

MAMADOU DIABATE: KENEYA (WELL-BEING)

The three virtuosic pieces for Sambla xylophone on Mamadou Diabate's CD „*Sababu man dogo*“¹ were not only surprising to jazz and blues experts, but they were also new to experts of African xylophone music. With this CD Mamadou Diabate wants to delight all friends of his music by providing a deeper insight in the culture of his people. On this CD he plays all instrumental parts himself again – digital recording technology made it possible. For a live concert, however, 7 Sambla musicians would be necessary: 3 for the xylophone, 2 for the talking drums, 1 for the small Sambla drum set called “pi” and the vocalist.

The Sambla (or Sembla) people live in Burkina Faso about 50 km west of Bobo-Dioulasso, in the intertwining area of the Mande and the Gur cultures. This area is a colourful mosaic of tiny, dispersed, and little-known cultures, like Sambla, Tusia, Sya, Semu, and Tyefu, with archaic characteristics. The Sambla are farmers, cultivating millet, corn, peanuts and cotton crops. The climate is terribly dry and hot, the rainy season is extremely short, and the ground is hard and stony. There are no passable roads and no electricity. As the use of agricultural machinery is almost impossible, their yields are very minimal leaving them extremely poor.

However, as far as music is concerned, the Sambla are unimaginably rich. Each village, each important family, and every profession has its own piece of music that functions like a coat of arms. Music is composed for every important occasion. Any work carried out by the village community is accompanied by music. On *Sababu man Dogo*, there are three beautiful examples: „*Tanfogobo*“ is the coat of arms for Takon (Kongolikan on a modern map); „*Numudara*“ was composed in 1897 after Samory Toure was put to flight by the Sambla; and „*Fon ban so*“ is music for thrashing millet. This tradition is still alive. “Marijata”, a praise song for Thomas Sankara composed by Mamadou's father Penegue Diabate, whose xylophone music could be heard as the signal on Radio Burkina for over ten years, was very popular in the 1980s. “Dyunune ngunune” and “Bana jugu” on this CD are compositions of Mamadou's brother, Sadama Diabate.

The most striking feature of their music is the rich ornamented virtuosic xylophone solo. You could say that it speaks! Indeed, what outsiders consider to be beautiful music is in reality **the Sambla language transposed into music**. The children learn this musical language simultaneously with their spoken language (boys actively, girls passively). Everything that can be expressed verbally can also be expressed in this musical language. As far as I know, none of the other great xylophone cultures of the world (Cambodia, Indonesia, Mozambique, Uganda etc.) have xylophones that speak. This phenomenon is only found among these tiny enchanted Gur cultures in West Africa.

Jazz experts find the tonal system particularly interesting as it has close affinities with the “blues” pentatonic tunings. The notes would be played on a piano in descending order approximately as A, G, E, Eb, C. These pitches are approximate because the Sambla tuning system does not employ the same interval organisation as the European diatonic scale. It is based on a selection of harmonics over a base tone, which is C in this case. The same tuning system and musical style were documented in the 1960s by Gerhard Kubik ca. 2000 km eastwards among the Tikar in Central Cameroon². This huge geographical distance between these peoples and their isolation suggest that this tonal system and style are of certain antiquity in Africa. Another remarkable attribute is that this music has all the characteristics of blues³ (except the 12 bar structure, that was invented in the United States). Any influence on this music from America can be excluded because this music precedes the American blues, and also because of the close ties between the music and the daily activities.

The general feature of the Sambla music reminds of the Chaconne or Passacaglia (variations on a permanently repeated “basso ostinato”), that were prevalent in the compositions of Frescobaldi, Buxtehude, Couperin, Händel and Bach in the 17th and 18th centuries. This magnificent compositional technique is practised in other parts of Africa too: Hugh Tracey documented it in the 1940s at the Chopi in Mozambique⁴. I experienced it at the first time in the 1990s among the Dagbon (Dagomba) in Northern Ghana. In Africa, two or more ostinato patterns are used simultaneously. The audience, however, does not recognise the distinct parts within the texture. In the contrary, disoriented by the interlocking technique (the instrumental parts are connected together like cog-wheels to create a dense, melodic and rhythmic composite) the audience may actually perceive several, seemingly independent melodic-rhythmic patterns in diverse pitch areas: these have been referred to as inherent patterns. **These perceived patterns are not played by any**

¹ Released by Extraplatte Wien in 2001. Catalogue number Ex 470-2, ISBN 3-221-14702-3.

² N° 27 on the companion-CD for Gerhard Kubik: Africa and the Blues. University Press of Mississippi, 1999

³ See Gerhard Kubik: Africa and the Blues. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1999 (82-95) and Paul Oliver: Savannah Syncopators. Stein and Day, New York, 1970.

⁴ Hugh Tracey: Chopi Musicians. Their Music, Poetry and Instruments. Oxford University Press, 1948

single musician, but they do exist within the combined parts, and it is the intention of the composer that we hear them⁵. Beautiful examples on this CD are “*Ji te so*” and “*San tsyobe din*” with their really ghost-like patterns in the deep register.

There are two kinds of the Sambla xylophone called Ba. The portable small one with 19 keys played by one musician is used for entertaining the workers, the big one with 23 keys played by three musicians is for festive performances. A senior musician called „*Ba-tsin-gyera-bre*“ plays the solo in the high register. He tells the story, he communicates with the audience. On his left side the „*Ba-anya-bre*“ completes and comments the solo in the bass range and interacts with the second supporter. His part is more difficult than the parts of the two other musicians. He is the main actor in the music for the spirits like „*Ji te so*“ and „*San tsyobe din*“. On the opposite side of the xylophone the „*Ba-le-kpan*“ plays (or rather tells) the basic ostinato – a single word or a name, a phrase or a complete sentence - with a constant speed to give orientation to the “free flying” soloist, the dancers and workers. Several different accompaniments exist for the same composition in diverse technical grades. They will be chosen depending on the abilities of the musicians and according to the occasion.

1 Keneya (Well-Being)

This music was composed in ancient times to praise the virtues of a certain farmer in Torosso. He was a hard-working, humble man. He respected the spirits and took care of everybody who was in need. He never let anybody leave empty handed. He had lovely wives with several healthy children. He was the ideal of the men and the dream of the women. Despite of his prosperity he had no enemies. Today this music is played to praise the hardest working farmer.

2 Gbene gosara so (Praise Song For The Chief of Gbene)

This is an ancient praise song for the very first village chief of Gbene (known as Bouendé on a modern map), who was elected by the village people for his virtues. The xylophone says that all people are satisfied with his way of managing village affairs and that nobody can surpass him. Since then, all his successors feel obliged to model their chieftaincy after his example.

Festivals in Gbene always start with this song because it has become the “coat of arms” of the village. Its marvellous vocal part was - together with “*Tanfogobo*” and “*Togonbo don*” - the favourite of Mamadou’s grandmother, the legendary vocalist Tene Traore of Gbene who became 85 years old this year. “*No one would ever be able to sing it so as she did.*” – Mamadou says.

3 Brum bo san (The Protector Spirit)

In the rather complex Sambla religion, in addition to the God who created the world, there are several benevolent and helpful spirits. They are responsible for diverse tasks associated with a person, a family, a dwelling-place or a village. They appear in visions and dreams, take care for their proteges and receive offerings for their services. On the other hand, there are several capricious, unpredictable and treacherous bush-spirits who constantly strive to harm to people⁶.

This ancient praise song has been composed upon a curious event: The first Bobo who visited a Sambla village was very attracted by the Sambla’s worshipping of spirits, so he asked the Sambla to provide him with a protector spirit. But at his first attempt to call the spirit back at home, the spirit appeared and he became frightened and ran away. This piece expresses the astonishment of the Sambla: The man is running away from his own protector!

4 Tsye don so (Praise Song For The Blacksmiths’ Son)

The blacksmith (tsye) is one of the most important persons among the Sambla. He is the only one authorised to quarry iron ore, and only he possesses the magical skill to forge iron. Only the tools made by him can be

⁵ See Gerhard Kubik: Musikgeschichte in Bildern – Ostafrika. VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, Leipzig, 1982 (20f) or Gerhard Kubik: Theory of African Music. Noetzel Verlag, Wilhelmshaven, 1994 (Vol. 1: 58-73)

⁶ See Klaus E. Müller und Ute Ritz Müller: Soul of Africa. Magie eines Kontinents. Koenemann Verlag, 1999 (92-96, 122-125).

used for cultivating the land without hurting or offending the Spirit of the Earth. It is also his task to forge protection rings against evil powers.

Understandably, the Sambla became very desperate when the first smith died. They did not know who would take over his tasks or how they could cultivate the land in the future. However, the smith had foresight—he had instructed all of his sons in smithery. This praise song, composed by the jeli of that time, expresses that despair, but at the same time it urges the sons of the smith to learn their father's skills diligently. This music is also played when the Sambla, led by the smith, solemnly set off for quarrying iron ore.

5 Ji te so (Praise Song For The Spirits)

Though spirits are frequently thought to cause trouble, especially if they are disrespected, they are also supposed to render help if they are treated well. A chief or a wealthy person would occasionally make a feast for them, killing some animals at the shrine and then partaking of the meal with the relatives or friends whom he had invited. This music calls the spirits if somebody or the community is in need. The priest would carry out the necessary rituals and explain the problem to the spirit. The spirit gives his answer or advice through the medium (a certain person who has the ability to fall in trance).

6 Dyunune ngunume (I Feel Dizzy)

Before a Sambla bachelor can get married he has to prove his ability to provide for his future family. Otherwise he has no chance to get the girl of his desire. Young men used to challenge each other at their work to see who is the best. During the competition they drive themselves into such an intensity, fired by this music, that some of them became out of breath and would turn giddy or even collapse. In the evening the girls would check them with a fine linen cloth to see if they got dirty and sweaty enough during the day. This music will be played on festivals too, when the musicians, who usually don't stop for food or rest, recognise that they are getting dizzy from hunger. This song is the signal for the audience to bring them some food.

7 Sambaa (Dangerous River)

Once upon a time there was a very quarrelsome Sambla. He listened to nobody and respected no one, not even the jeli, whose task was, among other things, to settle quarrels. Any time he heard people mentioning his name or believed that people were talking about him, he got into a fury and attacked them. The jeli found no other solution than to compose this music to call the attention of the people whenever he turned up. Instead of his name – remember, he was a Sambla and understood the xylophone language – the jeli always said or played on the xylophone „Sambaa“ (Dangerous River). That's why we don't know his real name today.

8 Sanne sebe bane ao me kan (Only God Can Decide)

In this song the jeli says that you can not alter or buy your fate with money, no matter how rich you are. Only God (San), who has created the world, decides who becomes rich and who remains poor. This piece was composed by a Sambla, whom no one knew while he was poor, but after becoming rich he was surrounded by a throng of relatives and friends who claimed to have been there for him all the time.

9 Togonbo don (Glorious Son)

This is the praise song for the second village chief of Takon (Kongolikan on modern maps). The xylophone says that his fame has even superseded that of his legendary father, whose praise song, *“Tanfogobo”*, is on the Sababu-CD.

10 Mi ka i si te (Let's Go Together)

In ancient times the Sambla did not know the world outside of their area. As they began to hear the first rumours about strange habits of people in the towns, they became curious. The first Sambla who dared to go to the town was Fyenyimanke. He returned after a long time, and the people were stunned. He was shiny clean without the bad smell of hard workers. He wore fancy clothes – the Sambla wore a bark waist-cloth only in those days -, possessed lot of enviable things, and told unbelievable stories about the life in the town.

The girls were enchanted with him and started to sing and dance. They all wanted him to take them into the town. This was the song the girls composed for him on that very day.

11 Nogo so (The Song Of The Initialisation)

The most significant event in a Sambla boy's life is his transition from childhood to manhood. Between the ages of 15 and 17 he must spend six months in initiation training in the bush to be prepared for adult life. Additionally, to complete the training in warfare, the education consists of an elaborate series of ceremonies with special adornments, dances, songs and lessons about Sambla history and tradition told in an ancient secret language that the boys have to learn first. This music, speaking that secret language, will be played at the opening ceremony in the initiation school.

12 Bana jugu (Evil Sickness)

This piece is a warning for malevolent people that their evil deeds might be paid back by the same coin. Evilness is not a born characteristic that should be treated by benevolence and compassion. It is rather a terrible and infectious sickness caused by disrespecting or accusing others for the own failures.

13 San tsyobe din (The „Tsyobe“ Are Also God's Creatures)

The rainy season is of vital importance for the Sambla. If it does not appear in time, the only harvest of the year is endangered. Around the end of April they start with the offering ceremonies for it. Today hens, goats, and sheep are sacrificed and their blood is poured over the ploughed land. However, many years ago men were sacrificed, and when the people heard this music, they ran away and hid for fear of being selected by the tsyobe. On the other hand, the Sambla were fully convinced that human sacrifices were essential for a good harvest. That's why the title says: The „tsyobe“ (the catchers) are also God's creatures.

It happened in a killing hot May afternoon that I heard this music for the first time. The rainy season was long overdue but for weeks the sky was just lead coloured. The air was burning hot and full of dust, the environment was burnt black, and the people were desperate. Suddenly a neighbour came to our house saying: "It is time..." Sadama Diabate, his brothers Sibiri and Mamadou took the big xylophone and started to play this music. They played and played with growing intensity – not only 4 minutes long like on this CD - until the sky became blue-black. Then the first wavering raindrops fell. Then the dribble changed into a heavy thunder-storm. About one hour later the clouds split, the sun came out and an unimaginable highly coloured rainbow lit up. In the air, on the roofs, and on the trees, raindrops sparked over all. The Sambla felt relieved. After a while the rain stopped, and as if by magic, the rainbow disappeared and the land sank into the dusk. At that time I did not suspect any connection between the music and the rain. Years elapsed until I learned who that neighbour in reality was and what kind of music they played...