

## MAMADOU DIABATE

Mamadou Diabate was born in 1973 into a West African "Jeli" family in which there is a long tradition of practising the profession of story-telling and music making. The first Diabate ancestor and one of the founders of the "Jeliya" (the Griot tradition of the Mande<sup>1</sup>), was, according to oral tradition, one of two hunters who killed a sorceress that had ravaged the land in the form of a buffalo. Her daughter was Sogolon Konde, who gave birth to the legendary Sunjata Keita, who later became the founder of the Mali empire<sup>2</sup>. The oldest, preserved document on the Jeli and the Balafon was written by Ibn Battuta who visited the Mali empire around 1350.

Mamadou Diabate belongs to the Sambla (or Sembla) people who live in Burkina Faso, about 50 km west of Bobo Dioulasso, in 12 villages on the border between the Mande and the Gur cultures. The language and culture of this Mande sub-group with its archaic characteristics has hardly been researched and will probably disappear before world takes any notice of it. The Sambla are crop farmers planting millet, corn, peanuts and cotton. The climate is extremely 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 which 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. What outsiders consider to be beautiful music is in reality the Sambla language transposed into music. The children learn this musical language simultaneously to their spoken language (boys actively, girls passively). Everything that can be expressed verbally can also be expressed in this musical language. I often witnessed a dialogue between a Balafon or Lunga player and verbal responses. 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 as A, G, E, Eb, C. Another remarkable attribute is that the Sambla music has all the characteristics of Blues<sup>3</sup> whereby any returning influence from America can be excluded, partly because it is dated earlier and the close ties between their music and their daily activities.

Mamadou Diabate was about 5 years old when his "professional" education began. His first teacher was his father, who in his day was considered the best Balafon player far beyond the borders of the Sambla culture. He was also taught by his older brothers, Sadama and Sibiri, who, today, are the most popular Balafon players of the Sambla. When he was 8 years old he started learning other peoples' language and music, e.g. the Tusia. He was 12 years old when he went against his parent's wishes and decided to try his luck as a musician in the big cities of Burkina Faso. Despite of three years of hardship he was nevertheless able to extend his skills and widen his musical horizons. He was helped through the influence and co-operation of other musicians of some bands, who later became world-famous (such as Farafina, Sababougnoma, Frères Coulibaly, Farafina Yelenba), as well as musicians from other cultures (such as Sya, Senufo, Gan, Semu, Lobi, Dagara, Bobo and Jula).

He finally reconciled with his parents in 1988 when his father was looking for a suitable second Balafon player for the National Cultural Festival. The little rebel had, by then, developed into an excellent musician and during the following years they repeatedly won the festival's first prize. In

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<sup>1</sup> See Eric Charry: Mande Music. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000 (90-94)

<sup>2</sup> See Eric Charry: Mande Music. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000 (102-111)

<sup>3</sup> 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.

1991 Mamadou met Ousmane Dembélé who was the same age as himself and played the Jembe excellently. Together with Moussa Coulibaly, Abdoulaye Dembélé they formed a group which later became well-known as "Landaya". Later, other young musicians, such as Siaka Keita, Seydou Diabate and Ibrahima Bake also joined the group. They inspired and learnt a lot from each other, and although they were all multi-talented each player was able to establish a main lead for himself. Mamadou became a composer and solo Balafon player. In 1998 the group won the first prize for the National Culture Festival. A CD by Landaya will be coming out shortly in Belgium.

Mamadou Diabate now lives in Austria. He not only plays the Balafon but also the Ngoni (a smaller version of a Kora) which is a traditional instrument used by hunters, and modern and traditional percussion instruments such as the Jembe, Dundun (bass drum) and Lunga (talking drum). His music sounds light, entertaining and easy to follow until anyone tries to imitate or to play together with him. These attempts usually fail due to his subtle polyphony and polymetrics which resemble New Orleans Jazz but are, without doubt, of Sambla origin and which make his music particularly appealing. His virtuosity is astonishing as his musician friend, Herbert Kinobe from Uganda said, *"I can't imagine how he, having only four hands, can play that."*

## **SABABU MAN DOGO**

### **(A Chance is not just Anything)**

Due to logistical difficulties it was not possible to record this CD with Landaya musicians. Therefore Mamadou Diabate decided to accept the challenge of playing all the instruments, up to six parts, himself.

- He composed some pieces of music himself (1, 2, 4-6) and
- arranged others (3, 7-11) which are based on traditional music.

#### **1 JIGITIGE (Broken Word)**

One should always keep promises, it is bad to destroy hope.

#### **2 SABABU (Chance)**

A received chance, even the smallest, should be shared with others.

#### **3 FINYE KA BON (The Wind is Strong)**

This piece originated in Senegal and is very popular in Mali and Burkina Faso. It is played for the women at the height and end of an exhilarating festival.

#### **4 FOLIKELAW (The Musicians)**

Musicians should think that any music not played today, any dance not danced, may never be played or danced again. In this song Mamadou is thinking of his musician friends who died before they could really develop their talents. (Bambara Hamidou, (Sababougnouma) Desire Soumé (Farafina Yelenba), Bakoro (Djigouya) Ibrahima Bake (Landaya).

#### **5 NAMBARA MAN NYI (Fraud is Bad)**

Fraud destroys the world. One should always try to be honest.

**6 DUNIYA YALA (Travels)**

Everyone should travel the world in order to know other countries, other people and oneself better.

**7 MARAKA DON (Maraka Dance)**

This is a very popular piece of music of the Maraka (Soninke) people in Mali and Burkina Faso

**8 TAN FOGO BO (The chief of Takon)**

This is an ancient prize song for the Sambla chief of Takon (known as Kongolikan on a modern map) whose Jeli were Mamadou Diabate's ancestors. The Balafon solo isn't really music but rather a speech in the Sambla language in which Mamadou Diabate remembers his deceased father.

**9 FONBANSO (Threshing Millet)**

All kinds of communal activities undertaken by the Sambla are accompanied by music. The Balafon solo is a speech to fire on the workers. If a Sambla youth wants to get married he has to prove his strength at work. The Balafon player watches the workers and tells the youths who don't work hard enough that they won't get their girls. The Fonbanso is played whilst threshing millet.

**10 BETE (Bete Dance)**

This music arranged for the Jembe belongs to the Bete people that live between the Sassandra and Bandama rivers in Cote d'Ivoire.

**11 NUMUDARA (Numudara)**

This music-piece celebrating victory was composed for the Sambla by one of Mamadou Diabate's ancestors after they defeated Samory Toure (who later became a legendary resistance fighter against the French colonialists) in 1897 at Numudara (a Semu village between Bobo Dioulasso and Banfora).

Andreas Szabo  
(Translated by Sandra Brandeis Crawford)

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Musician: Mamadou Diabate: Jula- and Sambla-Balafon, Jembe, Dundun(ba), Lunga  
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