of Islam as wearing a long gown or speaking Arabic. Through new music terminological designations and innovative approaches to performance practice, new prescriptions were introduced that governed the use of music in Islamic-influenced contexts, and these concepts slowly began to assimilate into the core of the Vai music system in later years. Despite these developments, the character of Vai traditional music during this era remained intact. The Vai response toward Islamic music was reserved, since it did not at this point in time infringe upon or otherwise attempt to destabilize the stable features of the traditional music system.

#### Notes

I wish to acknowledge the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Ford Foundation, and the University of California, for their support of the research upon which this article is based.

<sup>1</sup>The Vai were exposed to Islam many years before the period under discussion. The 1819 report by Cates is the first written documentation on the presence of Muslims among the Vai, though it is clear that Muslims were trading on the coast many years before.

<sup>2</sup>This paradigm is suggested by Trimmingham (1959:34).

<sup>3</sup>The "Muslim towns" were locales founded between 1885 and 1925 by Muslim Koniaka immigrants. The people in these towns practiced an orthodox form of Islam and did not subscribe to the traditional initiation societies. Much of the Islamic fervor in Vai country emanated from these locales.

<sup>4</sup>Hopewell (1958:84-85) uses the phrase "pagan wall" to characterize the resistance from some ethnic groups to Islam.

<sup>5</sup>Note on Vai Orthography:

B = implosive "b"

D = implosive "d"

N = as in sing

O = as in lost

E = as in men

<sup>6</sup>This is understandable, given the emphasis placed on death and immortality in the Qur'an. See Nyang (1987:72).

<sup>7</sup>The blending of Islam and traditional religion must be seen from two points of view—the accommodative spirit of Islam and the inclusivity factor common in traditional African religions.

<sup>8</sup>This part of Trimmingham's philosophy is useful for conditions during this early period. But let us not forget the inclusivity factor in African traditional religion, which also flexible and receptive to new concepts and philosophies.

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed description of this process see Fisher (1973:31).

<sup>10</sup>Muslims found among the Vai were itinerant traders and clerics; people who, for the most part, did not claim permanent residence in Vai country.

<sup>11</sup>Here Ellis is echoing a position held by W. Blyden some years earlier.

<sup>12</sup>Devoid in the sense that at the time Islam had no direct influence on the spiritual aspect of the Secret Societies. Such is the case of *bori* among the Hausa, where Islam has not created turmoil for that institution. See Ames and T .

<sup>13</sup>For an earlier account on the decline in another area of Vai country, see Ofri (1972).

<sup>14</sup>Several reports indicate that some *mOli* men even provided amulets to initiates in the Secret Societies.

<sup>15</sup>See Holsoe "Zolu Duma Ruler of the Southern Vai, 17??-1828: A Problem in Historical Interpretation" (in this issue) for key documentary sources and a fuller account of Zoluduma's life.

<sup>16</sup>See Corby (1988:49-58) for a discussion of Islam at Bopolo in the late 19th century.

<sup>17</sup>Cape Mount and Bopulo were linked by common co interests, in which both the Vai and Koniaka played major roles. The trade alliance between them was strongly linked to Islam.

<sup>18</sup>In addition, a large percentage of the population at Bopolo was Vai. The Vai language was used for general communication, and a number of Vai men were hired by the commerce lords as scribes. See Corby (1988) for a fuller description of the Vai presence in Bopolo.

<sup>19</sup>The term "Mandingo" was, and still is, used in Liberia to designate a person of Bambara, Dyula, Koniaka, Maninka, Mandinka, Manyaka, and Soninke origin. The majority of the people in the Bopulo region during the late 19th century were Koniaka from the Beyla and Mursuda region of present-day southern Guinea.



<sup>20</sup>My elderly Vai teachers tell me that the term was used during their childhoods, the approximate time period of this study.

<sup>21</sup>As noted, both Islamic and traditional Vai music shared elements such as call-response structures, sporadic harmony at the interval of the fourth, etc., but even in the present-day repertoire, the long melodious patterns and modal harmony in some forms of Qur'anic chant and calls-to-prayer are not commonly found in traditional songs.

<sup>22</sup>My suspicion is that no major stylistic changes occurred in the process. The most significant change had to do with text, changing from Vai to Arabic, or combinations of Arabic and vernacular languages.

<sup>23</sup>Ellis spent some time among the Vai and obviously had several Vai friends. However, much of his analysis is an interpretation of the ethnographic data contained in Koelle's 1854 grammar on the Vai.

<sup>24</sup>The relationship of this term with the Arabic "jinn" may be coincidental. Koelle (1854:161) attributes derivation of the term from the Vai (*Dsi*) ji "water" and na "to come." It is a common belief that many jina reside under water. Informants provided mixed opinions on the matter.

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## The Day Will Come: J. J. Walters and Guanya Pau<sup>1</sup>

John Victor Singler

The truth is . . . my mother and the other women . . . are satisfied with this state of things, because *they know of no better. They accept them as being absolutely necessary to the life of society.* If they could see things as they really are, that they were never destined in this world to be servants . . . but on the contrary, that woman is as good and great as man, and intended to be his equal, and that the realization of this is *possible*, they would soon change their minds. . . (p. 24)

But . . . our success comes from our own persistence. It is truly said that whatever woman has in her head to do, she will do in spite of anything. And why not? The truth is, *men are ever exercising their prerogatives to the letter, and we accept it without a question: but as soon as we assert ours, they brand us with transcending our sphere.* So long has woman been deceived that her condition seems to be *organic*. I may not even now succeed; but . . . *the day will come, THE DAY WILL COME.* (pp. 123-24)

The two quotations above crackle with the ardor and urgency of today's struggle for the rights of women. The timeliness of the words makes their actual source even more remarkable. For these statements come from the mouth of the title character in *Guanya Pau: A Story of an African Princess*, a novel written by a Liberian one hundred years ago. *Guanya Pau*, written by Joseph Jeffrey Walters and published by the Cleveland publishing firm of Lauer and Mattill in 1891, is the first novel by an African to be written in English. It is distinguished not merely by its precedence but also by its merit.

### 1. The Novel

Walters wrote his short novel while a student at Oberlin College in Ohio. He begins his introduction to it with the following disclaimer: "This little book I give to the public, conscious of its defects and lack of literary finish. The author is an undergraduate and cannot hope to be able to make a valuable contribution to Literature. But this book, incorrect as it is, with its many errors of grammar and composition, has its MESSAGE." (p. 5)

Later in the introduction, Walters spells out precisely what that message is: "In short, our women must be educated. The infamous system of betrothing girls when three and four years old must be obliterated. *Polygamy must be wiped out of the land.* There are women in that country [Liberia] who would be as pure

and good, who would make as blessed wives and noble mothers, as those of any land were it not for the . . . pandemonium in which they are incarcerated." (pp. 6-7)

As the introduction promises, the book is a polemic. But it is lively and literate, moving and profoundly eloquent. The title character, Guanya Pau, is an independent and queenly young Vai woman. At the age of four Guanya was betrothed to "Kai Kundu, the short, the ugly, the clumsy." (p. 29) Now that she is old enough for marriage, Kai Kundu comes to claim his bride. Kai Kundu already has "six wives with bright prospects for six more." He promises to make Guanya his headwife, but she wants no part of Kai Kundu or polygamy. She wishes instead to marry her beloved Momo, a young man who has assured Guanya that he shares her abhorrence of polygamy.

Alas, Momo is away when Kai Kundu comes to claim Guanya. Guanya's mother and all the elders are unyielding: Guanya must marry Kai Kundu. Rather than submit, Guanya and her bosom friend, Jassah, run away.

At first Guanya and Jassah are simply fleeing. In time their destination becomes Robertsport, where Christianity prevails and monogamy is honored. To get there, the two young women grapple with any number of dangers. Kai Kundu's men are in hot pursuit. Guanya and Jassah get to Tosoh, the next town to Robertsport. Just when Guanya and Jassah think that they have succeeded in escaping, Kai Kundu's men capture them. The men put the women into a canoe and set out across Lake Piso to Kai Kundu. But Guanya Pau, defiant to the end, foils her captors' plans: she jumps into the Piso to drown. Jassah does likewise. The story closes with these lines:

After a minute Guanya Pau came to the surface and said pathetically: "This is preferable to being Kai Kundu's headwife." Then she sank to rise again at the last day, when the seas and lakes, and rivers shall give up their dead. (p. 149)

Guanya and Jassah's flight gives the book its tension, its suspense. But it also gives the author a chance to provide several illustrations of what he feels to be the deplorable treatment of women in polygamous society. In one episode a man is on trial for having beaten his wife to death. His defense is that his wife was his property and he is free to do whatever he pleases with his property. His arguments convince the men hearing the case, and he is acquitted.

Such an episode, like Guanya and Jassah's double suicide, steps beyond the bounds of plausibility. But other incidents in the novel jolt the modern reader with their realism and their relevance. Thus, in another episode, a man has died, and two of his wives have refused to mourn. The widows say that the man was unrelentingly cruel and abusive to them while he was alive, so why should they cry? Their response brings the accusation that they have witched their husband. Compelled to drink sasswood, the two wives—whose only crime is their refusal to shed insincere tears—die from the poison.

## 2. The Novelist

Walters's book is a landmark in the literary history of all of Africa. But it is more than a historical document. It is a living and timely work, as provocative today as the day it was written. The book's special character leads inexorably to questions about its author. Who was he? What was the climate in which he wrote his book? Why have he and the book remained unknown in the land of his birth?

Joseph Jeffrey Walters was Vai.<sup>2</sup> Evidently he was born in or near Robertsport and in the 1860's.<sup>3</sup> Bishop Clifton C. Penick opened Saint John's Episcopal Mission in Robertsport in 1878, and Walters was one of the first students. After Walters had studied for three years at the Cape Mount School (as St. John's was frequently referred to at the time), Penick arranged for Walters to continue his studies in the United States at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. From there Walters entered the preparatory (pre-college) division of Oberlin College. Completing the preparatory course in 1889, Walters enrolled in the College itself. He elected the "classical course," one that "contained a prescribed amount of both Latin and Greek," and he received an A. B. degree in 1893. (The alternative was a "philosophical course" that "substituted" modern languages for the classics. [Oberlin College Alumni Catalogue 1833-1936, 1937:3])<sup>4</sup> While at Oberlin, Walters fell ill with tuberculosis. After graduation he returned to Liberia and became superintendent of St. John's, but little more than a year after his return he died from his illness, on November 12, 1894.

Thus, Walters is a Liberian who lived all but one year of his adult life outside of Liberia and who died at a very young age. These two facts by themselves are sufficient to explain the total absence within Liberia of his memory or that of his book.

To establish a context for Walters's book, it is appropriate to consider the times and places in which Walters lived. This is most readily possible in the case of Oberlin, Walters's alma mater. However, in connecting Walters's views to the atmosphere at Oberlin, I don't mean to suggest that Walters was a pliant product of his environment. From *Guanya Pau* alone, there is ample evidence that Walters was very much his own person, appalled by the abuse of women in Vai society yet fiercely proud of his Vai heritage, thoroughly Christian (and Christianized) yet able to laugh at the missionaries' imperfect adaptation to Africa. An example, perhaps, of the distinctiveness of Walters's views comes out in the appraisal in *Guanya Pau* of men's and women's secret associations (the Poro and Sande), as reflected in how each was founded. According to Walters the "Boy's Gregree Bush" was founded by a highly respected Vai elder who sought to forge a unity that would enable the Vai to protect themselves from belligerent peoples from the interior. In contrast Walters says the following about the women's association:

The Girls' Gregree Bush is of time immemorial. It is said to be as old as the Vey tribe itself and founded by the old wizard Pandama-Pluzhaway, the Devil's brother-in-law. (p. 26)

Of the men's and women's societies, it is only the women's society that Walters sees as a major agent in the continued subjugation of women and only the women's society that is incompatible with Christianity. Thus, his differing accounts of each society's founding corresponds directly to his divergent views of each society's merits.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1 Oberlin and Walters

To look now at the spirit at Oberlin in Walters's time: Oberlin was coeducational from its founding in 1833 onward. From the vantage point of the late twentieth century, Oberlin's status as the first coeducational college in the U.S. is consistent with its contemporary reputation for progressive liberalism. In actuality, to pair the College today with its historical achievement is misleading. The spirit that launched a coeducational college on the Ohio frontier was a vigorous if rigid commitment to evangelical Christian principles. Barnard speaks of "the national reputation of Oberlin for piety and reform" (1969:16) and comments that in the nineteenth century. "Oberlin and strict piety were nearly synonymous." (p. 22)

Part of Oberlin's Christian conviction was a concern for the rights of all regardless of sex or race. As noted, Oberlin admitted women students from its founding in 1833 onward; it began admitting African-American students two years later. To be sure, African-Americans had attended U.S. college earlier than this; in 1826 Amherst and Bowdoin had each graduated an African-American student. (The Bowdoin graduate was John Brown R an early immigrant to Liberia.) Oberlin was different from other colleges, however, in the *number* of African-Americans it admitted. An 1883 history of Oberlin's first fifty years states:

From 1840 to 1860 the proportion of colored students was four or five per cent. Soon after the war this ratio rose to seven or eight per cent, but has fallen again to five or six in a hundred. (Fairchild 1883: 111-12)<sup>6</sup>

For the time these figures are exceptionally high.

A militant religious spirit drove Oberlin's policies on social issues. Oberlin was fiercely abolitionist from the 1830's onward and was heavily involved in the Underground Railroad. The Oberlin community considered the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law ungodly and invoked "higher law," i.e. Christian principles. The clash between federal law and higher law came to a head in the 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue. In that incident hundreds of people from Oberlin (and elsewhere) surrounded a house in neighboring Wellington. They had been alerted that two "slave-catchers" were there, holding a fugitive slave captive. The episode resulted in the arrest of thirty-seven people, including the College's Professor of Sacred Rhetoric and Mental and Moral Philosophy and several Oberlin students. The students' part had been the successful removal of the

kidnapped exslave from the house. (He hid for three days in the home of another Oberlin professor—later president of the College—before escaping to Canada.) Those arrested were treated as heroes; their release after two months in jail gave rise to triumphant celebration (Fletcher 1943).

Slavery was an obvious target for Oberlin's Christian militancy. In the years immediately after the American Civil War the fervor declined, only to undergo a rebirth in the 1880's. With reference to that decade Barnard states that "Oberlin's social conscience was reborn and found expression in social service" (1969:65). This rebirth brought with it change. Evangelicalism was, in Barnard's phrase, yielding to progressivism. Attention to Christian belief was now combined with attention to academic social theory. Oberlin's *new* president in 1891 observed in his inaugural address that Oberlin "had never fallen into the error of asserting that the primary purpose of college study was the training of the intellect" (Barnard 1969:71); but in fact Oberlin was in transition, and the president's speech represented an appeal to the Oberlin of earlier times.

In this context Walters's fervent feminism can be seen less as a reflection of the new social science than of the old Oberlin religion. Oberlin's Christianity was committed to perfectionism, "the possibility of a sinless existence for the converted" (Barnard 1969:10), and Walters wrote *Guanya Pau* as a way to elicit American support for his campaign to bring Christianity to the women of Vai society. Even in the face of *fin-de-siècle* change, Oberlin's anchor continued to be its Christian beliefs, and the Oberlin environment nourished and sustained the faith of the passionately Christian Walters.<sup>7</sup>

An appraisal of Walters that emphasizes his commitment to Oberlin-style Christianity is supported by the obituary for him that appeared in the College newspaper early in 1895. It should be remembered that nineteenth-century panegyric style virtually required eloquent overstatement. Nonetheless, it is still possible to see what Walters must have been like:<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps no one of the many students who have come from heathen countries . . . has come into closer and more intimate association with the general life of the College than Mr. Walters. Perhaps no one of them has so influenced the life and thought of his classmates toward the development of truth, not only in regard to the condition and needs of Africa, though that was a subject very dear to his heart, but as well toward all noble conceptions of justice and religion. . . Mr. Walter's life was one of genuine helpfulness to those whose hearts were open to read its lessons. He never put himself forward. He was a most perfect gentleman, refined, courteous, modest and retiring in the presence of those whose prejudices forbade an intimate acquaintance. But he was always ready to speak for what he considered the truth, and his burning eloquence frequently stirred the souls of his hearers, whether in the society hall or

the larger public assemblage. In all his work, Mr. Walters was thoroughly conscientious. His class work, his society work, everything he put his hand to, showed earnestness and devotion. To have known Mr. Walters well was to have obtained a stronger and clearer faith in the practicability of Christianity and civilization for the world, and especially a keener sense of sympathy in the great work of redeeming Africa. (George W. Hamlin, *The Oberlin Review*, Feb. 6, 1895, p. 288)

## 2.2 Walters at St. John's

Walters's letters to officials of the Episcopal Church in the United States (most of them written after his return to Liberia) corroborate the views of him put forth in his obituary. To begin with, he stands out as a champion of the needy. When he returned to Cape Mount, neighboring Vai villages were beset by warring groups of people from the interior. Walters wrote articles for publications in the U.S. describing the desperate plight of the Vai and appealing for funds to be sent to a priest at the Episcopal Church office in New York.<sup>9</sup> The money would then be used to buy rice to be shipped from the U.S. to Cape Mount. In a letter to the priest (Father Joshua Kimber) written on October 12, 1893, Walters wrote:

Our work here is lagging because of the famine, and we are sometimes afraid to approach men and women about their souls' salvation because we know the first thing they need is food for the body!

Help us and help us speedily, for God's sake.

The correspondence also reveals Walters's disapproval of Christians—specifically those at the Cape Mount mission and most especially his predecessor as superintendent of the mission—whose conduct fell short of his own strict moral code. In the annual report that he submitted to the Episcopal Church office in New York on the state of Saint John's, Walters wrote:

Upon my return here from the United States last September I was very anxious to visit my *alma mater* where three years of my life were spent when a boy and where I received the first incentives to a higher and nobler life. Like Caesar I came, I saw, but unlike him I was conquered. That is, I was disgusted at the general ap . . . of things . . . But the cause of the 'ties I noticed was not far to seek. Institutions, like states, must have great men in their service in order to be great. . .

St. John's needs one or two good teachers, and *the need is imperative and paramount*. Men who will give their whole time to the work, whose hearts throb with a genuine love for and



interest in these heathen children, but especially, men who are pronounced foes to tobacco and intoxicating liquors. It is high time that we learn to discriminate in the selection of those who are to train the young, y the young of our heathen. The Bible incarnate in the teacher is worth more to them than sermons, or precepts or creeds. As is the teacher, so is the pupil. Character begets character. But yet, the late incumbent of this station in an address some time since . . . said, "Children, you must not do as we teachers do; but do as we tell you to do."

If teaching the lessons prescribed in text books is the whole of teaching then we can afford to employ any who are intellectually competent, but if the teacher is to build character, to instil in those young minds the great principles of truth and righteousness then it behooves us to be careful. That Bishop or Board is to be pitied that is compelled to take whoever they can find. But it seems to me ten thousand times better to close the doors of the schoolhouse than have the wrong kind of instructors.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.3 Conclusion

The reports that survive of Walters at Oberlin and his correspondence with church officials point to Walters's being a highly moral person who was sympathetic to the condition of others. Still, there is ultimately nothing in these sources uld have predicted the depths and power of Walters's f

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 Moreover, from a more  
 detached perspective it can be seen that Christianity, specifically the institution of Christian marriage, does not preclude the subjugation of women. Yet, from Guanya Pau's impassioned speeches, we are left, one hundred years after Walters published his book, with a keen certainty as to his views: women are inherently the equal of men, and this equality can and must be the cornerstone of Christian marriage.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A preliminary version of this article appeared in the *Daily Observer*, Monrovia, June 20, 1989, p. 5. Most of what I know about Walters comes from information provided to me by the Oberlin College Archives and the Episcopal Church Archives. I wish to thank Miss Gertrude Jacob of the Oberlin Archives, Father Paul Coke of the Episcopal Theological of the Southwest, and y—the Ven. E. Bolling Robertson for their help and K. Moses Nagbe for his encouragement.

<sup>2</sup>The information that Walters is Vai comes from Ware (1954).

<sup>3</sup>Bishop Clifton C. Penick filled out a vital-statistics form on Walters on January 25, 1895, at the request of Oberlin College. In response to "Place and date of birth," Penick wrote, "Not known. Supposed to be 'Cape Mount.'" Asked for the full names of Walters's parents, Penick's answer is that he did not know Walters's father's name and that Walters's mother "was a widow at Cape Mount." While in the twentieth century "Cape Mount" can refer either to Grand Cape Mount County or simply to Robertsport, in the nineteenth-century context at hand it referred only to Robertsport.

<sup>4</sup>The philosophical course arose out of the "literary course," the original degree program for women. While the founders in Oberlin advocated the education of women, they were not immune from such perceptions as the one advanced elsewhere and widely held that Greek was the "manly tongue," capable of study and appreciation by men only (Hosford 1937:57). By 1893, this attitude had been largely but not entirely eradicated. Thirty-one men and fourteen women graduated in the classical course in Walters's class while eight men and nineteen women graduated in the philosophical course.

<sup>5</sup>In appraising the women's society, Walters acknowledges that initiates are instructed in "matters of practical importance, and some of the instructions given are beneficial and wholesome." (p. 27) Walters's disapproval of the women's society comes from its support of the status quo for women, particularly by its endorsement of polygamy, child betrothal, and the like.

<sup>6</sup>The author, Oberlin's president at the time, admits that his figures are approximate. No indication of a student's race was included in his or her records at the College.

From an institutional point of view, African-American students seemed to be no different from white ones and were treated the same way. The treatment of women vis-a-vis the treatment of men was entirely different. Oberlin was breaking new ground and proceeded with extreme caution. Hosford speaks of "Oberlin's advanced yet conservative position upon the woman question" (1937:130-31). The founders of Oberlin had as one of the

... prominent objects of this Seminary ... the elevation of female character, by bringing within the reach of the mis-

judged and neglected sex, all the instructive privileges which hitherto have unreasonably distinguished the leading sex from theirs. (First Circular of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, March 8, 1834)

However, it is the thesis of Hosford's book that, while Oberlin was founded to be coeducational, it took its women students half a century and more to establish their place as co-equal participants in the Oberlin experience. Even late in the nineteenth century, as Barnard (1969:23) points out, the College library was open at different times for women than for men so that the two were not there at the same time. For a long time women and men took different courses, and at first women were not granted degrees. To be sure, by Walters's day, the classroom had been integrated. While more than women took the classical course and more women than men the philosophical course, the crucial fact was that each course had both male and female students. Moreover, women were permitted to engage in public speaking from the 1870's onwards.

<sup>7</sup>For example, the most popular career choice for Oberlin's male graduates in the decade from 1877 to 1886, one chosen by 25 percent of them, was religious work, either as a minister or a missionary.

<sup>8</sup>A major component of a nineteenth-century Oberlin education was membership in a literary society; most students belonged to one. Among other things, the literary society was the primary site for the development and exercise of oratorical skills. The references in the obituary to "society hall" and "society work" are to Phi Delta, the society of which Walters was an active member.

<sup>9</sup>For example, in an article published in the November 30, 1893, issue of *The Oberlin News*, Walters writes:

Large and flourishing towns that a few months since were doing a great business in palm kernel, oil, wood, rubber, ivory, etc., are today reduced to ashes, and their inhabitants, those who escaped the sword or slavery, reduced to the utmost necessity. They all rush down to Cape Mount for help and protection, and so general now is the suffering that Liberians [Settlers] and natives alike are reduced.

<sup>10</sup>The debate as to whether or not intellectual competence was sufficient qualification in a teacher was an ongoing and impassioned one at Oberlin during Walters's years there (cf. Barnard 1969).

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## **Ingenious Invention: The Indigenous Kpelle Script in the Late Twentieth Century**

Ruth M. Stone

The impetus for the present essay comes from a desire to pay tribute to Bai T. Moore, who devoted his life to perpetuating and presenting the indigenous inventions of Liberians. When I first discovered Kpelle people using a script of their own in 1970, it was Bai T. Moore who encouraged me to look more deeply at this system, even though I had come to Liberia in search of musical performance. I also want to respond to the requests by a number of Kpelle people over the years for a copy of the script as I had collected it. Some people indicated that they might instruct themselves in a vanishing form of writing created by one of their own people. To the memory of Bai T. Moore, who gave so much to the study of the arts and humanities in Liberia, and to the Kpelle people whose inventiveness always inspires me, this work is dedicated.

Written language has served to mark cultures and relative status in relation to other cultures. Those cultures that possess systems of writing, particularly phonological systems, have frequently been distinguished as "civilizations." Until recently, however, Western scholars have known little of writing systems in Africa, particularly systems from the area south of the Sahara.

A growing group of researchers have now learned that systems do exist, and David Dalby, in several survey articles, identifies and describes fifteen scripts for West Africa alone. He maintains that it was very likely that a number more persist, which are not yet known to scholars (1967, 1968, 1969). Gerhard Kubik considers African graphic systems more broadly, concentrating on those found in southeastern Africa (1984, 1985) and looking at symbols reproduced in a variety of media, including body scarification. While the term "script" here derives from Dalby's usage of a linear system of writing that records a sequence of speech (1968:159), there is considerable evidence that the scripts in Africa developed from earlier ideographic systems of communication and this link will be explored below for the Kpelle.

### Research on the Script

Indigenous scripts for the Vai, Mende, Loma, Kpelle, and Bassa have been identified and the possibility of scripts for the Gola and Kru has been noted as well (Dalby 1967, 1968). The first mention of the Kpelle script came from J. Friedrich in 1937. In the 1940s, A. Lassort conducted field study on the script in Liberia and Guinea, and this work was used by Dalby in his analysis. Between that time and my own field research beginning in 1970, no systematic syllabaries of the Kpelle script were, to my knowledge, collected.

My own contact with the Kpelle script began when, in the course of studying Kpelle music, I interviewed Lee-polu-mala-yale, a prominent ritual specialist and musician from Zongkai, near Sanoyea in Bong County. Lee-polu told me that he had served as clerk to Paramount Chief Gbili, inventor of the Kpelle script. Lee-polu proved extremely fluent in the script and shared examples and explanations of it in interviews in 1970 and 1975-76. Several other people familiar with the script—the late Peter Giddings who was related to Gbili and served for some time as paramount chief himself; Roland Payne, former bishop of the Lutheran Church in Liberia; and the late Bono-boi who served as clan chief in Yanekwele shared important aspects of this script with me. I spoke as well with the late William Welmers, a linguist who worked in the Sanoyea area and my father, Otto Spehr, who also lived in Yanekwele some ten miles from Sanoyea while he served as a translator. All of these people knew Gbili or knew of him and several various people associated with the script.

### Origin of the Script

Gbili, a paramount chief from Sanoyea, Bong County, in central Liberia, invented the Kpelle script in the 1930s according to all accounts. The script was revealed to Gbili one night in a dream through an angel messenger according to Welmers (Dalby 1967:29). Lee-polu relating a similar origin account adds that Gbili was asleep for three days. Gbili's unusually long sleep did cause people to fear that he was ill. Upon waking, however, Gbili showed that he was well and summoned Lee-polu, whereupon he dictated the script in essentially complete form.

The inspired revelation of the Kpelle script parallels the origin of the Vai, Mende, and Loma scripts (Dalby 1968:162). Such an origin accords special status among the Kpelle, for dreams are the source of things to be highly regarded. If Gbili had simply worked in his waking hours to devise the script, the Kpelle people would not have considered it to be of much significance. Coming through a dream, however, the script received special recognition by the Kpelle people.

### Teaching and Use of the Script

The script, from the beginning, was intended by the Kpelle as a tool of elite literacy. Like other Kpelle knowledge, it was considered a powerful commodity to be given to others judiciously and restricted to a few in the social and political hierarchies. Some of those invited to learn the script were scribes for the surrounding chief. These clerks were sent to Sanoyea to acquire the knowledge of the script so that official communication might be conducted using it. Some chiefs, like Bono-boi of Yanekwele, came themselves to acquire this special power. One of Gbili's wives, Neni-tee, mastered the script as well. She is reputed to have written messages to Gbili when he was traveling away from home. She delighted in astonishing the people of Sanoyea by being able to read his letters and to predict the exact day of his return (Payne 1970).

Sanoyea, long a prominent town on the trade route from the coast of Liberia to Guinea, developed as a center for the teaching of the new script in the 1930s and 1940s. This stopover on the route had for some time served as a center of communication and a market at a time when few other towns had the weekly market on today. Near Sanoyea, the Lutheran Church established a school and a medical dispensary.

According to Lee-polu, the script was taught in various houses throughout Sanoyea. No one knew how long it took to learn. The length of instruction varied. Some people mentioned that he had spent three months, but others asserted that a diligent person could master the basics in a few days, although Lee-polu's time estimate might have been more realistic. Lee-polu's purpose was to convince people of the ease of learning the script. This is how he summarized the script and its learning.

But this speech (writing) is not difficult.  
If you want to know it, four days.  
If you seat a syllable, if you seat it  
at its fellow's head, it is a word.  
They are numerous, you bounce them together.  
This writing, we saw the foot-putting-down [g]  
with Gbili. In the beginning, they began, they said  
To, ta, ka, fe, sa, ku, pu."  
That was its A, B, C in our hands. But the thing that  
makes it lie this way, we put it together. (Stone and Stone 1976)

By the late 1960s, the script was still being used until the late 1960s. Otto Spehr reported that he spoke with William Welmers, who recalled that he met with Gbili in 1966, and that Gbili's informants reported his death in about 1940. Gbili was a paramount chief some years before his death, and a rather young man at the time.

When the script was first introduced in 1970, the enthusiasm for the Kpille script was high. Lee-polu-mala-yale, who then lived in nearby Zongkai, reported that other people employed it for hut tax records, for the financial records of a store, and for recording court debts. He brought me examples of the store records and tax records (See Fig. 1). As he read one of the store records of debts, he commented, "These are old, old dead people, oh . . . he had died long ago . . . he left the debt on him, he has died" (Stone and Stone 1982).

### Fig. 1. Tax Records

Name		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	11-11-11-11													
2	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
3	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
4	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1									
5	11-11-11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
6	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
7	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
8	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
9	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
10	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
11	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
12	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
13	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
14	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
15	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
16	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
17	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
18	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
19	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
20	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
21	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
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46	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
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67	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
68	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
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76	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
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78	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
79	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
80	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
81	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
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90	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
91	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
92	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
93	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
94	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
95	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
96	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
97	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
98	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
99	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								
100	11-11-11-11	5	5	1	1	+								



## S 11a

The Kpelle script is conceived as a syllabary that is read from left to right. Each symbol represents a syllable rather than a single consonant or vowel as in English. Thus the symbol [ʒ] represents "pa" (come). Combined with the symbol [ʋ] which designates "be," the phrase [ʒʋ], "pa be" means "come here." One of the ingenious features of the system is that where there are mutational pairs, such as "ta" (town) and "da" (the town), the syllabary recognizes their close relation and uses the same symbol [ʒ] and provides a considerable economy in the number of characters employed in contrast to the Vai and Mende scripts (Dalby 1967:30). Occasionally, a diacritic may be added to the member of the pair with the voiced consonant to indicate what the Kpelle designate as the "woo wie" (heavy voice) and low tone as well.

Diacritics that may also be used to indicate vowel lengthening appear to have been adopted after the original invention, though these were used by Leepolu on a selective basis. A system of numerals, not based on the syllabary, were added later also. The late Peter Giddings, a young boy at the time of the script's invention, recalled how he returned to Sanoyea during a school vacation, to be shown the script. Peter said that he pointed out the absence of characters for numbers to Gbili. He then helped him devise a system, which supplemented the original characters of the script.

The present syllabary follows the form of presentation adopted by David Dalby, who based his system on William Welmers' analysis of Kpelle phonology (Dalby 1967:30). Dalby acknowledges that the characters obtained from Lassort's work represents an incomplete syllabary. From my interviews, the present version incorporates 12 characters—two syllable lengthening characters and a system of numbers—that have not been published previously and which are indicated by an asterisk in the chart below. In presenting these characters, it must be stressed that there is some variation in the script from one area to another. Although the present script was collected in the Sanoyea area some fifty years later, both time and space separate the two sets of characters. Comparisons with the Lassort script as presented by Dalby show a number of modifications to the characters in terms of rotation or additional elements. For example, Dalby shows the character for "kpu" as [ʒ], while the character Leepolu indicates for "kpu" contains two additional elements [ʒʋ]. The character for "bi" is recognizably similar in both versions, (Dalby): [ʒ] (Lee-polu): [ʒ], but with the alteration of several loops in the Sanoyea version.

Fig. 2. The Kpelle Syllabary<sup>1</sup>

Fig.2. THE KPELLE SYLLABARY<sup>1</sup>

	i	a	u	e	ε	ɔ	o
p/b							
6/m̃							
kp/gb							
f/v							
t/d							
l/ñ							
h(s)/j(z)							
y/ñy							
k/g							
kw/gw							
ɾ(/ŋ)							
ɾ or w							
w(ŋw)							

Nasal  
Syllables

	ĩ	ã	ũ	ẽ	ẽ	õ
m	oo	ſ	to	=mı	ıı*	o
n	ııı	B	to	=nı	ıı*	ıı*
ŋ		ıı	ı*	ı*	ıı*	ıı*

Syllable Lengthening

m	*
ŋ	*

Numerals

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
ı*	ı*	ı*	ıı*	ı*	ı*	ıı*	ıı*	ı*	ı*



### Influences

A number of diverse influences exist today. Several forms of invention including the English the prestige associated with which Muslims and Western years before the Kpelle script Vai scribes to serve Kpelle chi case with Gbili. Nevertheless, been invented prior to the Kpelle script (Delafosse 1899, Koelle 1954, Klinghenben 1933, Massaquoi 1911).

ted to the Kpelle script as it in Sanoyea at the time of Gbili was certainly aware of as he observed the uses to Furthermore, about ninety by notes, it was common for claims that this was not the of the Vai script, which had

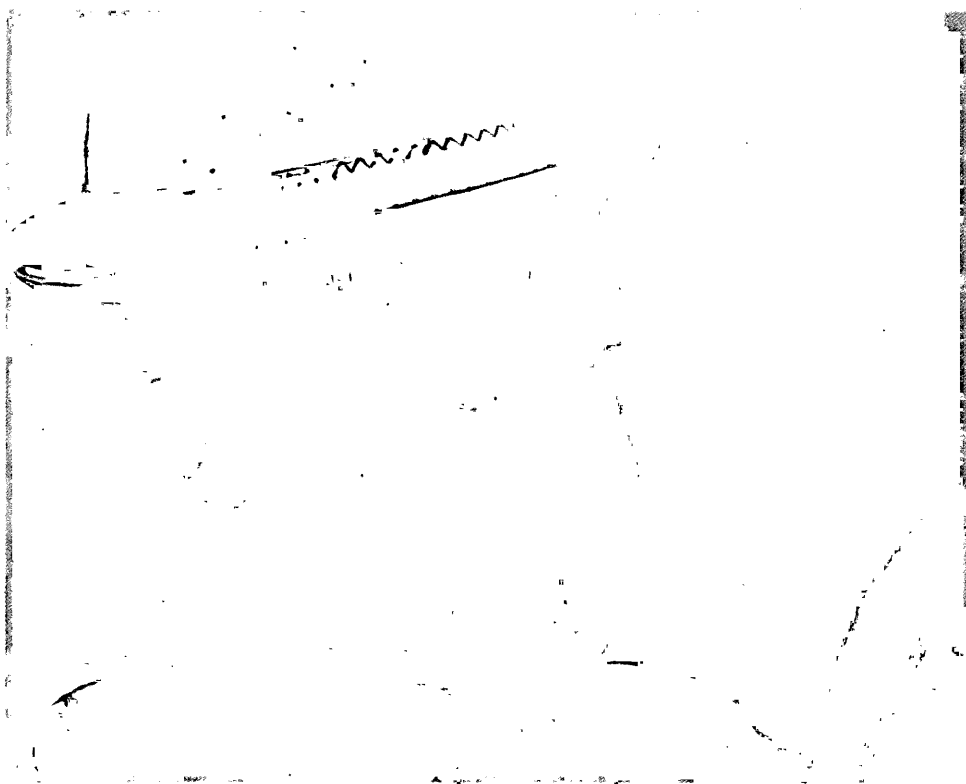
The Kpelle script, along with other West African scripts, is relatively free of imitation of the Roman or Arabic script except for the cursive style resemblance of the Kpelle script to Arabic (Dalby 1968:168). There does appear to be considerable influence, however, from the "magical" alphabets and mystical symbols" of Islam which were used for a variety of practices and which often incorporated influences from pre-Arabic scripts of the Middle East and Mediterranean areas (Dalby 1968: 171, 177).

Earlier ideographic and pictographic symbols were very likely important sources for the Kpelle script, particularly the syllabic concept (Dalby 1968:168). Furthermore, characters are often turned on their sides, reversed, or turned upside down in ways that may have drawn from the earlier non-linear systems. A number of Kpelle syllabic characters suggest possible origin in earlier pictographs and ideographs (Dalby 1967: 31).

**Figure 3. Possible Pictograph/Ideograph Symbols<sup>2</sup>**

pa	cf. paa "kill"
te	cf. tee "cut"
so	cf. soo "horse" (similar to Vai character)
kð	cf. kðð "leg, foot"

At the time of the Kpelle script invention, the Lutheran Mission had not yet begun its work with a Roman script for the Kpelle. in the 1940s, however, the Roman script was developed in parallel. Ironically, the center of this mission development of the Western script was also in Sanoyea. With a massive teaching campaign and publication program by the mission, the Roman script dominated and is today known by a growing number of Kpelle people while the indigenous Kpelle script exists for use by a very few people in the same region.

**Fig. 3. Lee-Polu-Mala-Yale**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The "ny" combination that Dalby uses under nasal syllables has been omitted because in the Sanoyea area, these symbols are the same as those used in the "y/ny" combination.

<sup>2</sup>The examples are based upon those presented by Dalby (1967:31). I have however omitted his last example, nga, which he translates as "eye" because my experience would indicate that "eye" would be ngΣ instead.

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# Reflections on Some Concepts of Religion and Medicine in Liberian Society<sup>1</sup>

Al-Hassan Conteh

## 1. Introduction

The extent to which concepts of religion and medicine affect modes of thought in Liberian society is an underresearched topic. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to explain, the inner workings of some concepts of religion and medicine in Liberian society.

By modes of thought is meant how people conceive ideas and act on those ideas in the solution of everyday problems given the challenges which confront them in Liberian society. This is defined by, and emerge from, their *thought patterns*, which form a permanent part of their theoretical thinking in space and over time.

John Gay's seminal work on the Kpelle (Gay, 1973) exemplifies how modes of thought are conditioned by the paradoxes and conflicts between Western and traditional concepts through real actors. Contemporary views on African religion and medicine stress their historical dimension and cultural contexts. Mbiti (1969) and Ranger and Kimambo (1972) advocate the former approach; with emphasis on culture and history to add extra clarity to religious and medicinal concepts. The latter approach is now adopted in medical anthropology, where careful research on how "local people perceive and use Western pharmaceuticals" is now beginning to appear (Van Der Geest and Whyte, 1988: vii; Bledsoe and Goubaud, 1988: 253-276). Either way, the reliance on experience and growing up in Liberian society for the scientific elucidation of concepts seems valid, if it precedes an empirical confirmation of theory. As such, no empirical data are reported in this essay, which should be regarded as a pre-empirical exploration of the issues. With this caveat, the propositions and hypotheses are tested within the framework of a thought experiment.

The next section of the paper *explores* a paradigm by which the rest of the paper on religious and medicinal concepts are explicated.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

In "African Traditional thought and Western Science," Robin Horton (in Wilson, 1970: 131-170) provides us with some useful insights about the similarities and differences between African and Western logic. He takes the approach that "An exhaustive exploration of features common to modern Western and traditional African thought should come before the enumeration of differences. By taking this order, we shall be less likely to mistake differences of idiom for differences of substance, and more likely to end up identifying those features

which really do distinguish one kind of thought from another" (Ibid, P.131). Horton believes that, theoretically, there is not much difference between the Western scientist and the African native doctor. The two use theory in similar fashion to diagnose cases that transcend common sense. In his words, "In both cases, reference to theoretical entities is used to link events in the visible tangible world (natural effects) to their antecedents in the same world (natural causes)."

When it comes to the salient differences between the two forms of thought however, Horton identifies what he terms "open" and "closed" predicaments, referring to the availability and non availability respectively of alternative theories and explanations. Thus African traditional thought is characterized by "closed" predicament while its Western counterpart is uniquely "open." As such, while a Western scientist provides his or her work to others for open scrutiny in order to ascertain whether or not all possible alternative explanations have been used in making conclusions, the native doctor puts absolute faith in his diagnosis. He cannot be wrong. Even if the population at large begin to realize that his prescriptions do not work, he is protected by a process of secondary elaboration.

Horton's framework has not been tested empirically by this researcher in the Liberian setting. But it appears to be externally valid if we assume that its theoretical categories (ie, "open" and "closed" predicaments) are also applicable to the general population who maximize their well-being, in a world characterized by uncertainty, imperfect information, and socio-economic risks. Therefore, like the Western and native doctors, we assume that common people also pursue alternative causal explanations given their options and societal constraints.

To give an appropriate structure to the conceptual framework, we hypothesize that Liberian modes of thought are a function, *ceteris paribus*, of ethnic, religious, educational and residential (rural/urban) background. These variables are important insofar as they give extra meaning to the cultural and spiritual basis of behavior. Further, they illustrate socio-economic stratification and dualism in such behavior that are useful in making logical conclusions. That added structure further accepts the Durkhemian conception of religion, implying a set of beliefs and practices, relating to the sacred, and solidifying individuals' social bonds (cf, Turner, 1983). But those beliefs and practices do not exist in a social vacuum. They are molded by mundane attributes in offering rational responses to problems and life prospects in Liberian society.

Let me narrate a personal experience to explicate the extended model. I grew up in a Muslim household in Monrovia. Our household was extended and could be classified as high income by Liberian standards of living in the sixties. I was very fond of jumping from very high places to the ground when playing in our backyard. Unfortunately, one day, I slipped and fell on my left hand, badly fracturing my wrist. As far as I remember (I must have been 11 or 12 years old), I do not recollect being sent to a hospital. My grandmother knew a *Bilite* (a

Manding surname whose bearers are popular for their bone healing knowledge) who was immediately consulted to diagnose my case.

The *bilite* are believed to have secret traditional knowledge of complicated bone healing that is passed from one generation of *Bilite* to the next. I remember, on my first visit, the *bilite* gingerly massaged my wrist as a Western doctor would do while telling me many kind words to psychologically alleviate my pain. At that first visit, our conversation was highly bioethical in many respects that Fox and Swazey elucidate the term Bioethics (Fox and Swazey, 1984; Loewy, 1986). Specifically, he asked me to tell him exactly what happened. After listening to my story, he told me that his treatment procedure would be extremely painful but that if I responded well, my wrist would heal in a matter of weeks.

His treatment exposed me to my very first contact with what I consider to this day to be a miracle. The treatment was very simple involving none of the elaborate diagnostic procedures of modern medicine; like x-ray, temperature and pressure reading. The first part of the treatment, which lasted for about three weeks, involved a thorough rub down of my wrist. He would put a little saliva on his finger tips and rub it down my wrist while murmuring some words believed to be powerful verses from the Qurán. It is believed that only the *bilite* know the healing power of those verses. It is difficult to express in words the pain that I incurred during that exercise. The second round of treatment involved the application of herbs, whose names I do not remember. The result was a perfect healing in about two months of treatment.

In the context of Horton's model, it is important to note that the *bilite* told me that had I not responded to his treatment, he would have referred me to a more powerful Manding (who was not a *bilite* for further treatment). Therefore, he was aware of an alternative solution of the problem at hand, thus probably expressing his willingness to accept the limitations of his approach and manifesting his cooperation with another qualified person who had the right to treat my case. This is suggestive of the handling of open predicament by Western scientists as explained above. Another lesson to be learned is that the *bilite* explained to me both the manifest aspects of his treatment and its consequences on the same scale that he explained it to my family. This says something about the myth of the lack of individualism in African culture as perceived often by Westerners. I am aware of several other cases where alternatives are sought in the solution of problems. The commonest are mental problems, epileptic cases, and cases where some friends or distant relatives are believed to be possessed by evil spirits (or *jinna* as popularly expressed in Liberian society).

Finally, it is important to realize the existence of both open and closed predicaments when the religious and medical functions are analyzed in industrializing horticultural societies (Lenski and Lenski, 1987: 384). Although it seems true that native doctors mention the role of human agents in tormenting the lives of victims of the various cases which they diagnose, it appears that they

are aware of the limitations to their approaches and alternative ways of solving problems. It would appear that it is the native doctor, who is virtuosic in magical healing, who does not pursue alternatives and who is protected by secondary elaboration. With this model in mind, we now turn to a discussion of selected concepts of religion and medicine.

## 2. Concepts of Religion

### 2.1 Types of Religions

The three main religions in Liberia are Christianity, Islam and traditional African. It is not clear what proportion of the population belong to each of these faiths despite questions on religion asked in the Population and Housing census conducted in February 1984. Pre results of the 1984 census state that Christians are 68 percent of the population; with Muslims and Animists forming 14 and 18 percents respectively (Liberia, 1987: 43). Earlier conjectures suggest that and Muslims comprise about 10 and 15 percents of the population respectively and the African Traditional Religion shares the remaining 75% (Dunn and Holsoe, op cit: 146). Therefore, the question of religious quantification remains open to empirical validation as a potential area for future research.

The dominant brand of Christianity is characteristically Protestant, probably because most of the settlers belonged to this denomination. The salient Protestant groups are the Methodists and the Baptists. In between are several evangelical and thaumaturgical groups. For instance, one finds a tightly organized group like the Jehovah Witnesses, the Church of Our Lord Aladura—a mixed evangelical and African thaumaturgy and a modern group like the Never Die Church, also a thaumaturgy.

Bryan R. Wilson, in his 1973 book, *Magic and the Millennium*, associates the presence of these latter groups with a society like Liberia having only about 30 percent literacy. According to Wilson:

"Thaumaturgy is the primal stuff of primitive religion. Cur-ing ceremonies, and miracle making are found very widely, if in differing combinations, in almost all preliterate societies."  
(Wilson, 1973, p. 70).

Catholicism is also practised in Liberia although it has relatively smaller number of followers than the Protestant groups. The Sunni typology of Islam is the main form of the religion practised in Liberia, although one finds the Ahmadiyas. The main distinction between these two types of Islam concerns the issue of the last prophet sent to by Allah (the Arabic word of God). The former group believe that The prophet Muhammad was the last of the prophets sent to , while the latter group believe that after the prophet M d came a Caliph of prophetic stature known as Gulam Ahmad. There is deep controversy over this issue in the Islamic World.

Much is not known about African Traditional religions besides the fact that they are often associated with secret indigenous societies like the *Poros* for men and the *Sandes* for women. The *Poros* is said to function mainly as a socialization agent for adolescent males. It is reported that the initiates are taught a wide variety of subjects ranging from bridge building to farming, in effect those basic ideas that are necessary for their survival in Liberian society. The religious functions of the *Poros* society remains a mystery except to those who join. It is believed that the initiates do not reveal their secrets to outsiders. The *Sandes* functions pretty much like the *Poros* except that its membership is open only to females. It is said that females are socialized about the good virtues of marriage and they are prepared for that role. They are taught how to cook for households and special ceremonies and the traditional songs of the society. Female circumcision is often associated with the society and forms an important landmark in the preparation of young women for marriage. Like the *Poros*, the secret rites of the *Sandes* are known only to its members.

A popularly held view of the African religion is its characterization by magic, witchcraft, and juju. It is difficult for this writer to deny or confirm this view because of the lack of data. But from experience there are persistent notions of beliefs in the society that are characterized by one or more of these forces. The *Nege* for example is believed to be a secret society that is linked with deals in human parts and human sacrifice for the achievement of various mundane activities. And whenever there is a mysterious drowning case, people are observed invoking the *Nege* as an alternative cause. The *Nege* is associated with the *Mamba Bassa*, a *Kruan* speaking group of the Niger-Congo classification of languages. Dual membership in religious groups is observed in the society. This means that one can be a devoted Christian while at the same time being an initiate of the *Poros* or the *Sandes* depending on the sex of the person involved. Many indigenous people fall in such categories as a result of their backgrounds.

## 2.2 The Responsible Person

In urban Liberia, several yardsticks are used to measure a person's personality and the ways in which that personality fits in the social system. The concept of the responsible person connotes a non deviant responsive behavior to the norms of the society. The most popular yardstick is marriage. A married person with a stable home is perceived as highly responsible. This concept of being responsible is enhanced more by religious membership and active participation in church activities. The concept is so pervasive in urban Liberia that many young men are observed to manipulate the institution of marriage and the church either to ingratiate themselves with wealthy families or to gain some prominent political positions. The concept of the responsible person is different in rural Liberia because of the existence of various ethnic sub-cultures. From observation I can speculate that *Poros* and *Sandes* membership would be very important in that definition. Men and women who join those societies are perceived to have mastered the arts of communication that facilitate interaction

within and without groups and in the adjudication of conflicts. The men, for example, know the appropriate gestures to make and appropriate repertoire for ceremonies, in greeting strangers, and when faced with a difficult problem. Similarly the women know all the rules of interaction, what to say and when to call in an elder female or male in discourses.

### 2.3 Brother and Sister

The concept of Brother and Sister (not used in the biological sense) is a good example of the bonding that is implicit in the concept of religion in Liberian society. It appears that this emanates from the realization by individuals that they share the same predicaments as defined by their faiths and the spiritual answers to them. Common participation in religious services, Masonic Lodge membership, and consistent group player solidifies and enhances that bond. The concept is commonly used by Christians and Muslims but among the latter group, it has a much wider meaning in that it denotes the Umma, or Islamic Community, whose boundary transcends class (either by virtue of income or education), ethnic classification and nationality. One example is the way in which this bonding is manifested during the month of Ramadan (The Islamic holy month of fasting). During that time, any Muslim who fasts can break his fast in the evenings at the homes of fellow Muslims he has no social or biological relations with.

The concept is also commonly used by people who join secret societies. It is believed that their bonds are very strong and are employed especially in helping fellow members who face difficult situations like funerals or conviction. While the bonding is not, strictly speaking, a religious one, its strength seems to be reinforced by the common experience of participation in rites whose nature and form are only mutually known.

### 2.4 The God Person

The concept of God person appears to be largely a Christian and Western phenomenon that has permeated religious socialization in urban Liberia. It involves three persons, a child (son or daughter), a mother and a father respectively known as Godchild, Godmother and Godfather. This trio forms a non biological bonding that is sanctioned by own parents and the appropriate teachings of the Bible. It is a lifetime experience, which is conceived at the christening of the child, at which both own and God parents are present. The children involved may later spend a greater part of their formative years with Godparents whose selection, in the first place, must have been based on some exemplary virtues that they have. This could be either church membership, good neighborliness, wealth, high position in government and Masonic Lodge hip. In certain instances the God person concept is manipulated as a means of ingratiation between more and less powerful political family groups, between families of low and high incomes, urban land owners their landless rural renters or c . In such instances, it is the security which it provides that supersedes all other considerations.

## 2.5 Divine Revelation

Religious leaders in Liberia sometimes manifest their contact with divine forces by making various types of forecasts, which they claim, are revealed to them by those forces. More often than not, communication with the Holy Spirit and with Jesus is alluded to in substantiating their claims. This religious authority is more often used by Protestant leaders than their Catholic counterparts. It is very common among the thaumaturgical groups like the Faith Healing groups and the Apostolic Faiths. It is virtually absent among the Muslim and the African religions.

The several interesting cases of divine revelations seem to cover all aspects of life. They may include the proclamation of a particular year as egregious for the pursuit of certain kinds of human activities or the confirmation of a top political position. For example a former president of Liberia, who himself was a Baptist minister, invoked divine revelation in nominating, beyond all speculations, a popular Methodist minister and government critic for the position of vice president, when a vacancy in that position occurred, due to the death of his vice president. Not surprisingly, the nomination was confirmed at his party convention as a show of respect and probably belief in what the president had conceived.

Although open proclamation of divine revelation is not found among the Islamic and African religions, there are indications that they display some forms of contact with the supernatural. Molimen,<sup>2</sup> for example, are popularly consulted for the solution of various types of problems. The famous cases include finding jobs, protection from evil spirits (example witchcraft), and gaining the attention of loved ones. The Molimen are said to provide charms and other substances (either liquids or solids) which their clients rub or wear. It is believed that users are to observe special rulers, while under the influence of these substances, whose enforcement are critical to the accuracy of the prescriptions. The concept of Molimen is detested by Muslim clerics who believed that it is not compatible with the teachings of the Quran.

A comparable concept in African Traditional religion is that of the *Nyantonnoh*. This is a Kpelle word meaning "for me alone". The Kpelle ethnic group forms the largest indigenous language group in Liberia with about 25% of the population. The *Nyantonnoh* is a love charm that is the handiwork of the native doctor. Female clients are believed to use it as part of the ingredients of delicious dishes, which when consumed by targeted loved ones, are capable of winning their hearts and exclusive attention. It is believed that men use it too in failed love relations.

## 2.6 The Mandingo and the Mandingo Gown

It was mentioned earlier that there are popular myths about the Manding that are associated with Islam. These myths are related to the Mandingo and the Mandingo gown. The former is an ethnic group who universally are Muslims.

The attire they wear, a full gown that covers all parts of the body except the hands and face, is referred to as the "Mandingo gown" by the population at large. The myth is that anyone who dresses like that is a Muslim. The interesting thing about this attire is that its style is not very different from a similar attire that is widely regarded as the national dress. Also, the dress of members of ethnic groups from other African countries is very similar to the Mandingo gown. But the fact that the Mandingo identity overwhelms all others is very interesting. For example, if a Hausa person from Nigeria dresses like that and happens to be Muslim he would be identified first as Mandingo until he correctly specifies his identity. It can be said therefore that the concepts of Mandingo and Mandingo gown exemplify how cultural perceptions of personality types work in Liberian culture and how perceptions are so distorted in the identification and interaction with those personalities or elements who share the same material civilization. With this point, we now turn to the use of some concepts of medicine in Liberian society.

### 3. Concepts of Medicine

#### 3.1 The Kwii and Country (native) Medicine

Medicine represents an important topic in both urban and rural Liberia. It pops up in many different contexts in conversations and discussions. Our purpose here is to attempt to identify those contexts in a similar way did for the concepts of religion in the previous section. Attitudes about medicine seems delineated along the dichotomy of *kwii* and "country." Thus *kwii* medicine represents medical prescription of Western origin that cures diseases and helps people recuperate from various types of while country medicine has the same function but is uniquely African in origin. The persons who administer *Kwii* and Country medicines are known as the *kwii* and "country" doctors respectively. It is usually the case that the hospital is used by every body, irrespective of income, education or rural/urban background. But it appears to be popularly believed that certain types of sicknesses cannot be cured by *kwii* medicine; especially those that are believed to be caused by evil spirits through human agency. Other limits to *kwii* medicine are complicated broken bones and mental diseases. It is interesting to note that limits attitude tends to transcend social and ethnic groups as defined in our conceptual model. This is seen in the consultative actions of people; in other words, where they send their sick who contract such types of sicknesses. The use of a hospital may therefore be a first step in a series of moves involving the simultaneous utility of *Kwii* and country medicine. Let us a case, from experience, in which we use a fictitious name for our subject, Kpannah, who had a serious automobile accident and, as a result, a terribly fractured leg. Kpannah is from the rural area, although he had his university education in Monrovia and makes a very good salary. His family takes him to the main hospital where he spends some time but there is no apparent cure of his leg. Some of his family members insist that his accident is not "for nothing" (meaning in Liberian culture that it was caused by his



enemies). They therefore take Kpannah up country and put him under the care of a native doctor, who must have advised them of the human intervention in Kpannah's accident. After about six months, Kpannah recuperates fully and is able to walk again.

In this case, the native doctor manifests his medicinal function as well as his religious functions as explained earlier. It is believed that bone healing, like in the case of Kpannah, follows an interesting and complicated procedure. The person involved is normally asked to make some sacrifice. This may include giving the medicine man some small amount of money (in coins) or some animal sacrifice like chicken or sheep which must be white to indicate purity. This sacrifice is said to neutralize the power of evil forces and help to normalize the situation. The way in which the healing is judged is all the more interesting. The leg of a live white chicken is broken at exactly the same spot the client suffers from. Herbs and other native medicine are simultaneously applied to both spots. It is believed that the chicken and the client recuperate together, progress in the former being the reference against which the situation of the latter is measured.

The potency of *kwii* medicine is often seen in injection, whose administration is often at variance with outpatient maladies. It is common knowledge among physicians in Liberia that people (especially rural folks) sometimes complain if not injected on a visit to the hospital. Bledsoe and Goudbaud (op cit: 264) found similar sentiments about injection among the Mende of Sierra Leone. People now seem to be ambivalent about its usefulness due to many death cases it has impacted. The main out-patient diseases in Liberia are mainly infectious and parasitic; like malaria and measles (Conteh et al, 1990: 123).

Because of the result oriented nature of medicine, both the *Kwii* and the native doctors are held in very high esteem by Liberians. Many parents tend to aspire that their children become physicians in their pursuit of "book knowledge". It is very hard for many people to distinguish between the M.D. and the Ph.D. meanings of a doctor. When a person is introduced as Dr. X, people often assume that he is a physician although he or she may have gotten his Ph.D. in literature.

Since the concepts of medicine are centered on health and on well-being, it may be interesting to note the way people raise health related questions in social relations. There appears to be the manifest and the latent concepts as explained in the subsequent sections.

### 3.2 The Manifest Concepts in Social Relations

Concepts of health and medicine are ubiquitous in Liberian human interaction. Our first observation is seen in greetings and the way health and medicine are perceived in such relations. The following represents a common scenario. Let Q and R represent two persons in the following conversation:

Q: "How are you doing?"

R: "I am fine, thank you. My only problem is that I don't sleep very well these days."

Q: "Are you worrying about something?"

R: "No, but its just that I have this strange stomach pain that comes and goes."

Q: "Oh! I hear that there is a new Chinese doctor at the Phebe hospital who is very good at stomach problems."

R: "I am trying some bitter root (country medicine) right now and will go to Phebe if it doesn't work".

This is a fairly representative conversation of the manifest concepts of health and medicine in Liberian social relations. Many people tend to exchange personal information in this fashion irrespective of income, education or residency background. In it, one sees a certain positive projection of self in the responses. Although the person being questioned may be sick, he informs his questioner first that he is well but then mentions that he suffers from something. There is always some hesitation or apprehension to reveal the exact state of one's health. To some extent, diplomacy is involved especially if strangers are around who may be listening to the conversation. In such circumstances, the state of health may never be revealed. Another reason for the hesitation is the inherent belief that somebody out there may be responsible for inflicting some disease on one and therefore one should not be too quick in revealing his state to give the suspected person the impression that one is suffering from something.

Here lies a possible difficulty for survey researchers, y those who conduct highly structured interviews that are based on stratified designs. In such circumstances, very little useful information, say on a health topic, may be derived. Participant observation should prove to be a highly useful alternative method in such cases.

### 3.3 The Latent Concepts in Social Relations

Basic to the latent concepts of health in Liberian social relations is the germ theory of disease. Throughout the society, there are latent indications of the awareness that infectious and parasitic diseases are caused by microorganisms that enter the body. This, however, does not alter the belief in human intervention as explained earlier. There seems to be the belief that the stomach (or maybe the alimentary tract) is the main storehouse of diseases and therefore one should be very careful of what one eats. In cooking food, it is believed that heat destroys germs and therefore is used always to prepare meals. There exists talk of the "dirty" and "clean" stomachs. When someone complains about his health as presented in the above scenario, the diagnosis often made for him is that maybe his stomach is "dirty". This means that he might have been infected by some

microorganism and should therefore take some stomach cleaning herbs that may alleviate the situation.

Such diagnoses are provided by family members friends and individuals. This exemplifies the extent of self diagnosis in the society. Various types of bitter roots are administered and it is quite common to find some experienced person around who knows what type of herb or "bitter root" to recommend. That would depend on the appearance of the sick person, especially color of the eyes and slimness. The popular Western medication that is used in such circumstances is a mixture of epsom salts and herb tea or atwood bitters. These share a common bitter taste with the local "roots". When no result is realized in an expected period of recuperation, people then begin to find alternatives like *kwii* or country medicine. And depending on the severity of the case, suspicion of the intervention of human agency in illness then comes into play.

Consistent with the germ theory is the recognition of many kinds of taboos in social interaction. For instance, normatively, it is not proper to greet other people with the left hand or to pass things on to them using that hand. The belief is that part of the body is frequently used to dispose of human excreta. Spitting and coughing without covering the mouth area is highly frowned upon. Flies are widely believed to cause diseases and covering food or boiling foodstuffs that might have been exposed to flies in the market place are basic folkways.

Limes are widely used in many types of food preparation and are believed to have strong neutralizing effects on diseases emanating from microorganisms and those inflicted through human jealousies.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this essay, we have attempted to unravel the difficulty, in Liberian society, of drawing a fine line between some implicit religious and medicinal concepts by revealing their interrelatedness. By extending Robin Horton's constructs of "open" and "closed" Predicaments to individual utility, it emerges that the population at large, who are often classified in various categories for research purposes, seem aware of alternative ways of maximizing their well-being given the cultural uncertainties and socio-economic constraints. Those options may include consulting *kwii* or native doctors or a blend of the two depending on the complexity of cases.

It is not easy to describe one's culture since one is often caught in a dilemma of where to draw a line between objectivity and emotionalism in coming down on the issues. But as explored in this essay, it is useful to manifest some degree of cultural agnosticism in evaluating highly sensitive subjects like religion and the use of medicine in a society. Such an evaluation can serve as a useful benchmark to an empirical validation of hypotheses and conceptual paradigms as discussed in this paper. It is hoped that this approach will prove useful to others who are interested in understanding the manifest and latent perceptions of concepts of religion and medicine in Liberian society.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup>Islamic soothsayers in Liberian parlance.

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