



The Gullah:

Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection

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A Gullah Song in Mende

Dr. Lorenzo Turner recorded this song in Harris Neck, Georgia in the early 1930s from a Gullah woman named Amelia Dawley. The original version contained ten lines, as some were repeated once or twice. Over the years, the Gullah people who preserved this song changed the pronunciation slightly and deleted a number of one-syllable words, but the text is still understandable to a modern Mende speaker. In fact, the song contains a number of dialectal features characteristic of the Wanjama Mende who dwell in Pujehun District in far southern Sierra Leone, where the Mende and Vai regions border. This is a typical Mende funeral song (*finya wulo*) performed by women as they pound rice into flour for a sacrifice to the dead. Mende women traditionally remain in town preparing for the sacrifice while the men are in the cemetery preparing the grave. This song was probably handed down among the Gullah from mother to daughter, mother to daughter, through the generations.

The Mende spelling is somewhat altered, as the Mende alphabet contains some special linguistic symbols which cannot be used here. Translations by Momoh Koroma and the author.

Gullah Version

A wohkoh, mu mohne; kambei ya le; li leei tohmbe.

A wohkoh, mu mohne; kambei ya le; li leei ka.

Ha sa wuli nggo, sihan; kpangga li lee.

Ha sa wuli nggo; ndeli, ndi, ka.

Ha sa wuli nggo, sihan; huhan ndayia.

Modern Mende

A wa kaka, mu mohne; kambei ya le'i; lii i lei tambee.

A wa kaka, mu mohne; kambei ya le'i; lii i lei ka.

So ha a guli wohloh, i sihan; yey kpangгаа a lolohhu lee.

So ha a guli wohloh; ndi lei; ndi let, kaka.
So ha a guli wohloh, i sihan; kuhan ma wo ndayia ley.

English

Come quickly, let us work hard; the grave is not yet finished; his heart (the deceased's) is not yet perfectly cool (at peace).

Come quickly, let us work hard; the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be cool at once.

Sudden death cuts down the trees, borrows them; the remains disappear slowly.

Sudden death cuts down the trees; let it (death) be satisfied, let it be satisfied, at once.

Sudden death cuts down the trees, borrows them; a voice speaks from afar.