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Jembe Music

The *jembe* (variants: *jenbe*, *dyembe*, *djembé*) is a goblet-shaped drum originating from Mande-speaking societies of West Africa such as the Malinké (Maninka) and Ouassoulouké (Wasulunka), in northeastern Guinea and southern Mali. *Jembe*-centered percussion ensemble music animates local dance events in these societies. In the 1960s *jembe* music and dance also entered the programs of state-sponsored folkloric ensembles and became a national symbol in both Guinea and Mali. At the same time, *jembe* music and dance became part of the urban popular culture in these countries as well as, in the following decades, in neighboring Senegal, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. Since the 1980s West African *jembe* music and musicians have migrated to Europe, North America and more recently to Japan, Australia, Brazil, South Africa and many other countries. There,

in diverse contexts such as music and dance education, social movement protest culture, interactive drum events (for recreative, health care, team building or human resources development purposes), the drum manufacturing industry's sales strategies and Africa-related tourism, globalized *jembe* music emerged as a popular medium of rhythm and community experience, and a symbol of an imagined Africa, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Musical Structure and Performance Context

Mounted with goatskin (or, increasingly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, calfskin) and played with both bare hands, the *jembe* creates a wealth of distinct sounds producing precise timbral melodies. The instrument mostly appears in ensembles of one or two *jembes* (accompaniment and lead) and one to three cylindrical drums called *dunun* (variants: *doundoun*, *djun-djun*). The latter are beaten with a stick and sometimes come with an iron bell, which is typically attached to the drum and struck with a heavy iron nut or nail, but which can also be fixed to the index and middle fingers of the player's weaker hand and beaten with an iron nut or strong ring slipped on the thumb.

Performed in metric four-beat cycles (or multiples of four) of either binary or ternary subdivision, *jembe* and *dunun* phrases are asymmetrically patterned by both their rhythmic figures and their timbral melodies. Phrases relate to the main beat and to the other ensemble parts in complex ways (offbeat phrasing, cross-rhythm); the ensemble parts produce dense and often intricate polyphonic textures. Repetition and variation are core features of musical form. *Jembe* music thus employs structures that are common in West African percussion ensemble music. A high degree of playful embellishment in the *jembe* lead part, the heavy use of diverse swing feel patterns (asymmetric beat subdivision), shifting between binary and ternary (or ternary and quaternary) beat subdivisions, and the marked acceleration of beat tempo in the course of most pieces are musical characteristics specific to *jembe* music. By contrast, features such as ensemble orientation at *ostinato* timeline patterns and an aesthetic of 'the cool' are less important in *jembe* music than in percussion ensemble music from Ghana, for instance.

Jembe music animates social celebrations of agricultural, religious and life cycle events and aims

to make people dance. The *jembe* lead part's role, in particular, is to focus and work out individual dancers' movements in sound. Through dancing, the participants – beyond entertaining themselves – display their commitment to the gathering's social occasion and also identify with the performed piece. Each piece is associated with various meanings that its performance can embody. In the city, pieces can connote a particularly broad range of attributes: ethnic identities, regional origins, and social, professional and age groups, among others. Some pieces also relate to the individual's role in the social occasion, for instance, the role of the bride's *denbaw* (honorary mothers), those few elder female relatives of the jubilee who organize and finance the event. The *denbaw* present themselves to the public by wearing a special headband, which usually is monogrammed with the owner's name or initials, and by dancing the *denbafoli* (honorary mother's rhythm). *Denbafoli* is the most frequently and extensively played drumming piece at Bamako celebrations (Polak 2012).

Who Plays the *Jembe*?

Because of the lack of documentation, the *jembe*'s precolonial history is obscure. Perhaps it was confined to exclusive institutional or ritual contexts, such as those controlled by the so-called blacksmiths (*numu*), who form a hereditary professional group within Mande societies and are, if loosely, associated with *jembe* playing (Charry 2000, 51f). At least since the early twentieth century, however, access to *jembe* playing is open to all social status groups. Taking up *jembe* playing is a matter of gender – female players represent rare exceptions even in modern, urban spaces – and, for boys, of personal taste and commitment.

Jembe music does not belong to the *griots* (*jeli*), who – as a socio-professional group more prominent in public than the blacksmiths – have practiced professional singing and laid hereditary claims to the playing of instruments such as the *kora* (quasi-bridge harp), the *bala* (calabash-resonated xylophone) and the *ngoni* (plucked lute) in Mande societies for centuries. Until their profession's commercialization in the twentieth century, the *griots*' musical genres, described as a 'court,' 'art' or 'classical' music of the Mande, were distinct from the field of percussion ensemble music performed at popular dance events.

Representing Ethnicity, Staging the Nation, Urbanizing Tradition

Throughout the twentieth century *jembe* music performance proliferated in contexts of state formation and urbanization. Under French colonial rule, administrative units were obligated to represent themselves in folkloric shows at official celebrations on occasions such as the *Fête nationale*. In the 1950s the colonial administration set up a system of competitive cultural festivals across all of French West Africa. The regions with populations identifying mainly as Malinké often presented themselves by performing *jembe* music and dance. A formerly rural tradition became an ethnic symbol in the colonial urban space.

After independence from France, the African leaders of Guinea and Mali put much emphasis on their nations' needs for building an identity. Toward this end, they continued the colonial system of competitive cultural festivals. Also, successful artists were recruited for newly formed premier troupes (*ballet national*) meant to represent national folklore to the international public. In pioneering Guinean artistic director Fodeba Keita's concept of an authentic African culture, connecting to ideas of precolonial history was crucial. Folkloric *jembe* music and dance, along with the *griots'* musical traditions, featured centrally in that staging of an imagined past. The *jembe* became a national symbol of both Guinea and Mali.

In the institutional context of state-sponsored ballets, *jembe* players learned of formalized rehearsals under an artistic director, and of performance marked by rigid role distinction between audience and performer. They creatively condensed a multitude of musical repertoires of diverse origins into prearranged pieces and suites. Moreover, they refined the musical support of choreography by providing cues and calls (termed *blocage* or 'break' in modern *jembe* players' jargon) and employed virtuosic playing and showmanship.

Until the 1950s *jembe* music was only one among many regionally and ethnically distinctive traditional music genres performed in the cities of the Mande world. Following its selection as a national art form in the 1960s, however, *jembe* music became a core part of the urban popular culture in Guinea and Mali as well as in neighboring Senegal, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. In Bamako, for instance, the female

population transcended boundaries of ethnic identity and social class by participating in dancing to *jembe* music for days at the frequent wedding celebrations. Prior to that development, most families would hire ensembles according to their specific ethnic or regional backgrounds, which was less participatory since many attendants such as, for instance, the organizers' neighbors and workmates of different backgrounds did not know exactly how to dance to such music. While the repertoire of *jembe* rhythms broadened and diversified to address the needs of a diversified audience, a supra-ethnic core repertoire of standard pieces, such as *maraka-dôn* (also called *denba-fôli*), *dansa* and *suku* [*soli*]), became particularly popular and representative of the local urban culture. Drumming became a profession. The average size of a typical ensemble increased – from duets of one *jembe* and one *dunun* to quintets of two *jembe* and three *dunun*, and beyond – as did the average tempo and the lead *jembe* player's freedom to expressively embellish and depart from the basic dance-centered phrases and themes.

Jembe Dance Music as Urban Popular Culture

Jembe music is often categorized as traditional (see Charry 2000, 24). People in Mali or Guinea, indeed, would rarely think of *jembe* celebrations as modern affairs. Designated as *fôli*, which denotes percussive dance music performed at social celebrations, *jembe* is distinguished from *musique*, which is a word borrowed from French applied mainly to 'modern' pop music. *Jembefôli*, in contrast to *musique*, is not performed on stage in the concert context (as it is in Western countries), but rather only in the folkloristic context of state-sponsored dance shows meant to represent 'traditional' culture. Radio and TV rarely broadcast *jembe* music, and it is absent from the cassette market, too. In a word, people in West Africa do not listen much to *jembe* music apart from its live performance in the context of social dance events.

Nonetheless, *jembe* dance music is popular music insofar as it belongs to the large and important class of unofficial art forms which are syncretic, concerned with social change and associated with the masses in twentieth-century Africa (see Barber 1987). It forms a vital framework of public interaction and communication, responds to social change, demonstrates frequent musical changes in its structural and stylistic features and is syncretic in

that it draws on diverse cultural sources and creatively merges elements of these into a new artistic form. It is prominent in the cities where it appeals to large parts of the population across social, ethnic, religious and other boundaries (Polak 2012). Individualism, self-employment, competition and market relationships entail artisan-like, work-oriented attitudes to performance and stimulate personal and generation-specific stylistic differentiation and innovation. The audience's demand, through the commercialization of the drummers' work, plays an influential role in the production and style of the music (Polak 2005).

Capturing the North Atlantic

Jembe music made first imprints outside West Africa with the enthusiastically received world tours of the Guinean and Malian national ballets in the 1960s. The Ballets Africains de la République de Guinée's first lead *jembe* player, Ladj Camara, soon broke away from the troupe. Settling in New York City in 1962, his teaching established a small *jembe*-playing community among US African-Americans.

In the mid-1980s two other *jembe* soloists of the Guinean national ballets, Famoudou Konaté and Mamady Keita, began teaching in West Germany and Belgium, respectively. It was the rich experience of staging *jembe* music and dance in the ballets which gave them cues for innovative handling of the contexts of concerts and, above all, formal education. In close collaboration with European percussionists, Konaté and Keita standardized the repertoire of drumming pieces and invented methods of formally teaching *jembe* music. For instance, while simple break phrases served as calls in the ballets and marked the ending of individual dance solos in traditional celebration music, in the teaching context, these breaks were reinterpreted as interfaces between cyclic drumming patterns to work around the difficulty of creating musical form through more flexible changes between phrases and variations.

Konaté and Keita were the cultural brokers of *jembe* music in Europe and thus set in motion the genre's globalization. Other key figures of transcontinental *jembe* music came from the urban tradition of dance music for social celebrations, such as, for instance, Adama Dramé and Soungalo Coulibaly from Bouaké, Ivory Coast.

In the North Atlantic context, *jembe* music has proliferated as a popular medium for approaching

rhythm and community experience, which often is associated with an imagined Africa of rural traditions. The genre's most important representatives have been accredited the status of keepers of tradition. Yet, popularizing *jembe* music, both in West Africa and beyond, has been preconditioned exactly by the transcending of traditional forms, contexts and meanings: from dialogic drum and dance performance to modern stage show and classroom to postmodern socio-therapeutic environment (such as drum circle and team building); from local community to ethnic, national and, finally, Pan-African symbol.

Globalization

In the late twentieth century *jembe* music in West Africa and the North Atlantic expressed mutual influences and structures of dependence. Central to this relationship were the large communities of professional players in metropolises such as Conakry, Bamako, Abidjan and Dakar. These players fused local musical styles and repertoires from half of West Africa into urban ballet and celebration music, on the one hand, and provided a pool of artistic knowledge and skill to the European and North American-based world percussion music scene, on the other. Conversely, the *jembe*'s immense popularity in the North – unheard of for an African musical instrument and related genre before – fed back much vitality in the form of money, status and career opportunities into the urban traditions of *jembe* playing in West Africa.

However, the globalization of *jembe* music as a popular medium of rhythm experience also involves processes of cultural appropriation that emancipate the instrument from its association with Mande musical traditions. Agents as diverse as team builders, school teachers, social activists, hand percussion aficionados, tourist animators and instrument traders from many parts of the world make the *jembe* drum and *jembe* music their own to an increasing extent.

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