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Résumé

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Conflict, Accommodation, and Transformation:
The Effect of Islam on Music of the Vai Secret Societies*

Scholars have recently begun to re-assess the effect of Islam on the creative arts of traditional African societies. Art historians and anthropologists have been at the forefront of these investigations, working with a wide range of African art but primarily with sculpture and masking traditions.1 Basically, these scholars view the problem from two vantage points. Citing Islam’s ‘uncompromising stance’ toward representational art in sub-Saharan Africa, Fagg (in Elisofon & Fagg 1958: 27) states: ‘These were not the conditions, material or philosophical, in which what we know as tribal or “primitive” sculpture can exist. Islam, of which iconoclasm is an essential tenet, is overly inimical to representational art . . .’ Opposing this notion, Bravmann (1974) considers the stability of masking traditions in the cercle de Bondoukou (Ivory Coast) and west-central Ghana; he maintains that while Islam has certainly influenced change, traditional art has not experienced outright devastation, as implied in some studies. He asserts (ibid.: 4) rather emphatically that: ‘Local cults, shrines, and rituals have not been attacked […] nor have the associated art forms been uprooted or destroyed. Quite the contrary: the Islamized Mande generally accept such aspects of “pagan-

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1. Some excellent discussions of the pro’s and con’s of Islam and traditional African art are found in Bravmann (1974), Bascom (1967), Elisofon & Fagg (1958). Unfortunately, few studies addressing the effect of Islam on the music of traditional African societies have appeared.

ism” without question and in many instances even support and cooperate with their neighbors to ensure that these traditions remain vital and in full operation. To characterize the scope of religious and social interaction, Bravmann and others portray Islam as a tolerant, accommodating, syncretic religion. At first sight, it seems logical that the conclusions of art historians and anthropologists on both sides of this issue are certainly to be found in the study of Islam and music. Unfortunately, no one has yet undertaken a thorough elucidation of the matter in an African culture.

The Distribution of Poro in Liberia and Sierra Leone
Source: Monts 1982

In Liberian Vai society, Islam has had what could be interpreted as both a positive and negative impact on their music. In an attempt to penetrate this rather complex domain, this article will focus on the effect of Islam on the traditional music practices of two Vai secret societies, Béli or Poro² (for men) and Sandé (for women). Two fundamental

2. Poro is a generic term applied to male secret societies in the region. In spite of that, each ethnic group has its own name. Among the Vai, the male secret society is known as Béli.
points will be examined. First, the basic conflicts between the secret societies and Islam will be discussed. Here, the problem rests with the adaptive strategies used by both Muslim and traditional factions, in order to accommodate and reconcile their ideological differences. The second and most important issue is the musical changes caused by the incursion of new social and religious patterns.

In the mid-17th century, the Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper (1668) first reported the existence of Béli and Sândè among the Vai, highlighting their relative stability over at least a four-hundred-year period. Since then, other writers have commented on the similarities in the role, function, and structure of these institutions among the Vai and other ethnic groups inhabiting what Azevedo (1962) has labelled the ‘Central West Atlantic Region’.

The Secret Societies

Before discussing the present-day effect of Islam on the secret societies, their roles in former times must be considered. Traditionally, boys and girls entered the respective ‘bush schools’ at or about puberty for a maximum stay of three (Sândè) or four (Béli) years. The initiation marked the beginning of a progressive course toward manhood and womanhood. A rigid curriculum familiarized the individual with the moral, intellectual, and spiritual knowledge essential to his/her new adult status. The societies also prepared adolescents for occupational roles, such as childcare, midwifery, hunting, farming, and other skills necessary for the maintenance of the social order. From a broader perspective, Béli, through its common affiliation with other Póró-type societies, functioned as an institution of regional diplomacy, serving as a forum for establishing politico-economic policy and settling inter-ethnic disputes (Azevedo 1962: 516).

Musical teaching was a very significant part of the educational system of both societies, as group performances of songs and dances for generalized recreational functions instilled a sense of unity and camaraderie among initiates. Talented Béli members were taught to play an assortment of musical instruments. Similarly, Sândè provided girls with instruction on a gourd rattle known as sásáá, played exclusively by

4. The same schema of initiatory societies is found throughout the coastal and interior regions of Sierra Leone and Liberia (see Map). Among the Mende and Gola, two groups with whom the Vai share various aspects of culture, the men’s societies are known as Pôô and Bôhn, the women’s societies as Sândè (or Bundu) and Sândè respectively.
women. These general and specialized lines of tuition also inculcated responsibility to the community, as individuals acquiring skills in music or any other vocation continued to serve the societies and the community at large after graduation.

Both societies maintained troupes that performed highly stylized dances. The Béli society troupe, wūsā, specialized in a spectacular acrobatic style. The enactment of dance dramas depicting various aspects of social life constituted the main displays of Sàndè society dancers, called tòmbō kē bōnī-bū. Professional music instructors (kēngāi for Sàndè, and kēmbē for Béli), whose skills were nurtured in the secret societies, directed the instruction of these troupes.

The epitome of dancing skill was found in virtuosic feats performed by masked dancers. The Sàndè society sponsored a masked spirit-impersonator known as zóó-bā, who interpreted an important role in Sàndè rituals and ceremonies, and served as an agent of social control in the greater realm of society. Phillips (1978: 265) asserts that it is the only mask worn by women in Africa. Documentary sources on the region mention five male characters—hɔwù, jòóbái, kòlòkò, nàfàli, and yàài—as Pòró masqueraders or spirit-impersonators. My own research reveals that they are only marginally related to among the Vai. This issue will be addressed below.

By the time boys and girls entered the societies, they were familiar with two basic groups of songs: (1) children’s play/game songs used for recreational purposes, and (2) songs for fishing, hunting, mortar beating, and other labor-related pieces used to accompany their pre-adolescent chores. Since children were not always familiar with the use of specific kinds of music in specific kinds of situations, songs were occasionally sung out of their normal contexts. That is, children would use a religious song in Arabic, or a rice harvest song heard from adults, to accompany a game. While in the societies, the initiates’ knowledge of context-specific pieces expanded greatly, since they were taught along with the techniques of farming, hunting, fishing, and other vocational tasks. Moreover, through rigid compliance to the ultimate purpose of the societies as a rite de passage, initiates learned the songs associated with the esoteric rituals celebrated in the confines of the ‘bush’, along with others that served an important recreational function. Thus, besides learning songs that were a requisite to their full participation in the societies’ ritual activities, initiates acquired knowledge of the basic repertoire used by adults in everyday life.

Islam and the Secret Societies

Islam is a relatively recent religious ideology in the forest belt. Until the latter part of the 17th century, ancestor-worship was the main
religious orientation of the Vai and other coastal people. 
Islam was introduced by the Manding, a people of Sudanic origin who established themselves in the region as warriors, clerics, and traders. 
Islamization was gradual; full conversion, if we can call it that, did not occur until sometime during the early decades of this century. Today, at least two factions exist with respect to Islam: those who fully accept an orthodox approach, and those who lean toward superficial accommodation.

While the Vai began converting, other ethnic groups remained less affected (Hopewell 1958: 92). There has been a great deal of speculation as to why Islam was so unevenly distributed in the region. Holsoe's assessment (personal communication) attributes this to the weakness of Póro among the Vai, contrasted with its relative strength among the Mende and Gola. He further states that the Vai borrowed Póro from the Gola, the ethnic group from which a number of Vai patrilineages derived. Also, the Vai were deeply involved in coastal economic activities, which attracted the attention of Muslim Manding traders. These traders established commercial networks and controlled the flow of raw materials from the interior to the coast during the height of trade activities in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The process of Islamization among the Vai followed a pattern similar to that found in other parts of the coastal region. Commenting on Muslim influence in the hinterland of Sierra Leone, Skinner (1976: 501-502) reports that: 'Islam gained influence among non-Muslims because Muslims—warriors, traders and craftsmen and teachers—possessed resources which were highly valued by local peoples. The Muslim "strangers" utilized their resources in such a way as to acquire political titles, territory, wealth, social position, and marriage alliances with local notable families. Muslims performed economic, political, military and religious roles which benefitted both the elite and the commoner. Their economic, social and political positions helped to integrate Muslims into the local power system and provided them with a firm base for proselytizing the indigenous population'. Moreover, the Vai, with their newly

5. For an excellent discussion of Muslim penetration into the coastal region, see Hopewell (1958: 78-103); and for an in-depth discussion of Vai religion during the pre-Islamic era, see Klingeneben (1939), Ellis (1914: 85-92), and Johnson (1954: 15-17).
6. See Holsoe (1967: 40-42) and Hopewell (1958: 71-93) for discussions of Manding missionaries and Muslim activities among the Vai. It should be pointed out that the Vai are of Manding origin; they arrived on the coast sometime between 1505 and 1550 (Holsoe 1967: 67-68). Bird (1970: 153-154) hypothesizes that the Vai, along with the Kono and Manding, once constituted a corridor of northern Mande speakers stretching from the coast to the interior savannah region of present-day Guinea. The interior-to-coast line was severed sometime after 1550 by westward migrating southwestern Mande speakers (presumably the Mende/Loko) who today inhabit central and northern Sierra Leone. It is further postulated that Vai/Manding ties were later renewed when European trade activities intensified and Islam began to penetrate to the coast.
developed syllabary (ca. 1830) and their high social demeanor, historically bore the reputation of being a culturally superior ethnic group, the so-called 'noblemen of the coast'. Writers dating from Dapper (1668) to Johnston (1906) have made numerous statements characterizing the Vai as an elite, intellectual people. Their conversion to a universal religion such as Islam could only provide them with another noteworthy distinction.

The ideological conflicts between the secret societies and Islam gained momentum within the past sixty years. Statements by elders indicate that, prior to 1920, both societies were well-established institutions among the Vai. By the latter 19th century, Muslim ideology evolved as a primary force in Vai social and religious life, and people began to re-assess their commitments in favor of a stronger, more orthodox approach. With this new orientation, conflicts began to precipitate which pitted Islam against 'pagan' practices, especially spirit-worship and the homage paid to the Sände impersonator of ancestral spirits, zóó-bà, and dàdèwè, the invisible Great Spirit of Béli. By the third quarter of this century, Muslim influences in some Vai areas increased considerably, and the dedication to Islam manifested itself in the renouncement of Béli and zóó-bà Sände. Devout Muslims cited cases of forced membership, and routinely labeled such activities paganistic, evil-doing, money-making schemes. One non-Muslim Vai man assessed the situation as follows:

'The Muslims have tried very hard to break down the secret societies, because everything they stand for is against Islam, except circumcision. They feel that the rituals are held just to get money from the next person, and this is not God's will. The Mandingo [Manding] feel that a man can get rich from the societies, and this is also wrong. People around here are very strong Muslims and do not send their children to Béli. They have compromised with Sände by having méli Sände. So when the Mandingoes came and said Islam was the truth, the Vai people grasped it right away.'

Vai imams and other staunch Muslims reluctantly speak of the conflicts between Islam and the secret societies. One man offered this brief comment:

'The reason the Muslims do not want Béli or zóó-bà Sände is that God said you should not worship spirits, you should only worship him. In the societies Vai people considered the spirits one of their gods, so the Muslim people started preaching the evils of this.'

7. The spirit dàdèwè is visible to Béli members. During his 'appearance' at key rituals, women and uninitiated males must remain indoors.
Thus, there is an ever-present demand for a more radical reform of the societies. Yet, amid open confrontations, countless attempts are made to settle the philosophical and ideological differences. Muslim opposition to the societies, especially Sàndè, has been sometimes subtle and other times quite overt. In an increasing number of towns, the male elders have not allowed women to initiate a Sàndè session for several years. The tension level in other areas has resulted in raids on the zóó kény and the public burning of ritual materials and other Sàndè paraphernalia.

Despite their overall commonality in purpose and structure, the Bèlì and Sàndè were influenced differently by the adoption of Islam. Because men conducted business relating to trade and warfare with the Manding, the Bèlì was perhaps the first of the secret societies to be most severely affected. Often male entrepreneurs concurrently held leadership roles in the Bèlì, providing Muslims direct access to the society’s power structure. This also allowed local Bèlì leaders to use what was perceived to be the wisdom, intellect, and thaumaturgic power of Islam to bolster their politico-economic power bases. At first they saw Islam as a supplement to rather than as a replacement for traditional religious practices. Faced with a strong reverence of the ancestors, men in this situation often resorted to ‘religious dualism’, since their conversion to Islam was frequently an attempt to improve their relations with Manding traders and warriors. Vai and Manding Muslims soon constituted an elite cult, a class religion within a larger population which continued to subscribe to the traditional ancestor-worship and homage to zóó-bà and dàddèwè.

The number of Muslim Vai kept increasing during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the 1930s and 1940s, the aniconic attitude of Islam, especially the prohibition of spirit-worship, had reportedly caused the demise of several Bèlì lodges, and today the activities of lodges throughout Vai country have been severely limited. In the past, when Bèlì was ‘strong’, each chiefdom, and some larger towns, maintained lodges, which alternated sessions with the Sàndè society on a regular basis. In recent

10. Though the Sàndè is a female society, permission must be obtained from the local council of elders for a session to begin. In addition, the town chief or elder acts on behalf of local women by obtaining the required government license for secret society activities.
11. The zóó kény is an in-town Sàndè headquarters which is strictly off-limits to men.
12. Holsoe (1974: 7) speculates that: ‘Today the Poro is not influential among the Vai, though this may be due to political realities of the Liberian central government where power now resides, rather than as previously among the ancestors. It is possible, however, to argue that the fact that the Poro could be in such a weakened state today is also due to the fact that the Poro society was not originally an integral part of the Vai social system. Such a society filling the exact same functions as the Poro does not seem to have existed among the savannah Manding’.
times, three towns in Vai country have held Béli sessions; only one of them initiates boys with any degree of regularity. These towns are Bendu in the Gawula chiefdom, Latia in the Tombe chiefdom, and Goa in the Tewo chiefdom. Circumstances surrounding initiation rites in each of these locations demonstrate the deteriorating status of Béli among the Vai.

Today, the only Béli lodge in Vai country to hold sessions on a regular basis (every three or four years) is located in the northern extreme of the most interior chiefdom. Many consider the Béli lodge at Goa as the final bastion of Béli activity in Vai country. Yet, even in this case, others would not agree that this is a Vai Béli at all, since its structure resembles the Gola version of Póró, known as Bóhm or Bóhm mándé, in many respects. In September of 1981, the lodge in Latia (Tombe) was in session, but because of weak participation and Muslim pressure, men of that chiefdom decided a year later to ban all Béli activities. The lodge at Bendu is only held periodically, and there are rumors regarding its poor administration. The general consensus among men from other chiefdoms is that this lodge is merely a ‘token’ approach to Béli. One overriding criticism is that boys are allowed to become members after only two weeks of training. Leaders of the Bendu lodge respond to such charges by stating that the shorter sessions are an attempt toward accommodation, providing boys membership in Béli and the opportunity to earn a public school education.

In areas where Béli has been abolished, there has been a resurgence of Bili, an age-old circumcision society that predates Béli among the Vai and is believed to be a cultural retention of their Sudanic heritage. Young boys are now circumcised privately or in Bili. For the more orthodox Muslim Vai, circumcision in Bili and enrollment in Koranic schools is a viable alternative to membership in Béli.

Klingenheben (1939: 333) reported that the Vai had made an attempt to establish a Muslim Póró, but my inquiries in the area of Dambala where he claimed to have made the observation resulted in informants' denial of its existence, past and present. After viewing the published photo of the ‘mohammedischen Porobusches’ (ibid.: 328), informants insisted that it was not a Béli ‘bush’ at all, but the entrance to a Bili ‘bush’.

Women were traditionally restricted from participating in major economic and political decision-making activities, although in some past cases among the Vai a woman served as a chief. And since the inner workings of Sàndè were closed to the influence of men, the traditional Sàndè estab-

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13. For a discussion of circumcision societies among the Kono and Manding, see Parsons (1904: 140-144) and Labouret (1934: 89-98).
14. See Ellis’ discussion (1914: 74) of a woman who held the position of king (bóhm-manjá).
lishment remained essentially outside the sphere of direct Muslim pressure on its internal structure and ritual practices. For these and other reasons, women appeared to exhibit a greater degree of tenacity with respect to Islam and were among the last to convert. Even today, women claim allegiance to Muslim traditions and law, while some continue (sometimes secretly) to maintain family shrines and make frequent sacrificial offerings to the ancestors.

The first report of direct opposition to the Sàndè society dates back to the early 1940s (although there were probably a number of previous confrontations) when a group of orthodox Muslims proclaimed that the Sàndè spirit-impersonator, zóó-bà, was an evil, sinister force among women, whose role conflicted directly with Islamic doctrines regarding the use and fashioning of ‘idols’, and was detrimental to the society at large. Conservative Muslims have little tolerance for what they consider blasphemous spirit representation.

In towns throughout Vai country, charges of idolatry against zóó-bà have so intensified that the traditional form of Sàndè (zóó-bà Sàndè) has now been transformed into a Muslim version called mïli Sàndè in some areas. Still, outside the absence of zóó-bà and mïli Sàndè’s commitment to Islam, little is known about the differences between the two versions. Such deep structural and conceptual distinctions remain a mystery, since at least one realm of mïli Sàndè operates at a highly secretive level.

Heated debates have ensued between liberal and orthodox factions of Muslim Vai regarding the ideological conflicts between Islam and zóó-bà Sàndè. Towns where more tolerant attitudes prevailed saw few changes in the general structure of Sàndè. The controversial nature of this issue, and the strength of one or the other faction at any given time, have resulted in some towns fluctuating back and forth between the two versions. In sum, the distinctions drawn between these versions should not be interpreted as a lessened commitment to such training for women. Overall, the Vai have not lost sight of the absolute necessity of Sàndè initiation, whether mïli or zóó-bà.

The preceding discussion suggests that Islam has had a tremendous impact on the traditional role and structure of the secret societies. As institutions of social control reflecting the ethics of the Vai and embodying in spiritual form the forces that were believed to sustain social order, the societies were vitiated by an alien religious ideology. With the reasons for their existence modified, they slowly disappeared or were transformed to serve newly defined social roles. By extension, changes in role and structure also embody changes in music. Supplemental proof of Islam’s effect on the societies can be clearly seen in five musical areas: song repertoire, initiate dancing, masked dancing, musical training, and the structure of songs.
The Song Repertoire

Perhaps the most complex group of songs in the Vai music repertoire are those associated with the secret societies. The exact number of subcategories is not known, since songs accompany several esoteric rituals held in the confines of the 'bush' of both Béli and Sândè. Such circumstances make it impossible to know just how many different kinds of songs exist. Another startling aspect of the repertoire is its language diversity. In my sample of over one hundred songs performed by the Vai, pieces in Mende, Gola, Dei, Kpelle, and Arabic are pervasive, reflecting the high level of cultural diffusion that has occurred in the region and the pan-ethnic nature of the societies. There has been a great imbalance in my collection of representative samples of Béli and Sândè songs. Though I have been somewhat successful in obtaining a great number of Sândè songs, I have experienced some problems in acquiring a suitable number of those associated with the Béli.15 Over the past seven years, Vai men have understandably been extremely reluctant to perform Béli songs outside the context of an actual ceremonial occasion. Even though some clans and chiefdoms have abolished the Béli, non-practicing men initiated in earlier years continue to respect the sanctity of its traditions. During my research in 1978, the Sândè society controlled the 'bush', and since the societies alternate sessions, men were bound by traditional law not to engage into any acts associated with Béli. By the same token, women are not allowed to take part in Sândè-related activities when Béli is in session. In 1981, for the first time in over twenty years, a lodge held session at Latia (Tombe). But men were not permitted to sing Béli songs, because the most common type performed outside the seclusion of the 'bush' are associated with ziawà, a four-day ritual which terminates a Béli session. On this occasion, songs summon the Great Béli Spirit dđđđewè from his inner sanctum in the 'bush'. Officials of Béli maintain that singing out of context would cause him to emerge too early, placing the initiates in grave danger.16 By 1982, Béli had been banned in the Tombe chiefdom and men flatly refused to discuss any aspect of it. Consequently, there is no extant sample of Vai Béli songs, and it is quite possible that they will eventually fall into obscurity.

15. Having conducted field research among the Vai on three separate occasions (1977-78, 1981, 1982), I have yet to collect a single Béli song. However, I was able to collect some Póró songs among the Gola. These songs were in Mende and Gola, and Vai informants acknowledge that the Vai perform the majority of them in the exact same contexts of Béli rituals.

16. Béli is a rite de passage, a life-cycle transition from adolescence to manhood. Initiates are said to have been eaten by dđđđewè and presumed dead. Graduation from the society symbolizes a rebirth or resurrection of the dead youth. It is believed that any interruption of the death-rebirth cycle of a Béli session would cause the initiates to remain 'in the spirit's belly'.


As in other traditional African societies, music among the Vai is integrated into the larger sphere of social activity. When a strong external force such as Islam influences changes in the traditional institutions, then the associated music is also affected. In the past, the following ritual and ceremonial occasions were held during a session of Béli. These occasions have either been modified or completely curtailed.

1. *filá bò filá* An occasion in which the women of Sàndè ceremoniously turn authority of the ‘bush’ over to the men, allowing a session of Béli to commence.

2. *béli bò-nà* An all-inclusive term covering the occasions associated with a ‘Béli graduation or ‘bush breaking’.


4. *gbónjó* The feast held prior to graduation, which includes festive singing and dancing.

5. *ziàwà* Festive communal dancing over four consecutive nights before boys are released, calling for participation by men and women. Special *ziàwà* songs and dances are performed for the duration of the ritual.

6. *béli bì* A ceremony in which initiates receive a special Béli mark on their backs.

7. *wùsà tìmbò* Dancing by Béli initiate dancers.

With the absence of these and other occasions, formerly an integral part of the Béli cycle of events, the songs, dances, and other forms of music-making no longer exist. In spite of that, it is common to find Vai men who have knowledge of these activities, since they were either initiated into Béli in the past or obtained membership in a Mende, Dei or Gola Póró lodge where these rituals and the associative music performances continue.

The advent of Islam has caused significant changes in the Sàndè song repertoire. Here we see a much clearer picture of how the Sàndè is being transformed. In *zóó-bà* Sàndè, which has fifteen or so known sub-categories of songs for recreational activities, initiate dancing and masked dancing accompany the esoteric and exoteric rituals of the society. The absence of *zóó-bà* in and of itself creates a void in the Sàndè repertoire, since it contains special songs for initiating a new dancer, praise songs, and a host of others in Mende, Gola and Vai that go along with the masker’s ritual acts and dance performances. As an accommodating gesture, some *zóó-bà* Sàndè lodges have attempted both to show their allegiance to Islam and to placate the attitudes of conservative Muslims by incorporating Arabic songs in their training and ritual activities. These lodges, however, continue to function as traditional versions of Sàndè, but the

17. The Vai have incorporated Arabic songs into a number of traditional activities, i.e. marriage ceremonies, birth rites, and death feasts, and any other occasion requiring Muhammed’s blessings.
use of Arabic indicates some Muslim influence, and is often a subtle clue that a transition to mālī Sāndē is foreseen.

The basic structure of a Sāndē lodge significantly affects the status of the music repertoire. Though the goals of the society are universal, their exoteric and esoteric rituals differ considerably. A comparative analysis of zóō-bā and mālī Sāndē shows an equally persistent dichotomy among the Vai. Musical data offers a mere inkling of substantive evidence on the problem, but because of the extent of variation in both versions, we are far from understanding the real structural and musical differences that apply to Sāndē in the whole of Vai country. Inquiries in two towns which have held mālī Sāndē for many years reveal the diversity in people’s perceptions of what mālī Sāndē is about and how it should be organized. In the Vai town of Bomfōlō, where a Muslim version of Sāndē has existed since 1947, women admit that it is the same as zóō-bā Sāndē, but without the spirit-impersonator: sessions are held for a full three years; rituals remain basically the same as those of the traditional version; a kēngūi is employed to train the initiate dance troupe; and in addition to mālī Sāndē songs in Arabic, others in Mende, Gola, and Vai are performed as they would be in any zóō-bā Sāndē lodge. Even pieces formerly performed for zóō-bā have merely been transferred to other contexts. For example, zóō-bā songs occasionally accompany dance performances by Sāndē initiate dancers, known as tômbo kē bômni-nū; and some zóō-bā praise songs are now used as greeting songs for the head matron of Sāndē, mā-zōō.

A different set of rules regulates mālī Sāndē in the town of Makpouma, which has one of the most extremely conservative Muslim population in the coastal region. In addition to the prohibition against zóō-bā, Muslims have eliminated many salient rituals of the traditional version, and the so-called ‘public face’ (exoteric occasions) is affected by these restrictions. Women are not allowed to play the musical instrument known as sāsādá, which is not only a symbol of the Sāndē society but also of women’s roles in the general production of music. Moreover, other than a sprinkling of Manding and Vai, the majority of songs performed in this lodge are in Arabic. For many years Makpouma was the only town in the lower coastal region to maintain a year-round Koranic school. Today, the town’s population still adheres to a vigilant, orthodox approach to Islam and mālī Sāndē. The degree to which traditional and Muslim practices co-exist in towns with mālī lodges through Vai country falls somewhere between these two extremes. The approach to mālī Sāndē as found in Bomfōlō, however, displays the flexibility on the parts of both traditional and Muslim factions with respect to mutual accommodation.

Unlike the circumstances which led to the almost complete decline of the Bělī repertoire, Islam has had somewhat of a bolstering effect on the number and diversity of Sāndē songs. As previously mentioned, in some mālī Sāndē lodges, a great many pieces have been retained from the
traditional version. And, in addition to the use of Arabic songs, mūli Sàndè has adopted songs from the Bili circumcision society, which are in languages from the savannah region, e.g. Manding and Koiniaka. Thus, in mūli Sàndè, the use of Arabic, Vai, Gola, and Mende has produced a richness in both musical style and language unmatched by any other corpus in the entire Vai repertoire.

Song Style

The analysis of some music style elements reveals even further the profound effect of Islam on the Sàndè repertoire, and on Vai performance practice in general. Due to the pan-ethnic distribution of the Sàndè and the fact that the repertoire is shared with other regional ethnic groups, there is a high degree of homogeneity in the structure of Sàndè songs performed by the Mende, Gola, and Vai (Monts 1982: 108-112). Islam has had little effect on the structural features in the existing Sàndè repertoire. However, songs with new structural features were introduced along with mūli Sàndè. The Manding brought the mūli Sàndè songs to the region, and therefore the stylistic tendencies differ in many respects from those found in the music of coastal peoples. It is interesting to note that pieces used in mūli Sàndè, or for any other Vai Muslim occasion, are also used by other peoples of Liberia who subscribe to Islam, especially those ethnic groups whose conversion was the result of Manding proselytizing. The next section will outline some of the basic structural characteristics and the performance practice of mūli and zōô-bà Sàndè songs.

A feature common to both versions of Sàndè is the recitation of a brief preamble. These recitations are said to show women’s commitment to God, the sanctity of Sàndè, and the role of both in their lives. Before singing in zōô-bà Sàndè, women recite the phrase kūwái yóó. This may not be a Vai phrase, as it is also heard among the Mende and Gola. A more extended preamble is recited before singing songs in mūli Sàndè. Here the phrase is a mixture of words in Vai and Arabic: ‘Abūlā é, kūmbā kòlo, à nābī bālā ká, múá bë à wálá bò, ʼūmīnā’ (‘Allah, great God, Muhammad, that is what we are concerned with, amen’).

The following musical examples (p. 334) will reveal some of the basic structural differences between songs performed in mūli and zōô-bà Sàndè societies.

Since we know little about the pre-coastal style and performance practice of the songs brought by the Manding, it is difficult to make judgements on how change affected them once they were introduced to the Vai Sàndè society. The mūli Sàndè songs typically use a one-part, choral unison format, although there are some two-part, call-response structures. Other common features include: symmetrical phrase struc-
tures normally of two or four bars; wide melodic ranges, often exceeding the octave; and identical beginning and final tones in the majority of songs. The latter feature, along with the use of perfect cadences, implies a concept akin to Western tonality. Generally, stricter rules are applied to the performance of mili Sândë songs. In the more orthodox lodges, only handclapping is used for accompaniment. The improvisatory features so common in Vai vocal music are normally absent from mili Sândë songs. In this case the language of the text restricts women with little knowledge of Arabic from improvising, and as mentioned above, these songs are normally in choral unison. As a result, the
texture is different from that of zóó-bà Sàndè songs, giving the critical listener the impression of a rigid, stiff style.

Though many of the features described above are present in the traditional zóó-bà Sàndè songs, they are typically in two-part, call-response structures; the leader, usually a professional singer, performs the more complex melodic line. Choral parts may be simply vocables, a repetition of the lead line, or completely different melodic material. Within the chorus itself, occasional heterophony may occur when individuals sing portions of the line. In the majority of performances, polarity (duplication of the melody at the octave) and homophonic parallelism at the fourth used by the more experienced choristers generates a rich harmonic texture. Such complex harmonies are seldom heard in performances by young girls. Phrase structures of zóó-bà Sàndè songs are commonly asymmetrical. This often occurs when a lead vocalist takes extraordinary liberties with the melodic line, causing early or delayed entrances by the chorus. The majority of zóó-bà Sàndè songs utilize smaller melodic ranges with fewer pitches and short, fragmented melodic units. Yet, an experienced kéngài moves far beyond the prescribed melodic material, utilizing the entire scope of the tonal range. Handclapping or any musical instrument may be used to accompany a zóó-bà Sàndè song, though there are purists who say that only the gourd rattle sásáá should be used for such purposes. Lastly, the duration of these pieces is generally shorter than those in mûlî Sàndè.

Dance

Documentary sources indicate that the Béli society initiate dance troupe, wùsá, existed among the Vai in the mid-19th century. In his description of Béri, S. W. Koelle (1854: 147) states that: 'To go through the rites of the common béri requires only a few months, whereas, in what is called a dancing béri, they have to be several years'. Yet, there has been no wùsá dancing in Vai Béli in the coastal region for over fifty years. Even then, informants say that the music instructors, kêmbe, came from the neighboring Gola. Furthermore, middle-aged Vai men from the coastal chiefdoms of Tombe and Gawula, who danced wùsá in the past, acknowledge being trained in a Gola or Mende Póró lodge.

Where the zóó-bà Sàndè has been maintained, the various dance types remain intact. I have pointed out the varying levels of Muslim restrictions on dance found in mûlî Sàndè lodges. Some of them have initiate dancing, but the more orthodox ones do not. But without exception, all strictly forbid dancing by the spirit-impersonator, zóó-bà. The elaborate ritual known as mûà zóó-bà námá kɔɔ, for initiating a new zóó-bà, is understandably absent in the Muslim version. To explain the conflicts surrounding the traditional form of Sàndè, women point not to
the conflicts with Muslim ideology, but instead to the fear of physical and psychological torment some men have of the zóó-bà.¹⁸ Men are said to be extremely vulnerable to the zóó-bà’s powerful medicines for which there is no known antidote. In former times, the zóó-bà was a key agent of social control, serving as women’s protection against men’s noxious maneuvers. In cases of impropriety, high-ranking Sândè women, along with zóó-bà, were empowered to levy heavy fines on men for violating Sândè laws. Such infractions notably involved a man having sexual relations with a sândè initiate, or allegations of his unfairness to one of his several wives. Men deny such assertions today, yet retain some degree of fear of powerful Sândè medicines and zóó-bà. The most severe threat of retribution is Sândè-induced scrotal elephantiasis. Thus, Muslim opposition to the zóó-bà arises not only from their ideological objection to spirit-impersonation, and the reign of terror the zóó-bà can incite, but also from a basic conflict between men and women. The zóó-bà and Sândè have lost much of their traditional power: cases involving infractions against women by men are now heard by a council of elders or in civil courts.

The male masked dancers are seen throughout Vai country, but because none are thought of as spirit-impersonators, they fall within the realm of Muslim tolerance. Here we see an excellent example of transformation and accommodation. These dancers were imported into Vai areas from the Mende and Gola; there, some are considered spirit-impersonators or ritual actors. According to Little (1951: 184, 193), among the Mende, the náfáli, along with the terrifying Póró spirit-impersonator, gbéni, perform sacred functions in Pöö rituals; and Azevedo (1973: 149) reports that the ḍówú (or gbéti) of the Gola personifies a mountain spirit. But, among the Vai, these masked figures are simply known as tómbo ké feñ-nú (lit. ‘playthings’), used primarily for entertainment purposes. Where ḍéli has been banned, the male masked dancers are maintained by quasi-secret societies or clubs known as gbóñji-nú (plural of gbóñji). Many of the secular activities and the musical training once associated with ḍéli have been, in some ways, kept on in the gbóñji. Thus, through the transformation from spiritual to secular roles, the male masked dancers did not conflict with Islamic dogma. Ironically, Vai informants hesitated to say why such a transformation has not taken place with regard to the Sândè society dancer, zóó-bà.

¹⁸ Interview with Bendu Kiagbasa, mà-zóó of a mìli Sândè lodge in the town of Bomfó (Gáwula), Apr. 14, 1978. She is one of the oldest and most knowledgeable mà-zóó on the subject of Sândè in the lower coastal region, where the majority of mìli Sândè lodges exist.
Musical Training

Islam’s effect on the role and structure of Béli is partly responsible for a sharp decline in both the number of professional male musicians and the general level of musical participation by men in social activities. The deteriorating status of Béli has eliminated the many important roles male musicians performed in the past. Elders have stated that in former times any given town contained four or five Béli-trained musicians connected with local Béli rituals. Today, such a statement would be less than accurate. Without Béli, there is no analogous systematic, institutional form of musical teaching available to men. Musical tuition provided by the gbônjí fills some of the void, but it is geared primarily toward masked dancer accompaniment. The decline in the number of musicians is not nearly as grim for women, since zoó-bà and some mëli Sàndè lodges have sustained a systematic form of musical training for women. A survey conducted in 1978 revealed three times more female than male musicians at the professional level. The disparity in numbers derives from the fact that, unlike Béli, Sàndè—whether mëli or zoó-bà—is still a viable institution, providing musical training and professional as well as amateur performance opportunities for women.

The decline of Béli has not only affected the numbers of professional male musicians, it has also caused a decrease in the musical participation and competence of the male population. Several scholars have commented that, while in Béli, boys learned the various songs which accompany the work-related and recreational part of their training. Participation in these activities allows boys to acquire a certain amount of general musical competence. Today, most middle-aged men have not undergone training in Vai Béli. But for those who have, the time spent in seclusion could have been as little as two weeks, as in the Bendu lodge, and hardly suffices to acquire even a minimal amount of skill as a dancer or instrumentalist, or to learn a substantial number of songs.

Among the Mende and Gola, in areas where Póró remains strong, men were observed taking a more active role in communal music events than among the Vai. Though Islam is present among these ethnic groups, it has not been allowed to make such severe changes in their respective versions of Póró. People in coastal Vai areas express admiration for the musical abilities of Gola and Mende performers, among whom the Póró is known as ‘dancing societies’. Vai men, on the other hand, are occasionally criticized for their general lack of musical skills and for abandoning the traditional musical events associated with Béli.

With the continuity of musical training in both versions of Sàndè and the lack thereof in Béli, we might ask how music-making among men compares with that of women on amateur and professional levels. There is a general consensus among the Vai that on a non-professional level
women are better singers and dancers than men. During communal recreational activities, women commonly perform dance movements reminiscent of those used in Sàndè activities. Moreover, Vai women’s song repertoire (mùisì döy-nù) numbers two to three times that of men (kài döy-nù). A majority of the songs performed by women, learned in the Sàndè society, are integrated into many non-Sàndè activities, such as comforting a baby and harvesting rice. These comments are not intended to demean the musical status of men, but to show that the decline of Béli, and the musical training it once provided, has had a profound effect on the musical roles of men in Vai social activities. Men do not seem overly concerned with the absence of musical training once provided by Béli, or with the lack of parity with women in general musical skills. Many believe there is no disparity, and that men’s musical competence is manifest in different ways. One often hears the comment, ‘We [men] know more sükìà [Arabic songs] than women.’ Though this statement may be true, the continued use of Arabic songs in mëli Sàndè will affect such opinions. We should be quick to point out that on the professional level there are several, highly skilled male performers. Yet a great disparity in the number of male and female musicians specializing in secret society training remains. The number of women bearing the title këngàì far exceeds the number of men called këmbe. After an extended search in 1977-78, I located only one man actively involved in the musical training of Béli initiates. Moreover, several male itinerant professional musicians I interviewed acknowledged having been taught by Gola or Mende musicians, or by other Vai musicians who had non-Vai teachers.

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In this paper, we have evaluated the basic conflicts arising when a new religious orientation is introduced and challenges the spiritual role of two powerful secret societies. The discussion has focussed on the strategies taken by the Vai to accommodate these new ideologies, and the resulting transformation of the societies. Music, an integral part of the societies, quickly responded to changes in the socio-religious climate, substantiating the theoretical orientation guiding this discussion: that is, ‘music follows culture’.

However unintentionally, the focus on the secret societies and the available data might suggest that Islam has denigrated music in Béli and Sàndè and in the greater realm of Vai society. On the contrary, inside and outside the societies, the positive association and interaction of Islam with the traditional belief system have brought about new spheres of musical and social life. For example, the use of songs with Arabic and Manding texts for Muslim holy-day ceremonies and for mëli Sàndè society activities has resulted in a richer and more diverse music repertoire.
Islam has brought new religious ceremonies; several of which have been uniquely syncretized with traditional rites such as death feasts and marriage ceremonies. These activities, which include \( \text{wu} \) (a feast held at the end of Ramadan), \( \text{mahô} \) (a celebration of the Prophet’s birth), \( \text{doyki} \) (a feast celebrating Abraham’s sacrifice of Ishmael), and other Muslim holy-day ceremonies, further enrich the scope of Vai social and religious activities.

The increased number of Muslim rituals and celebrations has given rise to a new class of professional singers called \( \text{suk} \). These Koranic school graduates receive specialized training to serve as cantors for Muslim ceremonies. Koranic school training provides increasing numbers of men the opportunity to become literate in Arabic letters. For women, \( \text{må} \) provides the opportunity for some general Muslim training, which was unavailable to them in the past.

The \( \text{àmá} \) (‘imam’) continues the role of arbiter and conciliator. His importance to the community has shifted away from the past role of servant to that of a powerful chief or warrior; today, he is the local religious leader, a ritual actor in life-cycle rites and in Muslim holy-day activities, and an Islamic educator. Because they believe him to be endowed with special knowledge and magical power, groups and individuals seek his advice and acquire amulets for protection and to enhance whatever skills they may possess. The acquisition of amulets is especially important to musicians. The most successful masked dancers, singers, and instrumentalists attribute their superiority in performance in part to the \( \text{dàsi} \) (‘amulet’) acquired from an \( \text{àmá} \). Some believe that the \( \text{àmá} \) possesses greater skills than the traditional medicine specialists.

Muslim priests have recently been accorded an important role in the secret societies. For \( \text{zô} \) and \( \text{må} \) Sande lodges throughout Vai country, the \( \text{àmá} \) is responsible for the manufacture of an amulet called \( \text{bina} \), which is worn as a necklace by Sande initiates. The \( \text{bina} \) contains protective medicines to ward off men’s sexual advances while the girls are enrolled in Sande. In the Bili society, the \( \text{àmá} \) performs the circumcision and is chief advisor on religious matters.

Such instances point out some of the positive effects of Islam. Though there has been widespread dissociation of Bili and transformation of Sande, the importance of these institutions remains tenacious in Vai traditional lore.

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