

E T H N I C S E R I E S

Dònkili

Call to dance

Festival music from Mali

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Introduction

Mali is a country situated in the West African interior. Its southern regions are covered by wet savannahs, whereas northwards it extends to the edges of the Sahara desert. Mali embraces the huge bend of the river Niger and its territory, as well as the great tradition of the medieval states of Ghana, Mali and Songhay. Mali also embraces different peoples and cultures: millet farmer's villages, pastoralists' camps and the cities where the traders operate.

Mali has traditionally been marginalized: its legendary wealth of gold attracted the Moroccan army which destroyed the region's political stability and continuity with the introduction of firearms in the 16th century; it was weakened by the slave trade; it was arbitrarily divided up by French colonial administrators; and it was termed a 'developing country' after securing formal independence.

But in some aspects—and music is one such case—Mali has begun to attract serious attention from Europe. Traditional narrative singers (griots) have gained international renown not only for their mastery of the spoken word and their knowledge of the past, but also for their melodies and musical tradition (see PAN 2015 CD *An Bè Kelen / We Are One*). Many Malian musicians were instrumental in the creation of commercial Ethno-Pop in Paris. Malian pop stars such as Salif Keita and latterly Oumou Sangaré have entered the World Music charts. The *jembe* is a carved wooden cup-shaped drum covered across the top with goatskin and played



Sita Ye Jabate performing at a wedding in Bamako, 1995.

with both hands. It is usually played together with a cylindrical accompanying drum called *dunun*. The *jembe* has spread from its heartland in southern Mali and northern Guinea to neighbouring Senegal and The Gambia, as well as further afield to Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. In many Western industrialized countries it is about to overtake the Cuban conga drum as the most important percussion instrument played with the hands. The *jembe* drum ensemble together with female singers constitutes the Malian festival music represented on this CD.

Festivals

In Mali, percussion and dance festivals frequently coincide with rites of transition: name-givings, circumcisions, initiations into secret societies and spirit possession cults, weddings and other ceremonies. These festivals are among the most important occasions where music is performed and experienced. Festival music mainly aims towards framing and synchronizing the close interaction between the hired musicians and the audience who actively participate in dancing, singing, rhythmic accompaniment or other forms of artistic and emotional expression.

In the capital city Bamako, festivals simply take place in the streets in front of the compounds of the organizing families. The drummers and singers who have been hired start to trickle in, whilst refreshing drinks of ginger and mallow and huge amounts of food are being prepared. There is an awning stretched from one street to the other and several dozen small chairs. A man tries to tap into the local electricity supply to feed his antiquated amplifiers.

The chairs are stored in a corner until a couple of minutes before the festival opens. There is no audience present as yet. The drummers informally set the event in motion. Playing expressively in a free rhythm they announce their arrival and greet both their instruments and the scene of the action.

Some children are sent to arrange the chairs in a rough circle or oval shape in such a way that the drummers' slightly curved line-up



Hawa Damba (right side of dancer) sings a spirit's song and invokes the dancer's trance. Bamako, 1997.

marks its front edge. It is the job of the juniors to drum up the party. In accordance with their clamorous style they first attract a wild crowd of children who only hop across the dance-floor—high speed, noise and rolls alone are not sufficient to play sweet music, the elders would complain. Meanwhile the master-drummer, and

leader of the ensemble, remains seated at the side. He observes the developments with indifference, waiting for the moment when the young ladies or married women leave the compound in order to enter the festival ground.

The drummers rise to play in a standing position. The *dunun* hang from the players' shoulders on a cord, whilst the *jembe* are fastened around their hips with webbing. The master drummer now has to be ready to play his role. Out of the audience's circle emerges a dancing woman who heads for a position where she is face to face with the drummers. Her movements and the master drummer's *jembe* patterns progress in close coordination and mutually incite each other for a short period of very energetic communication. He raises both the tempo and the density of the rhythm and pushes her solo dance to its climax. At that point—a solo doesn't last longer than half a minute—he suddenly cuts it off by playing a signal phrase. She at once rushes back to rejoin the rows of spectators who will soon yield the following solo dancer to come forward.

After the *jembe* soloist has cut off the first solo dancer's performance, he steps back to rejoin his accompanying drummers' line-up and reduces the tempo and density of his percussion. Playing short phrases he stands in wait for the next dancer to enter the ring. He is waiting for the moment when he can push the dynamics of the *jembe* towards another climax of excitement.

Thus musical and motional dynamics have been raised to the first of a series of stormy peaks. This creates an atmosphere of enthusiasm and people draw closer, their mood stimulated to the point where the distinction between performers and observers is neutralized—all those present become participants.

The cooperation between the drummers and dancers shapes the basic format of the festival. Two clearly distinct phases—the initial provocation, and the subsequent outburst—continuously alternate with each other. But there are further musical elements which the drummers must integrate into the performance. Female singers will appear at a lot of festivals. They might come, as is the case with the drummers, because they are hired and paid as professional entertainers. But every female guest who is experienced or enthusiastic enough may reach for the microphone to sing.

After the drummers' and dancers' rhythms have ceased, it is the part of the singers to reopen the sequence with a new song. Soon a line of dancers forms and begins to move at a measured pace in a large circle, dignified in character and slow in tempo. Every song is in itself a request for a certain dance and for the gentle accompaniment on drums. The title of this CD '*Dònkil*' is the word for 'song' in the Bamana language of central Mali, and literally means 'call to dance'. The dancers participate in singing the song. Their clapping or rattling further supports the rhythmic foundation. Musically the solemn



Chorus singer Na Kulibali dances and plays the rattle *ngusun* during performance. Bamako, 1994.

songs dictate the dynamics, whilst the drumming remains reserved.

A younger woman impatiently breaks from the common dance formation and a junior drummer responds too early, increasing the tempo and the volume of noise.

Since the elders are still in charge, they complain vehemently that their song and dance is being disturbed. But during this stage of the dynamic cycle, too, the tempo slowly quickens and the level of enthusiasm rises. A point of no return is reached when the *jembe* soloist suddenly heats up the rhythm, the dancers' formation dissolves and the common level of excitement gallops forward like a bolting horse. The drum ensemble's density of sound pushes the singing into the background and the focus shifts back towards the mutual incitement of the solo

dancers and the *jembe* soloist.

Drummers are the only male participants in the contemporary festival culture. Male passers-by strictly ignore the happenings while family members stay in their houses or display indifference by preparing tea around the next corner. The scene is an overwhelming combination of female pride, elegant dress sense and graceful, joyous movement. The highly sophisticated drum ensemble creates an atmosphere of permanent motional and emotional tension. The excitement reaches a crescendo as the alternating solo dancers are 'turned on' by the master drummer's excessive and ever-increasing speed. During their short but very energetic performances they often deliberately push themselves towards the threshold of losing 'normal' consciousness. Some do not end their solo dances until they become 'mad' or 'possessed' by a spirit. In most cases, at weddings, name-givings and childrens' festivals, they are pulled away by their laughing friends. In some contexts e.g. when trance is tolerated and stimulated by drugs at circumcision festivals, it is called 'madness' and becomes the object of rude jokes. But in controlled circumstances, for example when a healer is present at a festival organized by her spirit possession cult, the loss of 'normal' consciousness is culturally interpreted as spirit possession and is used to therapeutically cede control to another identity, to theatrically draw out the spirit that has previously caused the illness in a kind of psychic drama.

This range of trance-like experiences, from

the most profane entertainment to therapeutic and religious ecstasy, offer rare opportunities for female catharsis in a generally Islamic and male dominated society. The drummers specifically underline those traits which do not conform with 'normal' patterns of urban public behaviour. They work themselves to the edge of their physical endurance to serve the dynamics of the festival. Their performance is often marked by great athleticism rather than economy of movement. Those drummers who push themselves to the limits—performing dances with their drums and continually communicating with the solo dancers—most frequently attract bookings for future engagements. Drummers even reverse gender roles in different situations: to perform dressed up with a single headscarf is a rather unobtrusive example, but young drummers who have more scarves thrown to them while dancing regularly spice up the wild and joyful atmosphere. They wind the scarves around their hips and often imitate women's characteristic movements.

In this respect, the drummers do not only function as hired musicians but serve as catalysts meeting the requirements of a female festival culture. Their decidedly low status—a drummer may still face quite some difficulties in finding a girl to marry—is a consequence of this.

Outwardly the festival is marked by singers and drummers successively assuming predominance both in terms of the musical structures and the interaction with the participants. But a casual

onlooker would never realise that the singers and drummers are independently hired ensembles from different historical and social backgrounds with varying musical traditions: their performances are closely coordinated and progress simultaneously throughout, supporting the whole event even while the other ensembles are performing.

An accomplished *jembe* soloist punctually embellishes the song phase by introducing ornamental phrases just as an experienced singer is able to cheer on the drummers enthusiastically with rhythmic shouts. Sometimes even non-engaged performers attract attention e.g. fools, jugglers, acrobats and karate fighters. Every serious Bamako drummer has to know how to fit this wide range of expressive forms into the overall festival performance. An ensemble should be able to exchange passing colleagues in the way that an ice hockey team does. This means that Bamako drummers do not only share as a common repertoire a pool of patterns and rhythmic modes—they also share a set of ways in which they can apply their rhythms to the different needs of other performing groups: techniques with which to begin, to accompany, to support, to lead, to incite, to respond, to take off, to cut off and to end.

Parallelism of performance during the festivals may develop into two or more markedly different lines of action taking place at the same time. Sometimes it is not clear whether a period of solo dances has already ceased: the singers will give a sign to the drummers to start a new

song while a late solo dancer continues the previous sequence by heading in from another direction. At this point the drum ensemble may split its attention, because they have to meet every demand. The two sequences do not exclude each other but simply proceed in a parallel manner.

Splitting of the action also occurs frequently when a part of the ensemble moves to honour a certain guest situated in the circle of participants or even in the house itself. *Jembe* players quite often leave the general formation in order to perform solos in front of a dignitary from whom they expect to receive money as a tribute. They might continue to do so even if coordination with the rest of the ensemble becomes impossible.

These incidents could superficially be interpreted as structural failings or at least as gaps in communication. Yet even when two weddings are taking place in the same street, say 20 meter apart, parallelism does not lead to chaos, but is a rather joyful game of dissolution and reconstitution, a way of aesthetically playing with the ambiguity of relationships.

The most exciting example of the splitting up and reconstitution of the linear festival performance is perhaps the moment when late in the afternoon a large number of guests from the bridegroom's wedding party arrive at the house of the bridegroom in order to join in the ongoing celebration there. One has to imagine a line of 20, 50 or 150 dancers, singers and drummers

marching into the festival, bringing with them their own song, rhythm and dance. After a period of parallel performance par excellence, two festivals mingling (complete chaos if you want to maintain a narrow-minded view of things), they will discover each other's tempo and dynamics, fusing them into one song, dance and rhythm, reorganizing as one circle and line of action. This process creates the highest tension and acts as the climax to the whole festival.

The recordings

I. Songs and drum ensemble rhythms of the Bamana

The Bamana are the largest ethnic group in Mali. Their empire of Segu had been controlling large parts of modern Mali for more than 200 years when the French colonial army took over in the 1880s. Their language is employed as lingua franca throughout the country and beyond. The first part of the CD is made up of songs (*donkili*, lit. call to dance) and drum ensemble rhythms (*fôli*, a term that refers both to speaking words and to playing drums or other instruments) of the Bamana. The recorded repertoire forms part of the shared inter-ethnic and cross-cultural musical tradition of Bamako. It is mainly performed at wedding (*kônyô*) and circumcision (*fura-si*) festivals.

[1] *Rhythm*: Bamanafôli (drumming of the Bamana).

Song: JÏRÏ BÈ NE NA (I am feeling uneasy).

The rhythms of #2 and #7 are also given the non-specific name Bamanafôli by the drummers in the urban context, even though they consist of different patterns.

[2] *Rhythm*: Bamanafôli.

Song: TULONKÈ (playing games).

[3] *Rhythm and song*: SUNUN.

Sunun originates from the region in the far north of Mali which borders Mauretania. The Kagôôrô, descendants of the Bamana, founded the empire of Kaarta there in the 18th century.

[4] *Rhythm*: Didadi.

Song: DIBIDOYE.

[5] *Rhythm*: Didadi.

Song: DIDADI.

Didadi comes from the Wasulun region south-east of Bamako.

Songs performed to this rhythm like "Dibidoye" and "Didadi" became quite popular in Mali recently.

[6] *Rhythm*: Kirin, also from the Wasulun region.

Song: N'Ï DEN T'Ï BOLO (if you don't have children).

[7] *Rhythm*: Bamanafôli.

Song: a. FASA (praise song);

b. NSONSANIN (small hare).

Sita Ye Jabate (lead vocals) is a Bamana woman born around 1939. She comes from the Beledugu, a region in central Mali, north of the

capital. Her patronymic Ye Jabate indicates that she was born a *griotte* (*jeli*), that is an endogamous social and professional group of traditional bards and musicians. Fatumata Kulibali and Na Kulibali, urban Bamana women, join her during the chorus. All three of them simultaneously sing and play *ngusun*, a rattle-like instrument made from a calabash filled with fruit seeds. Sita Diabate's son-in-law is called Jaraba Jakite and plays solo *jembe*. He was born around 1956 in the Manden region south of Bamako, where the Maninka live. This ethnic group has a history, culture and language which is closely related to that of the Bamana. They once formed the great medieval empire of Mali (13th to 17th century), stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the river Niger and from the Sahara Desert to the forested mountains of Guinea. Jaraba Jakite is greatly in demand as a festival drummer throughout the city. He is at home with the rhythms of many of the peoples of Mali, as every successful drummer in the urban melting pot of Bamako has to be. His group consists of Madu Jakite (accompanying *jembe*), Solo Samake (first *dunun*) and Fasiriman Keita (second *dunun*).

Although acting as artistically and economically independent performers within the metropolitan festival musicians' scene, the recorded party (playing #1 through #7) regularly performs as an ensemble.

II. Music performed at initiation festivals of spirit possession cults

[8] NUMU

[9] JABA

[10] KABA

[11] SAJÏ

[12] TAMA

Each song is dedicated to a certain spirit. They are given titles in accordance with the name of the spirit that is addressed. The drums call them to enter the scene and possess the dancers. All of the rhythms are referred to as examples of *jina fôli* or spirit drumming.

Most Malian people believe that spirits (*jina*) are capable of causing what we in the West would term both mental and physical illnesses. There are dozens of different spirits. Together they form a pantheon representing the whole of society. Once your illness is diagnosed as possession by a certain spirit, you are treated with herbs and by 'magical' and 'psychological' practices. After that, you normally end up being initiated into the healer's cult. The cult regularly organizes festivals where the initiates are given the opportunity to dance continuously until they fall into a state of complete ecstasy. This way a woman's spirit is repeatedly allowed to possess her for a limited and controlled period of time in order to permanently and peacefully settle her formerly troublesome relationship.

The members of the ensemble, playing #8 through #12, have jointly been performing music for *jina don* (spirit dances) in Bamako for

almost half a century.

Hawa Damba (lead vocals) is an elderly lady who was born around 1915. Her family originates from north-western Mali where once the centre of the legendary state of Ghana (8th to 11th century) was situated. She is one of the most proficient *jina jeli* (spirit griottes) of Bamako. She knows two songs dedicated to every spirit of importance that is known. Her daughter Umu sings the chorus and plays the water drum (*ji dumun*). This is a large calabash bowl which swims upside down in a tub of water. This resonating system amplifies the sound made by the two sticks which are used to strike the calabash.

Yamadu Bani Dumbia (solo *jembe*) was born around 1917 in the region of Khasso in western Mali. In his adolescent days he suffered from a bout of mental illness. He was successfully treated by a spirit healer and was subsequently initiated into his cult. According to the spirit's wish he became a drummer. As a young man he was violently forced to join the French colonial army and fought against the Germans and their allies in the Mediterranean region. After the end of the Second World War the uprooted retournée Dumbia went to Bamako where the festival culture was booming. He was one of the first drummers there to use his talents to become a full-time professional. During the 1960s a second festival boom followed African Independence and Dumbia was famous for being the greatest *jembe* patron in town. More than a dozen accomplished master drummers were



Jembe soloist Jeli Madi Kuyate and his apprentice, the ethnomusicologist, speed up for a solo dancer at a wedding, Bamako, 1991.

working for him. Even now, despite his age, he is able to make the spirits rise within seconds with the 'speech' of his drum.

Ndulay Ja, another elderly man, man originally from Khayes near the Senegalese border, plays an hourglass drum called *tama*. He supports it under his left arm and beats one end with both his left hand and a curved stick held in his right hand. His left arm presses the strings that connect the skin that is struck with the resonating skin on the other side of this drum. In this way he is able to produce exact sounds of different pitches as well as gliding effects. Jaraba Jakite (second *jembe*) and Madu Jakite (*dumun*) provide steady accompaniment.

III. Festival music which has been transformed into other genres

[13] MÒGÒ KÒNYA

In this recording the drum ensemble alternately accompanies a narrative griot style vocal part and heats up the dance rhythm. The song praises the ethnomusicologist for supporting the musicians and talks of *mògò kònya* (people's jealousy).

[14] MENDIANI

A purely percussive instrumental piece. Once freed of any fixed functions, the drummers love to unfold rhythmic complexity and to improvise showing off their sophisticated and expressive qualities. The rhythm is called *mendiani*. It has been one of the favourite modes in ballet drumming in the 1960s and 1970s.

Performers on #13 and #14: Jeli Madi Kuyate (solo *jembe*), who was born around 1949, is a pupil of Yamadu Dumbia. He is engaged both as a festival drummer and as first *jembe* player at the 'Ballet National du Mali'. Junior artist Vieux Kamara sings and beats the first *dumun*; Madu Jakite plays *jembe* and Fasiriman Keita accompanies on second *dumun*.

Rainer Polak

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Is recording festival music a paradoxical concept?

It is very difficult to obtain well-balanced recordings of the manifold acoustic qualities present during an ongoing festival. This CD tries to portray festival music by exclusively featuring its two most important elements. Without an actual festive occasion, process or ambient atmosphere, drummers and singers alone were invited to perform for the microphone inside a school yard. Still, without any rehearsals they instantly produced excerpts of what would be the dynamic cycle of a piece in the festival context. Invariably the lead singer opens and the drummers immediately have to identify the song and fall in with the corresponding accompanying patterns. When the singer feels that she has finished her text, or when the master drummer presses because he feels that there has been enough singing for the time being, the latter will assume the leading role and heat up the rhythm as if a solo dancer were there. A drumming phrase cutting off the absent dancer (the first one in tracks 1 through 7, a subsequent one in tracks 8 through 14) is more or less unanimously taken as the end signal of the piece. Accepting the lack of context for both performers and listeners, this is the musicians' idea of how to represent festival music.

- [1] JÒRÒ BÈ NE NA 709
 [2] TULONKÈ 440
 [3] SUNUN 446
 [4] DIBIDOYE 534
 [5] DIDADI 332
 [6] N'I DEN T'I BOLO 401
 [7] FASA / NSONSANIN 705
 [8] NUMU 315
 [9] JABA 532
 [10] KABA 738
 [11] SAJÒ 226
 [12] TAMA 423
 [13] MÒGÒ KÒNYA 655
 [14] MENDIANI 355

total time 71'29

PAN 2060CD

Dònkili | Call to dance

Festival music from Mali

Tracks 1-7:

Sita Ye Jabate—lead vocals, *ngusun*; Fatumata Kulibali—chorus vocals, *ngusun*; Na Kulibali—chorus vocals, *ngusun*;
 Jaraba Jakite—*jembe* solo; Madu Jakite—*jembe*;
 Solo Samake—*dunun*; Fasiriman Keita—*dunun*

Tracks 8-12:

Hawa Damba—lead vocals; Umu Damba—vocals, *ji dunun*;
 Yamadu Bani Dumbia—*jembe* solo; Ndulay Ja—*tama*;
 Jaraba Jakite—*jembe*; Madu Jakite—*dunun*

Tracks 13-14:

Jeli Madi Kuyate—*jembe* solo; Vieux Kamara—*dunun*, vocals;
 Madu Jakite—*jembe*; Fasiriman Keita—*dunun*

Recorded by Rainer Polak, October 1995, in Bamako, Mali, on an AIWA HD-S100 stereo digital recorder with a SONY stereo electret condenser microphone ECM-99

Liner notes and photography—Rainer Polak

Editing—Chris Johnston

All tracks—traditional repertoire

Digital mastering—Cyriel van Kappel, Masters of Media

Design—Piet Schreuders

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