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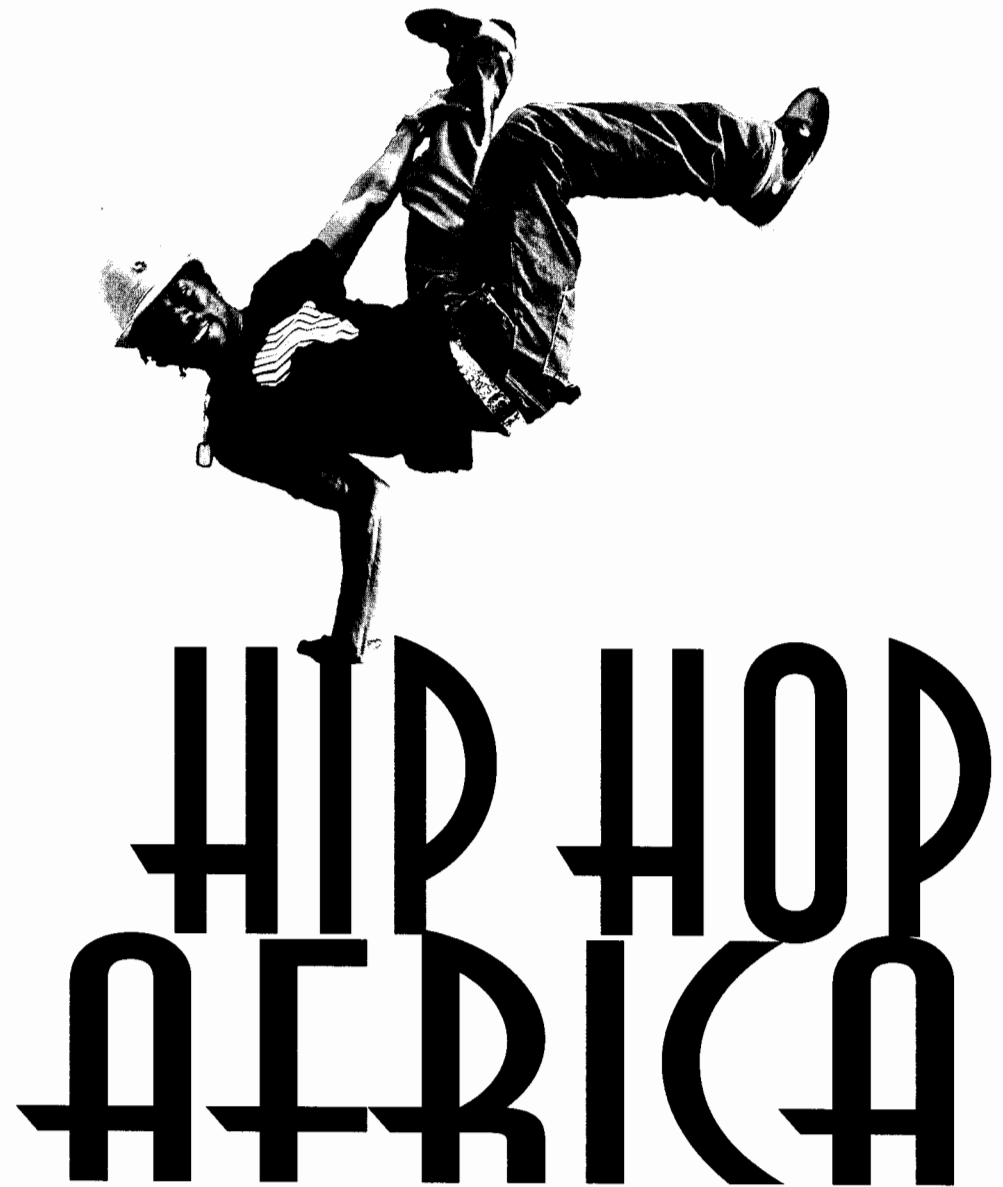
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# HIP HOP AFRICA

New African Music in a Globalizing World

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PART 6.  
**DRUMMING**  
(MALI)



## **Urban Drumming**

### **Traditional Jembe Celebration**

### **Music in a West African City**

### **(Bamako)**

RAINER POLAK

Jembe music today represents a global cultural good. Over the past half a century, thousands of professional players have proved innovative and successful in urban and transnational music markets. Contrary to common categorizations of African drum and dance performance genres as essentially rural and pre-modern ("neo-traditional" at best), jembe music has been urbanized and become part of the urban popular culture in West African cities, such as Bamako, capital of the Republic of Mali. Drummers have contributed substantially to make urban space, social relations and culture what it is in Bamako today.

The jembe drum originates from the Manden [French: *Manding*], a mostly rural region in southwestern Mali and northeastern Guinea (Charry 1996, 2000: 193–241). There, people have traditionally performed jembe music to animate local dance events on social, agricultural, and religious occasions. Since the early 1960s, the drum has entered the programs of state-sponsored folkloric ensembles in Guinea and Mali. It has also been part of the popular celebration culture in the greater region's cities. The metropolitan centers of present-day jembe playing, Abidjan, Dakar, Conakry, Bobo Dioulasso, and Bamako, all are outside the instrument's older core area of distribution (with Bamako just at the border; see map 12.1).

The jembe has been culturally appropriated in Europe and North America since the 1980s (Zanetti 1996). More recently, Japan, Australia, Brazil, South Africa, and many other countries have followed this trend. The new contexts of jembe music outside West Africa include stage shows, music education (both for children and adults), and use as a vehicle for social cohesion, such as drum circles, workshops

for at-risk youth, and corporate team building. The urbanization, nationalization, and globalization of jembe music have been mutually conditioning and reinforcing one another (Polak 2000). Channels of feedback between local and global contexts include emigration of jembe players and export of instruments from West Africa, cultural tourism to West Africa, and the mass-mediatization of jembe music in CDs, DVDs, teaching handbooks, and online resources.

This chapter offers a case study of musical urbanization examining the repertory of jembe pieces commonly performed in Bamako. In this city, jembe drumming has been the most popular style of celebration music since the 1960s. Male players have professionalized and commodified formerly communal musical work and today form a large occupational group. This chapter interprets the history, structure, and popularity of their repertory in the context of the urban audience.

I draw on about eighteen months of field research in Mali, which I carried out in several stages throughout the 1990s. The ethnographic present tense throughout this chapter refers to that decade. The focus was on a group of twenty-five professional musicians based in Badialan, a residential area west of Bamako's city center. For a comparative perspective on urban drumming, I also paid visits to villages and small towns in the rural regions to Bamako's south (Manden) and north (Bèlè-dugu). I collected data with a broad range of methods:

- participant observation and experience as a part-time professional drummer, performing about 120 life cycle celebrations in Bamako;
- biographical interviews with a dozen urban drummers of all generations;
- analysis of audio and video field recordings; and
- a statistical survey of the more than 400 performances carried out by the focus group of twenty-five professionals during a twelve-month period in 1997–98.

### The Urban Population

Bamako was founded in the seventeenth century and had fewer than 1,000 inhabitants when the French seized power in 1883. Typical for a (post)colonial metropolis, it was growing fast in the twentieth century. Much of the growth resulted from immigration. Bamako had 1 million inhabitants in the late 1990s and 1.8 million in 2009.<sup>1</sup> The Malian capital thus ranks among the fastest growing cities in the world today. Bamako has always been marked by its population's heterogeneity in regional origins, ethnic identities, and professional specializations. This qualifies it as a city according to views from urban sociology, anthropology, and history.<sup>2</sup>

In precolonial times, areas of the town were associated with ethnic, social, or professional identities. Bamako's founding Niare lineage was of Soninke origin, eventually assimilating to Bamana [French: Bambara] language and culture and

giving its name to the city's Niarela quarter. Other neighborhoods were named for traders of sahelian origin (Dravela, Tauatila) and Bozo river fishing people (Bozola). During early colonial rule, Bamana and Maninka [French: Malinké] peasants from surrounding areas and colonial soldiers, railway workers, and civil servants from various regions of French West Africa came to live in Bamako. The population's majority identified as Bamana, the group that used to occupy most of the capital's territory and immediate surroundings. After World War II, however, the urban population's ethnic composition began to reflect that of the colonial and then national territory.<sup>3</sup> Ethnic identities were still ascribed to residential districts built around the colonial center in the 1920s. However, new districts no longer bore ethnically specific names or showed ethnic biases from the 1950s onwards. Today, neighborhoods rarely reproduce ethnic, social, and professional differences (Westen 1995: 63–84). Most of the population lives in highly diversified *quartiers populaires*. Interethnic marriage is frequent (Antoine and Djiré 1998: 125).

### Urban Celebration Culture

Life cycle transition rites emerged as the major social occasions of jembe drum and dance celebrations in Bamako since 1945. About 90 percent of jembe celebration performances were held in the context of weddings, according to our survey of 1997–98. Weddings in the city serve to set up and reinforce social relations (Brand 2001: 67). The public exchange of gifts, consumption of food and drinks, the performance of song and praise (the griot's domain), and jembe drum and dance performances provide modes of interaction that create and display social capital. Women in Bamako think of their participation in celebrations as a duty that also serves their own interests in sociability, recreation, and gaining social and economic security through reciprocal relationships.

Life cycle celebrations usually take place in the streets of residential areas, just in front of the compound where the organizing family lives. Broad rectangular streets became characteristic of the colonially planned residential areas in Bamako from the 1920s onwards. The authorities designed the streets to ease traffic and control public space. The residents, however, found the streets ideal for drum and dance events. With jembe celebration culture, the female population temporarily takes over a part of the urban public space (see fig. 12.1). Traffic has to take a detour.

The festive gatherings of some one, two, or three hundred people are open to the public. Yet a cultural constraint keeps males from taking part in roles other than professional performer. These urban celebrations frame a largely female domain.

The participants come together through various channels of the organizing family's networks. Most of the guests are female relatives. Others come as neighbors, common club members, occupational colleagues, and friends. The music, dancing, and colorful and joyful crowd also attract party crashers: mostly kids

from the neighborhood. Each celebration forms a singular gathering of a complex network of people of heterogeneous ethnic and social backgrounds.

Within a circle formed by the participants, drummers and female singers make a front side. Members of the circle take turns dancing in the central ground. Groups of dancers sedately circle the ground in a single file (fig. 12.2). Periods of group dance continually alternate with swift successions of short (10–30 sec), energetic face-to-face encounters, individually or in pairs, with the lead drummer (fig. 12.3).

Drummers, singers, and dancers do not perform as fixed ensembles, but find one another spontaneously. The drum ensemble and most singers come as hired professional specialists with commercial interests. By contrast, everybody is welcome to take on the role of dancer: organizers, invitees, occupational specialists (fig. 12.4), and incidental attendees. Jembe drum and dance performance is participatory; it aims at involving people in expressive social interaction (Polak 2007; see also Knight 1984). Taking turns at dancing has at least two functions. First, it shows the participant's personal involvement in the public celebration, thus socially realizing and supporting its underlying ritual occasion. Second, it presents the dancer's identity to the public.

When people dance, they identify with the performed piece. The repertoire of jembe pieces is a reservoir of musical metaphors (Fernandez 1974; Waterman 1990: 213ff.; Coplan 2008). 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.<sup>4</sup> The *denbaw* present themselves to the public by wearing the *denbajalan* [honorary mother's headband], which usually are monogrammed with the owner's name or initials (see figs. 12.3 and 12.8), and dancing the *denbafôli* [honorary mother's rhythm]. *Denbafôli* is the most often and extensively played drumming piece at Bamako celebrations.

### Musical Repertory and Performance

Performing jembe music is to improvise with widely known musical materials and models. The musicians' working repertory consists of a certain number of recognizable pieces, each identifiable by a set of musical phrases played in specific multipart relationships by the two to six ensemble members.<sup>5</sup> The musical structures of the pieces are open to change. Sometimes several pieces merge into a larger suite. Sometimes, new ones emerge. Conflict occurs between competing individuals, as well as between generations, about how one should play a piece. The degree of awareness of how to play a certain piece is different between apprentices and experienced musicians. Nobody knows all pieces, after all. A young jembe

player once explained to me: "Before you can learn to play all pieces, a new one will appear," thus frustrating wishes for a systematic survey or authoritative control of the repertory. Despite all these disclaimers, the repertory in Bamako forms a body of musical units, which is well known among performers and audiences across the city. These units serve as a cultural resource for making music and dance together without reading or rehearsal. The repertory thus preconditions performance; performance interprets and re-creates the repertory at the same time.<sup>6</sup> Playing jembe music amounts to "performance-composition" or "situational re-composition," as Meki Nzewi (1997) coined the term.

Drumming at a celebration means to reproduce pieces on demand. Jembe drummers think of their music making as work (Polak 2004; see figs. 12.5 and 12.6). Each piece agrees with certain songs and dance patterns that it accompanies, coordinates, and focuses. Drummers intend to make people stand up and dance. They pick pieces with regard to who, among the attendees, might dance. Performing repertory is intentional action, purposely addressing a specific portion of the audience. "Whereas *jelis* [griots] play pieces honoring specific persons, drummers play pieces honoring groups of people" (Charry 2000: 12). Only in the urban context of professional celebration music have drummers adopted the griot's custom of approaching and praising individuals (figs. 12.2 and 12.7).

The job of the drummers in this situation is threefold. First, they create a joyful excited atmosphere and groove: a dense, repetitive, polyphonic texture of melo-rhythmic drumming patterns, which are performed with much swing, drive, and feeling, and synchronized in intricate multi-part relationships. Second, they embody and present a specific piece of the multimodal celebration performance repertoire, such as a certain drum ensemble piece that corresponds to certain dance movements and songs. Each piece usually reminds a portion of the audience of aspects of their backgrounds and identities, which, together with the groove, incites them to dance. The first *dunun* part is of particular importance for identifying and characterizing the piece of repertoire performed. Third, the drummers not only translate into sound and accompany the dancer's movements, they also interact with her. The lead jembe player, in particular, engages in a sort of multimedia dialogue with the dancer.

Views may differ about which piece is to come with which song and dance when, and why, and what it means. The repertory is not a static system of fixed items but a ground for social interaction that is open to change. For instance, songs that were formerly set in the drumming piece called *menjani* in the 1960s and 1970s have been accompanied with *suku*, which is more popular today. Jembe pieces are neither fixed in time nor unambiguous in the present. Their musical structures, cultural meanings, and social significance are continually reenacted and renegotiated in performance. For instance, a certain set of drumming phrases identified as a spirit possession piece (*jinafôli*) in the 1970s was appropriated by professional drummers for a profane children's song and dance (*sumale*); despite the protest of

possession cult leaders, the formerly exclusive piece entered the standard repertoire of mundane wedding celebration music.

The repertoire's metaphoric aspect is central to the popular appeal of drum and dance celebrations. In the following two sections, I interpret two trends of change: ethnic diversification, on the one hand, and integration of a common urban core repertoire, on the other.

### Diversification

Sagele is a large village some 70 km south of Bamako. In and around Sagele, three pieces (*furasifòli*, *kisa/wurukutu*, and *madan*) are played at almost every celebration. Beyond these pieces, the common repertoire has no more than a dozen pieces. One will rarely hear more than five or six of them at a typical village celebration.

The urban repertoire is more diverse.<sup>7</sup> Like in the village, three pieces are performed at almost every celebration (*dansa*, *marakadòn/denbafòli*, and *suku*). However, there are some twenty-five commonly performed pieces (see table 12.1) and an additional twenty-five pieces that are more specialized. At a typical Bamako wedding, one can be sure to hear at least ten to fifteen pieces. These combine more flexibly and change more swiftly than is the case in village celebration music.

Until the 1950s, many families living in Bamako still invited music ensembles from their regions of origin when they had a celebration. The dozen or so professional resident jembe players then had mainly their own regional pieces in their personal repertoires and played primarily for those families who came from the same regions. Celebration culture in the city used to differ according to people's ethnic identities and regional origins. The community of participants and the musical repertoire at each celebration was more homogeneous than today: "In those times, all were on their own. For whatever ethnic group you played, you played their pieces. To play all pieces at a single wedding, this was not done" (Yamadu Bani Dunbia, Bamako, January 8, 1998).

In the 1960s, urban jembe drummers began to adopt and adapt dozens of pieces from diverse regions, ethnic groups, and social contexts in Mali as well as a few from neighboring countries. Many of these pieces had not been jembe pieces originally. For instance, Soninke musicians from northwestern Mali first performed the piece *marakadòn* on hourglass drums (*donka*). In Khaso, a region in west central Mali, they played *dansa*, *garankedòn*, and *sanja* on the griot's cylindrical drums (*jelidunun* or *khasonkadunun*). Thus, of the six most important pieces in today's Bamako repertoire, only two (*suku* and *kirin*) were jembe pieces before they came to the city.

The larger part of today's Bamako jembe repertoire came into being in only one or two decades. The process of regional musical appropriation ended in the 1970s when the more important ethnic, regional, and social status groups each showed up in the urban repertoire with at least one specific piece. The local Bamana group's

Table 12.1. Drumming pieces realized at more than 20 percent of celebrations in Bamako in 1997–98

Piece	Frequency (%)	Piece	Frequency (%)	Piece	Frequency (%)
<i>dansa</i>	97	<i>bònjalan</i>	43	<i>maninkamòri</i>	30
<i>marakadòn</i>	96	<i>didadi</i>	43	<i>menjani</i>	24
<i>suku</i>	94	<i>dununba</i>	42	<i>fulafòli</i>	23
<i>kirin</i>	82	<i>baya yuguba</i>	39	<i>bara</i>	22
<i>garankedòn</i>	62	<i>sunun</i>	39	<i>numufòli</i>	22
<i>sanja</i>	62	<i>tansole</i>	39	<i>sogoninkun</i>	22
<i>sumalen</i>	54	<i>tisanba</i>	39	<i>sungurunbanin</i>	21
<i>madan</i>	50	<i>bolon</i>	38		
<i>tasaba</i>	45	<i>sabarifòli</i>	34		

Source: Author's survey, Bamako 1997–98.

Note: Out of 434 performances surveyed, I here make use of only those statistical data that I could corroborate through personal observation and/or audio recordings (N=120).

pieces, such as *tisanba* and *tansole*, from Bamako and surrounding areas were among the last to be adopted. Longer than other groups, Bamana resisted the rising popularity of urban jembe playing and supported their own celebration music genres and musicians, such as *bònkolo* drummers and *ngusunbala* xylophone players.<sup>8</sup> Yet the jembe became irresistible in the city.

Urban youth culture has been the second most important source of innovation in the Bamako jembe repertoire. Every year or two a new dance is all the rage with children and youth. They demand that the drummers contribute their share. In the 1970s and 1980s, jembe players have translated Afro-American pop music styles, such as funk, disco, reggae, and rap, into drumming pieces. They transposed pieces of the Senegalese sabar drum orchestra, which in Bamako specializes in urban youth entertainment, into their style and repertoire.<sup>9</sup> Since the mid-1990s, they have adopted rhythms from televised pop songs from Kinshasa, Abidjan, Paris, and Bamako. In 1997, for instance, drummers all over the city played *tasaba* and *baya yougouba*, jembe pieces that had originated two or three years earlier from pop songs by Les Youtous and Aisha Koné, respectively, from Abidjan. In the same

year, Bamako singer Yoro "Bruce" Diallo's latest hit, "Muchacha Fernando," was about to be reinterpreted as a jembe piece. It did not work very well and stayed *en vogue* only about half a year or so. Bamako drummers could not agree on how to translate the pop song's beat and feeling. Not every innovation turns out musically satisfying to the audience.

Typically, two or three contemporary creations are among the ten or fifteen most popular jembe pieces at a time. Opposing views exist about their status. Traditionally minded persons—most older drummers, for instance—deny such vogue pieces the cultural and social significance that marks the older repertoire of "real" or "normal" pieces, as they say. However, many of these critics in their younger days have themselves contributed to creating and popularizing vogue pieces. Even today, they would rather not express such views in the face of an audience at a celebration. Their evaluation depends on the situational context and personal interests.

Many vogue pieces more or less rapidly go out of fashion one or two years after their success. Some, however, have made it into the more stable repertoire of standards. These have lost their exclusive association with youth. Adult women, too, dance them today (see figs. 12.8–12.10).

The diversified urban repertoire offered a large part of the female urban population both an opportunity and a reason to take part in a common framework of celebration, cutting across differences of origin, status, and age. In the urban context, many newly adopted pieces took on the character of metaphors of their regional, ethnic, or social contexts of origin. In several cases, pieces took on ethnonyms as complementary or even primary names. For instance, in the Wasulun region, some 150 km south of Bamako, there is a piece named *kirin*, after the instrument (a calabash beaten with sticks) on which they play it. When the piece became popular in Bamako as part of the jembe music repertoire, the urbanites started to call it *wasulunka* [lit. Wasulun-person], as they call the people of this region.<sup>10</sup> Other pieces took on professional status group's names, such as *jelidòn* [griot's dance] for *sanja*. Still others became associated with an age group, such as *sabarifòli* [sabar playing] with the youth. Participants now could identify with an ethnic, status, or age group by following the call to dance to "their" piece.

In the village, pieces of the local repertoire usually do not express ethnic or professional identities. Even a piece such as *sabarifòli* from Senegal, which came to the Manden region south of Bamako only some decades ago, appears as local and "Maninka" as any other piece. In an interview, Namakan Keita (born about 1964), farmer and village drummer from Sagele, defended *sabari*:

RP: Do not *sunun* and *sabari* come from elsewhere, from other people?

NK: *Sabari* has been played here for quite some time, more than 20 years.

RP: But originally it was a piece of the Wolof people from Senegal.

NK: Yes, maybe, but we play it here for a long time.

RP: People say that *sunun* is a piece from Kaarta, from the north of Mali.

NK: *Ah, bon?* [French term in the original, with skeptical or ironic distance in tone]

RP: Yes, that is what I heard.

NK: According to my calculation, this is a piece of ours. I have found it here. It has been played here since I was born. Thus, one can say that it is a local piece. (Sagele, June 21, 1997)

In Bamako, just as in Sagele, people feel that their pieces form a local repertoire. However, urban musicians and audiences more than rural ones understand that their pieces originally came from elsewhere some time ago. For instance, in Bamako they know *sunun* as a piece originating from Kaarta, thus addressing the people from this region (Kagooro) and related Bamana groups. *Sabari* is a piece of the local youth in Bamako, but at the same time, everybody knows it is a piece from Senegal. Drummers continually play it when people they identify as having Senegalese backgrounds are present in the audience. Some call it *wolofòli* [piece of the Wolof], associating it with Senegal's largest ethnic group. Urban repertoire can evoke both origin-related and local-oriented urban meanings at the same time.

In a word, repertoire is more complex and polysemous in the city than in the village. Diversification came along with ethnic connotations of pieces. The continued attachment of ethnicity to musical pieces does *not* point to a lack of urbanism, as Claude Meillassoux (1968) assumed in his seminal study of Bamako. In contrast to the then commonsense notion of African urbanization as equal to "detrribalization," performing ethnicity was functional to setting up new forms of social relationships among people of diverging backgrounds in the city (J. Mitchell 1956, 1987).

While jembe pieces and dances became metaphors of ethnic identities, their performance created a context attended by an increasingly mixed audience. The heterogeneous urban population now joined in a common local framework of celebration, thus surpassing the older segregation of expressive culture according to ethnic and regional origins. Differentiation—not abandonment—of ethnicities marked the first stage of urbanization of the repertoire, allowing celebration culture to transcend the diverse origins of urbanites.

### The Urban Core Repertory

The diversification of the Bamako repertoire took place largely in the 1960s and 70s. Somewhat later, in the 1970s and 80s, a core repertoire of common popular appeal emerged. This further added to the integrative quality of drum and dance performance at urban celebrations.

As noted above, in both village and urban contexts there are three primary drumming pieces played at almost all drum and dance celebrations. In the village music of Sagele this core repertoire (*furasifòli*, *kisa/wurukutu* and *madan*) makes for over 80 percent of the playing time.<sup>11</sup> In Bamako, the three core pieces (*dansa*, *marakadòn/denbafòli*, and *suku*) add up to 40 percent of all playing time. This pref-



erence is still remarkable in view of some 50 to 60 existing pieces, of which an average of 12 to 15 is performed at a typical wedding.

The urban core pieces are independent of the ethnic identities of the organizers, audiences, and musicians. By contrast, pieces such as *sunun* (associated with Bamana), *fulafòli* (with Fulani/Peul), and *menjani* (with Maninka peoples) do correlate with, for instance, the organizer's ethnic identity (table 12.2).

The core pieces, like most others, continue to have connotations of ethnic and regional origins. At the same time, they show associations with social roles, status groups, and age groups. For instance, *marakadòn* is associated, first, with the Soninke ethnic group, called Maraka by Bamana speakers. Second, *marakadòn* relates to groups of long-distance traders also called Maraka in Bamana, even if they do not necessarily speak or identify as Soninke. Third, the piece refers to the region of Kayes in western Mali, from where most Soninke/Maraka originate, in general. Yet, fourth, the piece also addresses the so-called honorary mothers (*denbaw*) who organize and finance the celebration. It even bears *denbafòli* [honorary mother's piece] as a second name. By extension, the piece also speaks to all mothers with grown-up children and to all older women in general.

*Dansa* is associated with the Khasonka ethnic group and the Khaso region in western Mali. Specifically, it reminds people of social occasions of agricultural contexts, such as harvesting. *Dansa* also relates to the social group of griots (*jeli*), whose urban associations first made the piece popular in the 60s.<sup>12</sup> *Suku*, from a Bamako perspective, belongs to the Maninka people and the Manden region south of Bamako. Young, unmarried women love to dance it, because it refers to its older social context of excision and circumcision rites, that is, to a significant experience in the recent formation of their identities.<sup>13</sup>

The core repertoire can evoke a multitude of social references and cultural associations, and thus can address several segments of the audience at the same time. The core pieces also stand out as they can move flexibly to and from other pieces within the same stretch of playing. *Dansa* and *maraka*, in particular, have annexed and absorbed various other rhythms that today are no longer played as individual pieces in their own right. Such fusions and the resulting increase in programmatic flexibility have further contributed to the core pieces' wealth of meanings. Finally, they are of inherent musical appeal. In the words of jembe drummers, the core pieces' popularity is based on their being suitable for many different dances and songs, and on their ability simply to please everybody:

*Marakadòn* is well ordered, everyone can dance to it. People like it. And all songs can be set to it. Otherwise, the Maraka [people] themselves sing their songs in their own language. It was the Bamana who adopted *marakadòn* and made it so popular. (Drisa Kone, Bamako, March 14, 1998)

Besides, the jembe players themselves, too, love *marakadòn*. Even if they probably also consider people's expectations: When you tell some jembe players to play something, they will start out immediately with *marakadòn*. (Madu Jakite, Bamako, March 10, 1998)

**Table 12.2. Frequency of pieces played in relation to the ethnic identity of the organizing family, out of 120 events**

		Bamana (%)	Fulani (%)	Maninka (%)
Urban core pieces	<i>dansa</i>	91	100	100
	<i>marakadòn/denbafòli</i>	97	91	100
	<i>suku</i>	91	95	94
Urban ethnic pieces	<i>sunun</i>	49	23	29
	<i>fulafòli</i>	17	36	12
	<i>menjani</i>	14	23	59

Source: Author's survey, Bamako, 1997–98.

## A Musical Tradition Urbanizes

Until the 1950s, jembe music was one among many traditional celebration music genres carried on in Bamako. It had been a rural practice before. During the 60s and 70s, jembe players urbanized socioeconomically, by professionalizing and commodifying the service of music performance, as well as musically. Musical change concerned form, style, and, as examined in this chapter, repertoire.

First, reinterpreting drumming pieces as metaphors of the diverse ethnic and regional origins of migrants served to broaden and integrate the heterogeneous urban audience into a homogeneous framework of celebration culture. Second, a local core repertoire emerged. These innovations have allowed for the lasting functionality and popularity of jembe music in the city. Today Bamako jembe players talk of their style as *yanfòli* [local drumming], *bamakòfòli* [Bamako drumming], *dugukònòfòli* [inner-city drumming], or *dugubafòli* [big city drumming]. These expressions suggest the urban professionals think of their style as different from rural styles both locally and in a categorical sense. In their view, theirs is an urban form of music.

Some Bamako professionals and I once performed at a wedding on the urban outskirts. The celebration's participants were of homogeneous ethnic identity (Songhay). It soon became clear that the celebration could not succeed because most of the people present did not know how to dance to our Bamako celebration music. The organizing family only recently had migrated from northern Mali to the city. Most guests were visitors from the countryside. During a short break, a member of the organizing team made an excuse for the celebration being so sluggish: "We are



all Songhay. We do not know jembe dancing well." (November 30, 1997) But she obviously, nevertheless, found it proper for a wedding in Bamako to have a jembe ensemble playing. From the immigrant's perspective, jembe dance and drumming represents the customary way to celebrate a Bamako wedding.

The audience's preference for jembe celebration music in Bamako cuts across boundaries of social class and ethnic identity. According to our survey from 1997–98, the largest three ethnic groups among the urban population (Bamana, Maninka, and Fulani) each comprise close to 25 percent of the total number of organizers of jembe celebrations in Bamako.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the jembe is an important part of the rural celebration culture among only one of these groups (Maninka). In addition, people of about a dozen more ethnic identities from Mali and some from neighboring countries are engaging jembe players in Bamako. Some organizers call both a Bamako based jembe ensemble and a more ethnically specific ensemble on the same occasion. There are two customs of putting the two parties together into the program. First, they sometimes perform by turns. Second, they often perform simultaneously in separate spaces. In this case, the ethnically specific ensembles perform somewhere inside, within the walls of a compound or inside a house, while the jembe performance takes place in the street. An experienced jembe player comments: "Well, you may be of whatever descent, if you find it absolutely necessary, you do your business inside, your affairs, you go and sort them out inside the house. Yet what the Bamako people like, you take it and settle it in the streets. That is a matter of agreement" (Jeli Madi Kuyate, Bamako, February 5, 1998).

In cases of two music ensembles performing the same celebration, one can observe a difference of preferences with regard to the participants' age. As a rule, the majority of younger and medium aged attendees prefer to dance to the jembe, whereas the ethnic ensemble attracts an older audience.

### Urban Tradition and Popular Culture

In the 1950s and 60s, Africanist urban anthropology focused on migrants adapting to modernity. Researchers assumed that modern forms of popular culture were an index to urbanization. Conversely, they took what they supposed to be traditional culture as an expression of remaining relationships to rural society, thus of the lack of urbanization. From a European perspective, Bamako then was not a true (modern) city yet. Research misrepresented Bamako's residential areas as large villages. Dance and drum celebrations were among the most colorful clichés in that image.<sup>15</sup>

In his book *Mande Music*, ethnomusicologist Eric Charry (2000: 24, fn. 12) used the concepts of the traditional and the modern to "distinguish sensibilities associated with old musical instruments, genres and styles from more recent ones." Charry placed jembe celebration music on the traditional side, in contrast to gui-

tar, harp, lute, and xylophone players who all can perform in both traditional and modern styles and contexts. People in Bamako, indeed, would rarely think of jembe celebrations as a modern affair. Addressed as *fôli* (percussive celebration music), people distinguish it from *musique*, which is a loanword from French applied mainly to "modern" pop music. *Jembefôli*, in contrast to *musique*, is not put 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. Charry thus seems right in placing jembe celebration culture on the traditional side of this duality; participants in Bamako weddings think of their practice as a local tradition. The problem is that this implicitly equates the traditional with the rural, that is, jembe celebration music as "a village tradition (which can be carried on in urban areas)" (Charry 2000: 194; parentheses in the original). This does not suffice to understand its transformation in the twentieth century. As shown in this chapter, jembe music has not been merely continued, but reinvented in Bamako. About two-thirds of the Bamako repertory, for instance, comes from other music traditions and has been markedly recomposed or rearranged in jembe music performance. This repertory combines aspects of difference, on the one hand, and commonality, on the other, allowing its users (audiences and dance performers) to both culturally distinguish themselves and affirm a common local culture at the same time. In response to the urban audience, resident jembe players have contributed creatively to making urban culture what it is.

Since the 1980s, urban music in Africa has been addressed mostly through the concept of popular culture (or arts). Karin Barber outlined the field in an influential review article:

Popular art can be taken to mean the large class of new unofficial art forms which are syncretic, concerned with social change, and associated with the masses. The centers of activity in this field are the cities, in their pivotal positions between the rural hinterland on the one hand and the metropolitan countries on the other. (Barber 1987: 23)

Popular culture studies have helped include into academic study the many urban styles of African music, which traditional perspectives of anthropology and ethnomusicology had ignored (Fabian 1978; Coplan 2008; Waterman 1990). It is thus worth discussion whether this concept would also support understanding jembe celebration music as an urban tradition.

Jembe celebration music in Bamako conforms to Barber's (1987) characterization of popular arts in many respects. It forms a vital framework of public interaction and communication, but is not sponsored or disseminated through official channels, spaces, and institutions; it is unofficial art. Responding to social change, it is open to fast musical change. It is syncretic in that it draws on diverse cultural sources, and creatively merges elements of these into a new form.<sup>16</sup> It is lively in

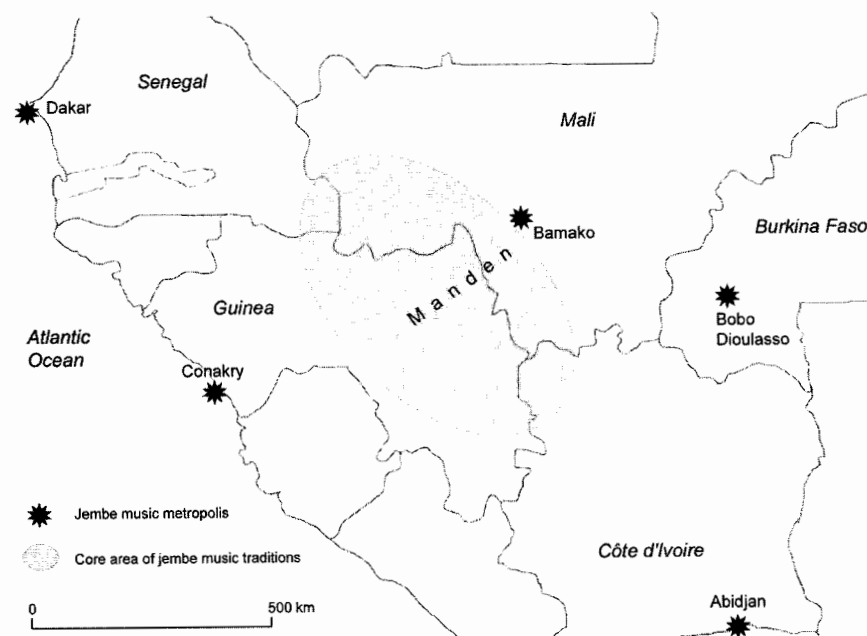
the cities where it appeals to large parts of the population across social, ethnic, religious, and other boundaries. It falls perfectly into what, again according to Barber (1987), is a typical economic context of popular art forms in Africa. Individualism, self-employment, competition, and market relationships entail artisan-like, work-oriented attitudes to performance and stimulate personal and generation-specific stylistic differentiation and innovation. Urban jembe celebration music is open to novices. No institutionalized constraints, such as formal apprenticeship, keep young entrants off the labor market. 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).

On the other side, jembe celebration music differs in important aspects from what is seen as typical of popular arts in Africa. First, it is not mass distributed. Second, while popular culture has been characterized as being relatively free from the normative (e.g. stylistic) constraints supposedly typical of official or traditional culture (Fabian 1978, 1998), jembe music is not. Although there is more space for creativity in urban than in rural jembe playing, it would be wrong to say that urban jembe playing is low in artistic norms. The music labor market filters innovations. Urban professional jembe players experience the market as a restrictive and stylistically homogenizing institution (Polak 2004). Third, urban jembe music is not radically syncretic. The syncretic confluence of indigenous and foreign cultural elements is held to underlie the qualitative novelty attributed to popular musics in Africa (Waterman 1990). The "foreign" is often identified with "Western" cultural items. Jembe players indeed innovate, but continuity and references to pasts and origins are still important to their performance. They indigenize and fuse elements from different cultural sources, but the foreign elements they select do not often come from outside Africa. The urbanization of jembe music rather lives by intra-African cultural confluence (cf. Hampton 1980).

Many African music studies—whether they use the concept of "popular" or not—associate the urban with the modern, cosmopolitan, and the rural with the traditional. The striving for modernization and the cultural appropriation of "Western" elements indeed mark much musical change in urban Africa. The popular culture concept has helped to focus and understand this "absorbing a shock from outside" (Diawara 1997). However, urbanization and modernization are not identical (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1991). The recent history of jembe music shows that traditional arts make a massive and distinct contribution to urban popular culture in West Africa.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Map 12.1. Urban centers and rural core area of jembe music traditions.

earlier form as "City Rhythms: The Urbanization of Local Drum/Dance Celebration Music in Bamako," in *Experts in Mandé*, ed. Jan Jansen (Leiden: Nederlandse Vereniging van Afrika Studies, 2003). I wish to thank Andreas Meyer and Jan Jansen for many valuable comments and corrections that helped to shape the present text. Finally, I would like to thank Madu Jakite, professional drummer from Bamako, who contributed to collecting statistical data, which underlies many of the chapter's arguments. I dedicate this paper to the memory of Musa Kamara (ca. 1964–2008), mason, dunun player (see figs. 12.2 and 12.7), and the most good-humored person I ever met.

#### NOTES

1. See M. Gosselin (1953), Villien-Rossi (1966), Meillassoux (1968), Vaa (1990), Sanogo (1993), Westen (1995), Miseli (1998), and Brand (2001) for more detailed demographic data. See INSTAT (2009) for the latest census figures published by the Institut National de la Statistique of the Republic of Mali.
2. See Wirth (1938), J. Mitchell (1966, 1987), and Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991).
3. See Meillassoux (1963, 1968), Villien-Rossi (1966), Diakité (1993), and Sanogo (1993).
4. A note on orthography: Bamana (*bamanankan*) is the vernacular language of Bamako. Bamana terms are spelled according to the dictionary of Bailleul (1996) and set in italics.



Figure 12.1. Bamako wedding celebration. Photo by Rainer Polak, 2007.



Figure 12.3. Denba Mme Diallo and age-mate come in for a synchronized duet dance encounter with the lead jembe player, Sedu Balo (right). Photo by Rainer Polak, 2007.



Figure 12.2. Dunun player Musa Kamara focuses the head of a group dance; the dunun is a cylindrical drum accompanying the jembe. Photo by Rainer Polak, 2007.



Figure 12.4. Professional singer and animator Mamanin Kante—with microphone, standard equipment at urban weddings—takes a run-up for a solo dance performance. Photo by Rainer Polak, 2007.



Figures 12.5 and 12.6. Jembe players Modibo Kuyate (left) and Sedu Balo at work, performing with women from the audience. Photo by Rainer Polak, 2007.



Figure 12.7. Dunun player Musa Kamara (ca. 1964–2009) earns two 1,000 Franc CFA bills for having called the denba to dance. Photo by Rainer Polak, 2007.



Figure 12.8. Married women, including the celebration's organizer (denba Mme Diallo), enjoy themselves performing a youth dance. Photo by Rainer Polak, 2007.





Figure 12.9. Teenagers enjoy themselves at a self-organized jembe-dance celebration. Photo by Rainer Polak, 1997.



Figure 12.10. Teenagers perform jembe music and dance at a wedding. Photo by Rainer Polak, 1997.

5. The first cylindrical accompanying drum (*dunun*) has a particularly distinctive quality in defining a piece. It also serves as a timeline and phrasing referent. Dancers will often sing it aloud when it is important to unambiguously relate the dance pattern to the musical phrase. The sequence of patterns played by the lead jembe drummer also contributes to identifying each piece. See Polak (2004: 111–48; 2010) for musical analysis and transcriptions.

6. Faulkner and Becker (2009) describe this interactive, processual nature of repertoire in the case of jazz.

7. See Reyes-Schramm (1982) on the diversity of repertoire as a marker of the urban in the case of New York City.

8. The *bònkolo* is a wooden, single-headed drum comparable in shape and playing technique (with one bare hand and one light pliable stick) to the Senegalese sabar. The *ngusunbala* is a huge equi-pentatonic xylophone of three and a half octaves.

9. On the original contexts of sabar music in The Gambia and Senegal, see Knight (1974) and Tang (2007).

10. Further ethnonyms used as names of drumming pieces in Bamako are *maraka-dòn* (Soninke people from the region of Kayes), *manenkamòri* (Maninka of the region of Kankan in Guinea), *fulafòli* (Fulani from the region of Macina in the Niger Delta), *bamanafòli* (Bamana from the Bèlèdugu region), *senufòli* (Senufo from the region of Sikasso), *minyanka-fòli* (Minyanka from the region of Koutiala), and *bòbòfòli* (Bobo from the region of San).

11. *Furasifòli* is associated with circumcision or excision and is called *suku* in Bamako and other parts of Manden. *Kisa* is associated with agrarian occasions as, for instance, harvesting. *Wurukutu* is a second (uptempo) part to *kisa* and is associated with fast and athletic dancing of youths. *Madan* is known throughout the Manden as well as in Bamako under the same name. It formerly was associated with male dancing on the occasion of political events such as the assumption of power of kings or chiefs.

12. See Meillassoux (1968: 107ff.) and Charry (2000: 268) for more details on the famous Ambiance griot association and its popular wedding celebration music performances.

13. Despite strong internationally sponsored campaigns to eradicate female gender mutilation, as female excision is termed in Western feminist and human rights discourses, it is still practiced, legal, and affirmed by many individuals and groups in Mali. There is also a pro-excision discourse in Mali, arguing that the anti-excision campaigns represent a recent form of Western cultural colonialism (C. Gosselin 2000).

14. While anthropological and historical research has shown the constructedness and fluidity of ethnic identities, jembe musicians and their audiences usually are quite clear about their own ethnic identities and the ethnic affiliations of the jembe pieces that are performed.

15. See M. Gosselin (1953), Villien-Rossi (1966: 253), and Meillassoux (1968: 143–47). For similar views of different West African cities, see Little (1965). For reviews of Africanist urban anthropology, see Hannerz (1980: chap. 4) and Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991).

16. Compare Arnoldi (1987, 1995) on the importance of creativity and innovation to traditional arts in rural Mali.