1-1-2013

The jembe in Mali: Bassidi Kone and Maraka

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By Robert J. Damm

When I studied music and culture of Mali in fall 2011, Bassidi Kone was my teacher for jembe and bala (xylophone) lessons [see Figure 1]. Kone has performed with many important artists in Mali, including Mah Kouyate, Mangaga Kamara, Nayini Diabate, Nafi Diabate, Madiare Drame, Abdoulaye Diabate, TaTa Bambo, Kandia Kouate, and Che Che Drame. Kone leads Groupe Bwazan, one of the most popular ensembles in Mali. Kone is certainly a rising star of jembe in Mali, recognized for his technical virtuosity.

I interviewed Kone concerning his musical background and his knowledge of the jembe. Sekou Camara served as translator and informant. Camara, who died in October 2012, was a tour guide, musician, composer, researcher, translator, language and music teacher, healer, and fortune teller from the Malinke ethnic group. He graduated from the teacher training institute in Bamako and earned a master's degree in English. [See Figure 2.]

Kone is a member of the Buwa ethnic group, also known as Bobo, the name given to them by the French. The Bobo people in the traditional village setting are not talkative. They are secretive, in fact. It's cultural; a favorite proverb, "Kuma be mogo dun," which means "Speech eats [a] person," is an admonition to avoid talking too much. Although it is his nature to say very little, Kone was willing to share valuable information about himself, his music, and his knowledge of jembe history and performance practices. This cultural information will be appreciated by jembe players outside of Africa who want to know more about the instrument from a Malian perspective. Also included here is information about *maraka*, a very important jembe rhythm in Mali, and a transcription of *maraka* patterns as taught to me by Kone.

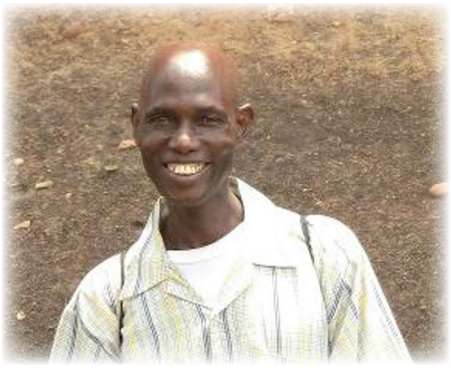


Figure 2: Sekou Camara

Bassidi Kone was born in 1985 in Bamako, Mali. At the age of ten he started performing with his father, who was a bala player. Each year Kone visits his ancestral home of Moniso in the Segou Region and plays bala. This village of a little more than one thousand people includes many farmers and women known for making shea butter. There are occasions in the Bobo village for which music is very important. When a political delegation visits, the musicians welcome them. When a patriarch in the village dies, musicians perform for the funeral ceremony. Musicians perform for festivals, and when invited, play in other villages. The most important musical instruments in the Bobo village are the tamani (talking drum), bara, and bala. Other

Figure 1: Bassidi Kone

Figure 3: Bara

instruments of interest are bugles made out of horns of wild animals played in ensemble with special drums called tondunnu, the oro (a string instrument; a kind of ngoni), and flute.

The first instrument Kone played was the bara drums made from calabash that are dried, opened, and cleared, then fitted with a goatskin head [see Figure 3]. Bara are generally played in pairs by two drummers; the baraba (literally "mother," the bigger drum) and the baraden (literally "child," the smaller drum). Kone found the instrument in the house and started playing it. He would listen to other players and imitate them. His first teacher was Koninba Bagayogo, who led a group made up of apprentices. Kone began playing jembe in 1998. Koninba Babayogo saw him playing bara and Koninba said, "You can become a good jembe player. Please play jembe." Koninba was his first and only jembe teacher.

In 2001, Bassidi started performing with jembe player Boubakoar Dembele, playing dundun, jembe, and bala in Bamako for marriage and baby-naming ceremonies. The group also included guitar, jeli ngoni, and drumset. In 2007, Kone created the ensemble called Groupe Bwazan, which means "Bobo Children." Many of Kone's brothers and cousins are musicians, so he formed this family ensemble of ten young artists who dance, sing, and play bala and drums (jembe, dundun, and tamani). The group primarily performs traditional bala melodies. It was Kone's innovation to add jembe to the Bobo ensemble. He explains that Groupe Bwazan interprets Bobo bara rhythms on the jembe as a way to keep the rhythms alive.

Damm: *What do you know about the origin of the jembe?*

Kone: Mali. From the south it was introduced to the center; from the center it was introduced to the north. It is played in every corner of Mali by almost all ethnic groups today. I was told by my teacher that the jembe first came from the Malinke people. The first name for jembe was *deme*, not jembe. It's a Malinke word that means "help."

Figure 4. Mortar and pestle

Camara: The first jembe was an old mortar [see Figure 4]. The guy was intelligent enough to see an old mortar, which had already a hole in the bottom, and he said, "What if I skin [put a head on] this mortar? Would it sound better than a tondunnu or bara?" He had this idea and was clever. He skinned it. When he started beating it, it was sounding better than tondunnu or bara. He said, "Well, I found something!" Different types of mortars and jembes with corresponding shapes have the same names, like *sullen* and *baran*.

Camara explained the meaning of the word *jembe*. *Je* means "gathering" and *be* means "is," therefore *jembe* means "there is a gathering," suggesting that when you play the drum, people come together. In the Malinke cultural context, *je* can also mean "understanding" or "peace." Therefore, *jembe* can mean "Let's come together and talk in order to understand each other," "Let's come together in peace," or "It's time for peace and for people to come together and listen."

Damm: *What rhythms do you play at weddings and other performances?*

Kone: I play different rhythms during different ceremonies. I play for weddings most often. I play *mandiyanin*, *soli*, and *tisamba*. I play popular dances such as *maraka*, *dansa*, *madan*, *sunu*, and many Wasulunka rhythms, too. I also play for dances such as *maribiyasa* and *bolokofoli*. For *bolokofoli*, they spend all night dancing.

Damm: *What is your favorite music to play on jembe?*

Kone: I like *soli*. *Soli* is played for circumcision and excision ceremonies. I like the songs. I learned it four years ago [2007]. I heard it from other players and on cassettes and CDs, then I started playing it. Most of the time, I'm invited to play for these ceremonies in villages; rarely in Bamako.

Camara: *Soli* is also called *bolo koli. Bolo* means "hands" and *ko* means "to wash." This designation corresponds to the belief that if you're not circumcised/excised, you are not clean. Traditionally, the excision/circumcision was an initiation to adult life.

Damm: *What are the qualities of a good jembe performance?*

Kone: A jembe player can be a virtuoso, an excellent one, but still your music will not be much appreciated by the audience if you don't have a good dancer with you. Good dancers are just like the yeast in the bread to make you a good performer. Also it depends on the audience. If the audience appreciates the music, you are an excellent player. If they are not dancing, not moving, it means you have to do more.

Damm: *What are the qualities of a good jembe performer?*

Kone: You know, to be an excellent performer there are some parameters to take into account. You must not have a gloomy face. First of all you must be smiling and show the audience that you love what you are doing. The second side of a good player is in his hands—the type of sounds he produces on the drum. If these sounds make people feel happy and excited, you are an excellent player. You, the player, will see that the audience likes what you are doing. You will feel it in the way they move, and dance, and smile, and laugh. You will see them very joyful.

Damm: *Who are your favorite jembe player*s?

Kone: Adamanin Diarra. He plays with correct technique. He knows all the rhythms of Mali and plays all of them correctly.

Damm: *Who are the best jembe players in Mali?*

Kone: There are many, including Francois Dembele, Mousa Traore, and Ibrahim Masa.

Damm: *In the world?*

Kone: I really love Mamady Keita from Guniea. Mamady was the person who gave the world jembe playing.

Damm: *How important is jembe in your life?*

Kone: To me, the jembe is very useful. All of my lifetime is dedicated to jembe. It's part of my life; this is how I make my bread.

Camara: There is a correlation between the musician and his instrument. You are your instrument and your instrument is you. You live in your jembe and your jembe lives in you. Some jembe players refer to their jembe as their first wife. A jembe player's first drum is considered special, and drummers always keep it because it is empowered with magic and his teacher's blessing. Jembe players see their teacher in their instrument. The drum is believed to be an incarnation of their teacher's soul. They may pray to the drum saying, "May the soul of my master help me."

Damm: *How important is jembe in Mali?*

Kone: Jembe is played for entertainment and it's also played to make money.

Damm: *To what extent do you make and or assemble jembes?*

Kone: I can assemble 20 jembes in a day; sometimes I do. I'm not a carver, but I put the skin on.

Damm: *What is the difference between a*

Figure 5: Tuning drums with fire

commercial jembe (one made as a souvenir for tourists) and a professional jembe (one made to be played by serious musicians)?

Kone: The way you make a professional jembe is better because you yourself play and it's much, much better made than a commercial jembe. The quality of the wood [is better], the way you skin the drum [is better], and the quality of the rope you use [is better].

Damm: *Is the tuning of the jembe important to the music you play?*

Kone: The tuning is a key element in jembe playing. Every drum player tunes his jembe according to his own taste. Some people like a high pitch, some people like a middle pitch, and some people like a low pitch. I like a high pitch.

Damm: *Has the tuning of the jembe changed over the years?*

Kone: Well, after a long time of playing the jembe, it can be out of tune or if it's too wet, it can be out of tune. In the past, after a few seconds, you had to bring fire. [Historically, the jembe head would be tightened by heating it up over a small fire. The author saw this method still in use by a group of drummers performing one morning for a festival; see Figure 5.] Now they use modern ways; they use a pestle or hammer to beat slightly on the lining iron ring of the jembe head or they pull the rope and you can play it for days, or weeks, or months and it stays in tune.

Damm: *What are the traditional beliefs about the power of the jembe?*

Kone: There is a special way of making jembes, carving the wood, if you want your jembe to have special powers. It should be carved by a special person—a blacksmith who knows all the rules of carving. It should be made from the wood of a special tree [lenke, jala, and ntomi are believed to be inhabited by spirits] and made on a special day. When the carver is making the drum he should not be speaking to anyone. He should be clean spiritually and bodily; cleanliness is very important in making a special jembe. To cut down the tree to make the drum, the blacksmith has to do a special ceremony. The person who has requested the special drum will give the blacksmith a chicken and some millet paste for use in a sacrifice ritual.

I have a small, small drum at home that my teacher gave to me. This is really a bewitched jembe—a small one that has special powers. It was activated with some powers by my teacher. I know that the jembe is activated by my teacher and given to me—passed down to me. Now it has no skin on it; the day I skin it means I'm traveling abroad and there is a huge competition organized. When you want to skin it, normally you should skin it away from people. When I skin mine, I close the door and skin it. I don't come out until I'm finished skinning it. I don't want some dirty person to come and touch the jembe while I'm making it. I do it at my father's house and I close the door. So I play it abroad during great competitions and it made me famous in many aspects.

Camara: The time he's playing his jembe, nothing bad can happen to him. Even if somebody tries to cast a bad spell on him, it will have no effect on him. He will be protected. The jembe is a protection device for him. There is a permanent and intense rivalry among musicians including jembe players in Mali. Some jembe players will cast bad spells known as *karote* on their rivals. Madou Farabansyla, jembe player with the Troupe National Du Mali, was known for doing this.

Damm: *What have you learned about jembe playing from your travels outside of Mali?*

Kone: I frequently go to Burkina Faso to play concerts. I learned many notes in Burkina on jembe and on bala. I went to Guinea. I know a lot about Guinean music because I listen a lot to recordings of Guinean folk music such as *dundunba* and *soko*. I also traveled to Ivory Coast to perform. Anywhere I go I adopt something. I learned a traditional rhythm called *guegue* in Ivory Coast. I have a cousin there who plays jembe.

Damm: *What is the* maraka*?*

Kone: *Maraka* and *sunu* came from the same ethnic group.

Camara: Maraka is an ethnic group found in the Kaye Region. This western part of Mali is dry—almost desert. Maraka is the Bamana word for these people; they are also known as Soninke. The Maraka are travelers, traders, and merchants. The dance known as *maraka* is for marriages, feast days such as *Tobaski*, to welcome and honor visitors, and for naming ceremonies.

Kone: You cannot play jembe without learning *maraka*. It is a very popular music. From the time your teacher wants you learn to play jembe, he will teach you these rhythms.

Damm: *Where did it originate?*

Kone: The *maraka* will be found in Kaye in Southern Mali, also a little bit in Maritania, and a little bit in Senegal. You know the junction between the three countries. You look at a map of Africa and this is where you will find it.

Damm: *When I started studying jembe with you, you showed me patterns. I asked for clarification of the tones through vocalization of the rhythm and tones (e.g., tun-pe-ti-pa). You responded with ease to vocalize the bass, tone, and slap patterns. Where and when did you learn these vocalizations?*

Kone: This is my own innovation. This is very common with somebody who started playing bala and switched to jembe. This is how bala players teach.

Camara: Bala has five tones [pentatonic] and jembe has only three [slap, tone, bass]. Students who have first learned bala and switch to jembe learn faster and can also play faster. Jembe players who first played bala can also find many more intermediary tones between slap, tone, and bass because of the bala influence. Lamine Somake is another bala player who became an excellent jembe player.

Damm: *Why did you begin my jembe instruction by teaching me* maraka*?*

Kone: I myself started with *maraka*. That's why I teach people starting with *maraka*. I learned these *maraka* patterns from my teacher. There are two accompaniments [pattern 4 and pattern 5] and the other eight are solo.

Damm: *If there were one pattern to be played by the accompanying jembe drummer for* maraka *what would the pattern be?*

Kone: Pattern 4.

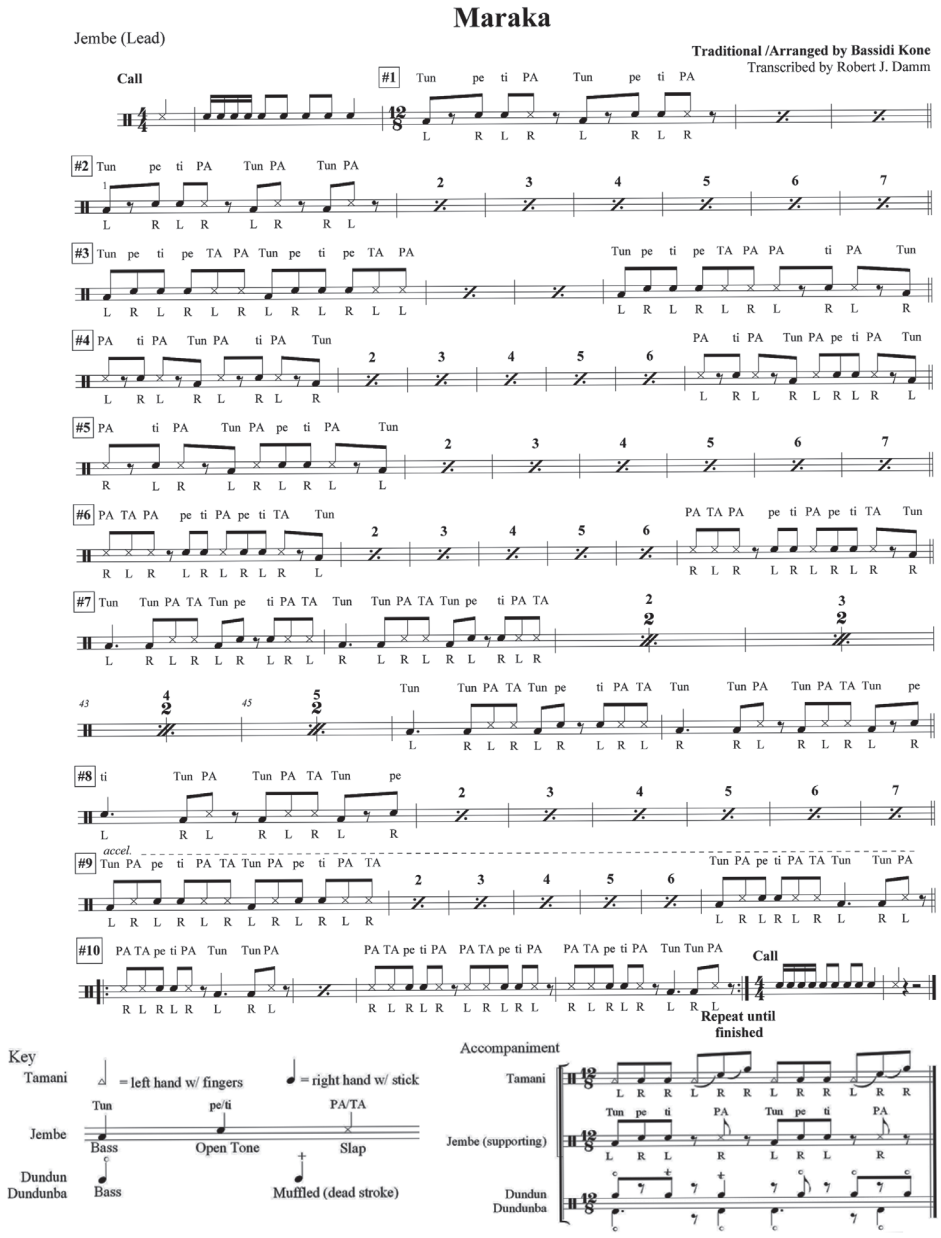
Damm: *What is your term for "lead phrase"?*

Kone: Lead is *jembe ba* [meaning jembe mother]; accompaniment is *jembe den* [meaning jembe child].

Damm: *Are there standard lead phrase patterns for* maraka*, or does every jembe player have his own unique rhythms?*

MARAKA

The following transcription is an etude for learning *maraka* accompaniment and lead patterns. It is highly recommended that the jembe be accompanied by the dundun/dundunba, and that the jembe player listen carefully to ensure that the solo part is locking in with the accompaniment. A supporting jembe accompaniment may be added. and the tamani part is optional.



Kone: Accompaniment is the same. As to solo, it depends on the player.

Camara: It's just like a stamp in Mali. Every jembe player has his own stamp. If I hear somebody playing, by his solo, I can tell you who is playing.

Damm: *How did you learn to play lead?*

Kone: The traditional way of learning is to start with accompaniment and lead all together. Some days you play accompaniment, other days you play lead.

Damm: *So did you imitate your teacher's lead as a way to learn how to be a lead player?*

Kone: I copied my master's solo first and then added more.

Camara: All players are innovative in Mali because playing solo means "I want to distinguish myself." It's a kind of competition. Who will play better? You cannot be popular if you're a photocopy of somebody else.

Figure 6: Tamani

Damm: *What is the ideal instrumentation for* maraka *at a wedding in Bamako?*

Kone: Two dunduns and two jembes. Three of them play accompaniment and one person will play the solo. The dundun maintains the same rhythm for the whole piece.

Damm: *What is the role of the tamani [see Figure 6]?*

Kone: A marriage party in the Maraka ethnic group can be played with only tamani—no other instruments. In the original *maraka* style, no jembe is used at all. Instead, there will be many tamani players, everyone playing a special kind of rhythm. You can have five or six tamani players, and they will divide their rhythms. At a traditional Maraka wedding, people will sing songs in the Maraka language and dance the *maraka* accompanied by rhythms played on tamani.

Robert J. Damm is Professor of Music and Director of Music Education Partnerships at Mississippi State University. He has studied music and dance in Cuba, Ghana, and Mali. His original compositions are published by HoneyRock and HaMaR. He has served as President of the Mississippi PAS Chapter. PN