THE KONDI[1] OF SIERRA LEONE

by

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The very title of this article needs a small measure of justification. It has been used because it would have been too cumbersome to call the article 'The *kongdi* or *kututen* or *bundoma* of Sierra Leone'. The instrument is played by Temne, Limba and Loko musicians who call it by those three names respectively. But the word *kongdi*, obviously based on the Temne name, is understood intertribally and I have even met Limba musicians who appeared to know the word *kongdi* better than *kututen*.

The instrument, a very obvious relative of the mbira found in other parts of Africa, is a metal box (sometimes with part of the metal replaced by wood) which has a number of metal tongues fixed on top of it — the longest in the centre, than tapering off regularly on both sides. The tongues are often flattened-out umbrella stays. The box also has an extension, through which small metal wires are threaded. The player takes the box between his body and his hands with the extension facing away from him, turns his thumbs inwards and uses them to pluck the tongue ends which are also pointing away from him. Here then is an important difference from the mbira playing technique, for the mbira player will pluck tongue ends which are pointing towards him. The Sierra Leone musician will shake the box up and down while playing, to obtain a rattle from the wires threaded through the extension and from some pebbles inside the box. The importance of this secondary sound varies from one piece to another; it may be subordinate or it may be an essential ingredient of the piece.

The box often has sound holes in the three sides that are not resting against the player's body. As he will hold his instrument at the far end, securely wedged between his body and hands, he can easily play it while walking, and in fact the very first player whom I met at close quarters was doing just that. Abdulai Fofanah, a Temne musician whom I met while walking at Magburaka in the Tonkolili District of Sierra Leone's Northern Province, was playing his *kongdi* to 'keep himself company' as one Sierra Leonean so aptly expressed it. His *kongdi* had nine tongues, which is a favourite number although I have also met instruments with ten and eleven tongues. A ten-tongue *bundoma* is shown by Loko musicians on our first illustration. The photograph was taken at Maferuku in the Bombali District, also in the Northern Province; on the whole, these instruments appear to be definitely northern in Sierra Leone. The *bundoma* picture shows a few objects wedged under the non-playing end of some of the tongues. I have met them on other instruments too but by no means on all. At the time I just assumed that they were stones which had to prevent the tongues slipping out of position. This may well be so, but recently it has occurred to me that they may also have been small lumps of some sort of tuning paste.

The other illustration shows the instrument in action. This time it is a *kututen*, played by Limba musician Baio Mansaray in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. The size of all these instruments varies, but not very widely. In an average one, the box might be 10½″ by 6½″ by 4″ and the extension, which is sometimes curled up, might be 5″ long.

The tongues give a pleasing sound when plucked, but they have one disadvantage:

Ed: The 'o' and 'n' in "kondi" should correctly be spelt with phonetic characters resembling respectively a 'c' backwards and an 'n' with a tail. It will be spelt "kongdi" in this article as the nearest approximation.

Copies of tapes referred to in this article have been deposited in the ethnological archives, University of California, Los Angeles and the archives at Indiana University, Bloomington.

they break easily. One such breakage occurred in the middle of a song as my 'crew' and I were working with Loko musicians at Rokulan in the Bombali District. Their songs were accompanied by two nine-tongue *bundoma* and one *gbahina* (a U-shaped iron rod played with an iron beater). It was the second *bundoma* which came to grief in the last song without us noticing anything. After this song we recorded the tuning of both *bundoma* and it was discovered that one pitch out of the nine was missing on the second *bundoma*.

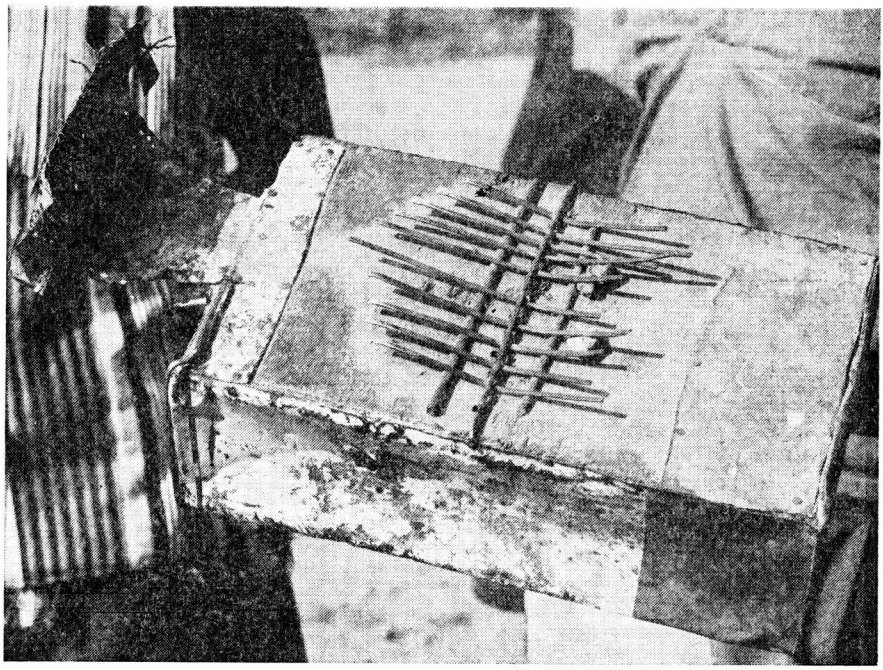


Fig. 1. Ten-tongued Loko *bundoma*, at Maferuku, Bombali district, Northern Province.

Watching a player in action, one sometimes gets the feeling that the rhythmic movement in itself is as much a joy to him as the resultant changes in pitch. The shaking of the box, setting a steady division of time against the complex and subtle rhythms of the plucking, would probably add to their joy.

I used to think that people with similar languages would resemble each other in their music too, but the Loko people seem to show that this is by no means necessary. Their language closely resembles Mende; I have even been told that the name *bundoma* (or possibly *gbundoma*?) is actually borrowed from the Mende language, but although I have worked extensively with Mende musicians from the extreme west to the extreme east of Sierra Leone, I have never yet met any *bundoma* players among them. Musically, I can find little similarity between the Mende and the Loko, either in singing or playing. The Loko would seem far closer to the Limba and also to the Temne in their music, although both the Temne and Limba languages are totally different from their own. The deciding factor in these things may well be geographical. The Loko live away from the Mende, in a Temne area flanked by two Limba areas. It would be a mistake to try and cut up Sierra Leone's music into 'tribal' sections. While on the one hand there is

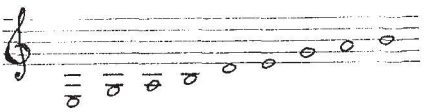
Fig. 2. Nine-tongued Limba *kututen*, played by Baio Mansaray, at Freetown.

considerable musical variety within each ethnic group, we find on the other hand that musicians from different groups living in the same area will listen to each other and learn from each other. It is thus not surprising that we should find our little *kongdi* used by all these three groups.

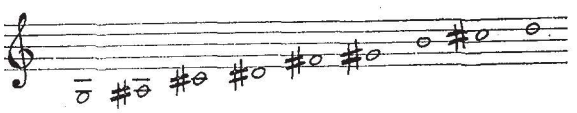
Tuning

We have never yet met two of these instruments with the same tuning. They appear to be complete individuals. In mentioning a few points here, I must stress first of all that I am very much aware of the shortcomings of my investigations. I know full well that African pitches should not be measured with European yardsticks — but what could I do? Since the whole project was my own venture, unsupported except for some very generous help given by the Peace Corps for three of the recording tours, I have never had access to any apparatus that can measure pitches really accurately; in fact, all I had for pitch comparison when working on my collected material was a very European 'Glockenturm' I had borrowed from a school. So it was obvious that I could only say "This sounds a little above A" or "That sounds a little below B♭". With these limitations in mind I shall give a few approximate findings and a couple of approximate tunings.

Sometimes there is a marked unevenness in tone quality and resonance between the different tongues, and the lowest pitch in particular may be very hard to determine. Leaving these problems aside, it may be said that the size of the steps between next-door pitches is usually either two or three semitones. The arrangements of these smaller and bigger steps differs from one instrument to the next. The *kongdi* that kept Abdulai Fofanah company as he was walking at Magburaka, came up with a surprisingly straightforward example of a pentatonic tuning (over):



But such simplicity is the exception rather than the rule. Hexatonic tunings are frequent, but sometimes they turn out to be heptatonic after all when a note 'missing' in the lower octave of the instrument turns up in the higher octave, or the other way round. 'Chromatic' notes may appear in the same way, if for instance one octave had a D and the other a D♯. The approximate tuning of the *kututen* played by Baio Mansaray in Freetown gives a taste of what may happen:



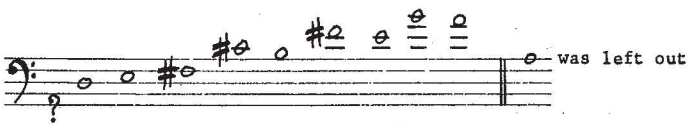
The approximation is roughest in the 3-semitone step from low A♯ to C♯, the next step from C♯ to D♯, and the last three steps at the top (including the final single-semitone step). But as the solo piece played immediately after the recording of the tuning gets under way, even these steps and notes appear to sound closer to the ones written here. Then comes a surprise. The D♯ tongue, which has been used quite a lot, suddenly seems to have slipped up to around E — the one note that has been missing from a heptatonic scale. I have found this sort of thing repeatedly both with plucked-string and plucked-tongue instruments: a note absent from a recorded tuning suddenly appears in the very next piece. The most likely explanation, I imagine, is that the force or manner of plucking influences the pitch. But whatever the explanation, it must be said that the player in this piece makes as good and musical a use of the new E as he did of the old D♯.

The problem does not end there however. Before the tuning was recorded the same player with the same *kututen* had taken part in some songs. In one of these, B♭ (middle of treble stave) had played an important part on the *kututen*, and the other notes heard on it were C and D below the stave, F and G. Since all of this is a semitone lower than what was then found in the tuning and in the solo piece, one might be tempted to blame the tape recorder (in spite of the tuning fork sounds preceding all items, which should provide for the necessary adjustment when comparing them), if it were not for the fact that the high D, which is an important note on the *kututen* both in the song and in the piece, has come out the same in both cases. I have often wondered whether these instruments would be re-tuned to fit in with different songs, but I have never actually seen any players do so. Maybe a lot of energetic virtuoso playing like Baio Mansaray's might tend to push up certain tongues and raise their pitch (he had no stones or other objects wedged under the non-playing ends of his *kututen's* tongues) or maybe the whole difference was just caused by altered force of plucking.

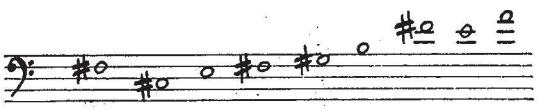
This flexibility of pitch, which in Sierra Leone can be heard both in singing and playing, is well illustrated by a true story I once heard about the meeting of a music teacher and a *kongdi* player. The music teacher wanted to examine the tuning of the *kongdi*. When in doubt about a certain tongue he sounded a note and asked "Is this right?" The *kongdi* player said yes. The music teacher sounded a slightly different note and asked "So that is wrong?" to which the *kongdi* player replied with cheerful smile "That also is right". I can well imagine it. No doubt he could have used either pitch to get the result he wanted in a given situation.

Of the other tunings we recorded, some had a slightly lower range than the two given here, but they rarely went much below the middle of the bass stave in pitch.

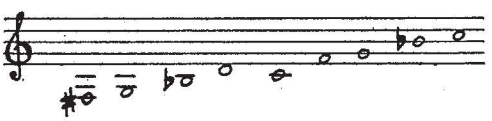
We recorded the tunings of 14 *kongdi* in the field. Here (and also in my book) I have only given those tunings of which I was reasonably sure. Many others contain some pitches which are just *too* doubtful. A good example is an eleven-tongue instrument we met at Tumbodu in the Kono District, Eastern Province. The longest three tongues all give strangled squeaks which are obviously overtones not fundamentals. By the time it comes to the third tongue I can manage to hear both fundamental and squeak, the squeak being an octave plus a fifth above the fundamental. But may I assume, on the strength of that, that the fundamentals of the first and second tongues are also an octave plus a fifth lower than the squeaks I hear? I dare not. A few musicians, when asked to pluck the tongues of their *kongdi* for a recording of the tuning, had chosen a different order of tongues. Not having been trained as an ethnomusicologist, I had not realised that the musician's own order of plucking might be an important clue to his way of tuning his own instrument, and so I just used to ask the musicians to pluck straight from the longest to the shortest tongues. In a few cases however the musicians must have either misunderstood this or disapproved of it. The tunings contain some very doubtful pitches but I give them all the same, to show the order of plucking. The first case is the Katanta *kututen* mentioned further on. It is an eleven-tongue instrument with a very marked unevenness in tone quality and resonance; the longest tongue is just unpitchable so I shall indicate it by a question mark. When the player had plucked the tongues in his own order I noticed that one of the eleven pitches was missing, so I *had* to ask him to do it again, and this time he did go straight from the longest to the shortest tongue, giving me all the eleven pitches. I shall give his first plucking and also indicate which note was left out.



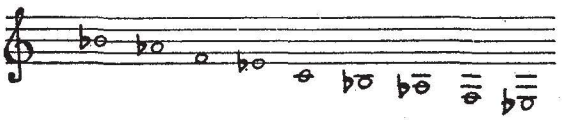
The next case is the second Rokulan *bundoma* — the famous instrument with the broken tongue. Whether the player was trying to cover this up by plucking another tongue twice I do not know, but you will see that his fourth pitch is the same as his first and that he does give me nine pitches although the instrument had by that time only eight tongues. The pitch gap from B up to e was caused by the broken tongue.



The third case is the *kongdi* that played in the dance songs — at Mabonto in the Tonkolili District of the Northern Province. The musicians were Limba and described themselves as a Poromende group. Here is only one downward move in an otherwise rising succession of pitches.



In all these cases there seems to be an occasional tendency to go down a tone and then to jump either a fifth or a fourth. But in the last case there is a straight downward pitch line from the shortest to the longest tongue. This is a *bundoma* which, together with a *kongoma* and handclapping, accompanied some Loko songs at Makambi in the Bombali District, Northern Province. There is a female leading singer and a chorus of women and children.



As for the actual arrangement of the tongues on the keyboard I may first of all refer to a *kongdi* I met at the house of a Sierra Leonean friend and colleague before I had made any field trips at all. I described the instrument in Letters to the Editor, "African Music" III, 1, 1962. The order of rising pitches in that example was absolutely regular; first the long central tongue, then first on the left, first on the right, second on the left, second on the right, and so on — the terms 'left' and 'right' are used here as seen from the player's position. It has been my impression in the field that this pattern is common but the chance of 'irregularities' is always there. Particularly the ten-tongue instrument at Maferuku (Fig. 1) presented complications because its central tongue had four tongues on its left and five tongues on its right. I have a *kongdi* in my possession which starts according to the common pattern but then at the fourth tongue 'changes sides'; but I would not regard this particular instrument as a model of anything as it has had a most chequered career.

A few individual pieces

Returning once again to Abdulai Fofanah's *kongdi*, we may note a few points about a piece he played on it. The structure appears to be successive variations on a number of different short tunes. For some of the time, a frequent short phrase is (approximately):

which also appears an octave lower, but it is dressed up in such a rich variety of rhythms and additional notes, that the written phrase would seem to be merely a skeleton of what is actually heard. Later on, many other tunes appear and in their turn play an important part. E sounds like the 'home note'; the approach to it at phrase endings is made either from above or from below, but usually by step and not by leap. B is the insistent starting note of the piece and remains important throughout. Frequent emphasis is also placed on G.

Turning now to the song in which Baio Mansaray and his kututen took part before the tuning of his instrument was recorded, it was a solo-and-chorus song in which the other accompanying instruments were a *kongoma*, a *ken-ken* and two *kukotor*. The *kongoma* is another member of the plucked-tongue group, although the hacksaw blades or even broader blades used on it would hardly seem to deserve the delicate name of tongue. The instrument is a wooden box much bigger than the *kongdi* (20″ by 12″ by 6″ would be a reasonable average), with a sound hole over which the blades, often three in

number, are fixed. The player plucks the blades with the fingers of one hand while beating out a second rhythm on the side of the box with the other hand. The instrument is of interest because it seems to be this large size of plucked-tongue instrument that has survived in South America until today. The Sierra Leone version sounds rather drum-like, totally different from the small *kongdi*, and is not infrequently used instead of a set of drums where these are not available. Particularly with Limba musicians, *kututen* and *kongoma* are often found together in the same orchestra. The *ken-ken* is a sturdy piece of metal played with a metal beater, and *kukotor* is the Limba name for the U-shaped iron rod which we have met already under its Loko name *ghahina*.

The song has a staggered beginning. There is a *kukotor* start, followed by the *kututen* sounding its shaken pebbles and metal wires but not yet its tongues. Immediately after the *kututen* comes the *ken-ken*, and immediately after the *ken-ken* the *kongoma*. The solo voice comes next, answered by the chorus. The two keep up a continuous alternation, with a very small instrumental tail-piece at the end. *Kututen* and voices do not use the same scale. By the time the chorus are singing in the first vocal sentence, the *kututen* tongues have also come into action and the following snatch can be caught on the instrument:

Just after the end of this vocal sentence the *kututen* has

with the octaves continuing in further rhythms throughout the next solo phrase. On the whole, the rhythm of this song is comparatively steady and it is for this very reason that effects like this longer 'beat' coming between the others can be well observed here. The very slight stress that marks the beginning of each new beat is actually 'moved up' one quaver as a result of this dotted-note beat being longer than the others. The same thing happens several times in the solo singer's phrases, although the effect of moving up the stress is not always lasting: it is cancelled out for instance in a solo phrase which contains both a one-quaver beat and a three-quaver beat.

Changes of pitch begin on the *kututen* shortly after the last tune given above. In addition to the high Ds and B♭s which featured before, G naturals can now be heard. A later snatch caught on the instrument is:

C natural below the stave can also be heard. The high D, which never changes, returns again emphatically at a later stage. At the — rather abrupt — end we hear F, G♯, D♯, C, and finally more D♯s. The playing has at times been virtuoso with very fast-moving notes, just as the solo singer has decorated her tunes with various musical ornaments.

It is hard to say which note sounds like the 'home note' of the *kututen's* music in this song. The complete set of notes heard on it is B♭, C and C♯, D and D♯, F and F♯, G and G♯.

At Katanta in the Bombali District we heard a song with exactly the same accompaniment as the Freetown song just described — except for the fact that there was only one *kukotor* instead of two. The *kututen* is played here by Kemoh Conteh. It is one of those songs in which solo singer and chorus appear to use slightly different scales. The soloist consistently sings G, the chorus just as consistently G♯. None of the *kututen* tongues give either G or G♯. Indeed it sounds as if both the vocal and the *kututen* scales are hexatonic, for the singers have neither C nor C♯. This song falls very clearly into three sections, the third section resembling the first, and the middle section being spoken. We were told that the leading singer tells the Paramount Chief that he should take no notice of her poor attempt, but his answer is: "No bad can come out of a good intention".

At first, there is much insistence on B and F♯ in the *kututen* playing. Later, when the singers have started, E comes to the fore and alternates with the F♯. A also becomes important and the F♯ begins to alternate with D. Later still, the *kututen* goes down to its low E (in the bass stave), D and F♯, but the three notes are actually somewhat under these pitches though not as much as a semitone. Then the instrument returns to its higher octave where A and F♯ can clearly be heard. All the *kututen* notes fit in with the vocal scales, whose most likely home note is D.

The song that broke a *bundoma* tongue at Rokulan had little chorus work in it. It was largely a dialogue between the two solo singers who were also the two *bundoma* players — Sorie Conteh and Lamina Bangura — although other singers joined in at the 'chorus points' occasionally. As in the above Katanta song, there was speaking as well as singing. The song is supposed to represent a man speaking to a woman and its meaning is: "Do not leave me; I am going to escort you".

The *bundoma* start of this song is very effective. Both *bundoma* are at first shaken without being plucked, as was the *kututen* in the Freetown song. Then there is a repeated G♯ (high in bass stave) followed by a climb up to a repeated B and then to a repeated F♯ — all this in a steady crescendo. A prominent figure, coming both at beginning and end of the main vocal phrase, is made up of two E's followed by F♯-E-C♯, and we find the same falling movement F♯-E-C♯ featuring in the *bundoma* playing. Yet in this song too, *bundoma* notes are heard which are not only foreign to the vocal scale but also to the recorded *bundoma* tunings. The song is ended effectively by the first *bundoma* player hitting the bottom of his instrument.

Finally, back again to Freetown and Baio Mansaray for the piece he played on his *kututen* immediately after its tuning had been recorded. There is an insistence on C♯s at first. Then B becomes frequent, and G♯, F♯ and D♯. As the lower C♯ and D♯ are playing around together, the high B's come cutting in with much ingenious rhythmic interplay. Later, insistent B's are combined with F♯ and D♯. Much gradual downward weaving in the playing is followed by jumps back up to B. Then there is a change. The music begins to go up from that same B to a lot of D naturals and down again from that D via C♯ to B. All this time the B has sounded like a home note and it still does so, but the scale built on it would now appear to have changed with D taking the place of the earlier D♯.

The next surprise is the entry of the startling E, which from now on seems to be the pitch of the tongue that first gave us the D♯. From G♯s we go down to F♯, E and the low C♯. This falling movement from the G♯ alternates with a rising movement bringing in the D again: G♯, B, high C♯ and D. The ending of the piece is on repeated E's. but they sound on the low side, somewhere between E and D♯.

The piece thus appears to change its scale twice. The first scale with the D♯ and the

second with the D have the following notes in common: B, C♯, F♯ and G♯. The low A♯ found in the tuning (see p. 80) is sometimes heard but seems to have shifted almost up to B; and the G natural right at the bottom is heard very little. Once the D♯ tongue has slipped up, we lose the feeling that B is the home note. C♯ may be felt to be its successor, but this feeling is only vague. There is no such obvious home note as there was at first. The only feeling that is definite is that the home note, and with it the scale built on it, have changed. It does sound as if these changes of flavour are deliberate. The whole piece with this particular choice of notes is most effective; the musician obviously knows what he is doing, and knows how to get the sound that satisfies him.

Of the 404 items I have so far collected, 36 involve the *kongdi*. Of these, only 2 (both mentioned in the article) are solo pieces. One is a piece played by *kongdi* and *kongoma* together. One is a solo song accompanied by the singer himself on his *kongdi* (it is actually far more *kongdi* playing than singing), although another musician's *kongoma* butts in right at the end to provide a small tail-piece. At the end of this song the singer asserts rather boastfully: "When I am tired of playing my *kongdi* I go home and sleep, and then nobody can dance because I don't play". Indeed three of our songs with a *kongdi* in the orchestra are specific dance songs; the actual meaning of such dance songs may be concerned with any subject. To one other song (meaning: "I am not beautiful but God has blessed me with a lover") an old lady did some dancing. In yet another song with *kututen* participation all the singers and players danced around in a circle, with children taking part and some of the women carrying their babies. Finally we have one song with *kongdi* participation, in which the *kongoma* player semi-dances. As an accompanying instrument the *kongdi* is not often alone. Apart from the above solo song we have just one song sung by three male singers and accompanied by one of them on his *kongdi*. It is more usual for the instrument to be accompanied, as described earlier, sometimes with the numbers increased as in some songs which were accompanied by two *kongdi*, one *kongoma*, one *kenken* and three *kukotor*. The above three dance songs had a different orchestra: one *kongdi*, two *kukotor*, one *hutamba*, two *n'kali*, one *huban*, and rattling bracelets worn on the wrists by the player of the bigger *n'kali*. The leading singer was the player of the first *kukotor* and also took part in the dancing; the chorus included children. (The *hutamba* is a double-headed hourglass drum, the *n'kali* a slit-log 'drum' and the *huban* a big double-headed cylindrical drum.) Some songs which have a *kongdi* in the orchestra have handclapping as well.

It cannot be said that the *kongdi* songs have any particular subjects. While they sometimes deal with the subject of love, any other statement may also be found, or a Chief may be praised. The *kongdi* players appear to be amateurs, although at festive occasions it is usual for Chiefs and other dignitaries to give some reward to the musicians. *Kongdi* playing is not limited to any age group, but it does appear to be limited to the male sex (except of course at the women's teachers' college where I taught for four years and where some students experimented, not very successfully, even with such a typical man's instrument as the *balangi* xylophone).