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TALKING BALAFONS[1*]

by

HUGO ZEMP WITH SIKAMAN SORO

Systems of substituting music for words — the best known being drummed and whistled languages — have long drawn the attention of travellers, explorers, colonial administrators, missionaries, ethnologists, linguists and ethnomusicologists. Earlier in *L'Homme* (Zemp & Kaufman 1969) I mentioned the two main categories defined by Stern: the "abridgement system"[2], which preserves a certain similarity with natural language, primarily in the tones and the speech rhythm; and the "lexical ideogram", which symbolises a concept directly, without reference to the phonemic structure of the language. From what we knew in the 1960s, the first system was particularly widespread in Africa, and the second in Melanesia. Crudely, this distribution is still useful. However I have since been able to show that the two systems can coexist in Melanesia, notably in the slit drum rhythms of the 'Are'are of the Solomon Islands (Zemp 1997).

In their two-volume work on *Speech Surrogates*, Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok (1976) include seventy-four articles, forty-one of them completely devoted to Africa, and five articles referring to it generally. Unless I am wrong, only three authors touch on the xylophone in passing: on the Jabo of Liberia (Herzog 1976: 566), the Idoma of Nigeria (Armstrong 1976: 868, 875), and one without specifying regions of Africa (Nketia 1976: 826). It is true that the sub-title of the work is *Drum and Whistle Systems*, but other instruments like bells, trumpets, flutes and chordophones are often mentioned. The absence of specific references to the xylophone is due no doubt to the fact that this instrument is used less as a musical substitute for words and, as it is less immediately spectacular than the "bush telegraph" (talking drums sending messages over long distances), it has more rarely been the subject of enquiries into the possible connections with natural language.

The resonated xylophone known in French as "balafon"[3], is an emblem of the

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[1] * First published as "Paroles de balafon", by Zemp H. & Soro S., *L'Homme* 2004/3-4, No. 171-172, p. 313-331. This translation is by Andrew Tracey. The ethnomusicological and linguistic data were collected among the Senufo of the Côte d'Ivoire (former Ivory Coast) thanks to the efficient and devoted collaboration of Sikaman Soro, balafonist and research assistant, during trips (Dec 1998 to Feb 1999, and Oct 1999) funded by the CNRS under the Ethnomusicology Laboratory (UMR 7486). Sikaman Soro has continued to collaborate regularly, sending letters with different types of detail, notably linguistic. The comparative analyses, the musical transcriptions, the concept and the editing of the article are by Hugo Zemp. The musical examples shown in the diagrams, as well as the interviews mentioned, are extracts from films 1 and 2 (see the filmography). The transcriptions in Senufo have been set here in Roman characters.

[2] Stern's original term. A possible French translation would be 'réduction'.

[3] The word 'balafon' means in both French and English the resonated xylophone of west Africa (and sometimes even of central Africa). It comes from the Malinké bala fo, "xylophone/talk", i.e. "make xylophone talk", in

Senufo of Côte d'Ivoire (former Ivory Coast). It is not for nothing that Ivorians call their North "balafon country"[4]. The Kafibele, a sub-group of the vast conglomerate of Senufo societies[5], distinguish between seven types of orchestra in which balafons are combined with other musical instruments. Each type of orchestra has a different name and plays under precise circumstances. In each orchestra, the balafonists play tunes with specific linguistic meanings.

Interpreting the words

Oumar Coulibaly, on the Tiebara and Nafara sub-groups of the Senufo, and Till Förster, on the Kafibele Senufo, are the first writers to have drawn attention to the connections between balafon music and language.

> "A piece of jegele [balafon] music is above all a speech translated onto the instrument, [...] there is no music without text [...]. This is why, when composing a jegele piece, one starts first by finding the literary element: the text, that is *the words one wants to transmit* [underlined in the text]. [...] the musical setting of the language is based on the tones and the rhythmic structure of speech [...]" (Coulibaly 1982: 43).
>
> "Playing the xylophone is called in Senufo "having a conversation" (sy̰e̱e̱re̱jō). A phenomenon characteristic of all xylophone ensembles is the musical setting of the language, consisting in following the tonal pitches of the syllables of the spoken language, which in Senufo carry meaning. By this means, *it is possible to a certain extent to transmit texts which are not sung* [our emphasis]" (Förster 1987: 29).

One could add that the balafons "sing", since the tunes are called jèŋu̱gō, "balafon songs", which shows the importance of the verbal content. Let us examine first a short phrase as spoken by the master balafonist Nahoua Silué:

"wàà ǹ pa̱ na̱ wòlò ma̱"
someone (i.p.)[6] arrive here us with
"Here's one of them just arrived with us!"

other words "play xylophone". The word appears from the end of the 17th century in the publications of French travellers to refer to the xylophonist or the xylophone (Charry 2000: 363, 365). The Senufo, who speak Senar, a language of the Voltaic or Gur family (and not Mande), have their own terms which vary according to dialect.The Senar language has three semantic and grammatical tones, as well as glides. Some of the authors who transcribe it mark all the tones, using a horizontal dash to show the mid-tone; others only mark the low and high tones respectively with a grave and an acute accent. The Korhogo Baptist Mission uses no accent wherever the tone is the same as the previous syllable, nor on the first syllable if it is a mid-tone. To avoid confusion with words whose tones are not known, I have used a uniform notation showing the mid-tone with a horizontal dash over the vowel.

[4] Cf. three Senufo stories about the origin of the balafon (Zemp 1976).

[5] The ethnographic literature on the Senufo has been enriched since the publication of Pierre Boutin and Jean Jamin's bibliography (1977). My recent field research has benefited mostly from the works of Till Förster (1987, 1997) which are the most recent and deepest on the Senufo; further, they concern the Kafibele sub-group whose balafon music is the subject of my research.

[6] i.e. immediate past

The tonemic structure per syllable is: low, low, mid, high, low, low, high; the intonation as spoken is shown in the sonagram below (Fig. 1). Before playing it on the balafon, Nahoua explained:

> Every balafon tune (ŋ̰ǵgō, literally "song") really has a meaning. Speaking of this, I can talk about those for the announcement of a death. I can explain some of these. Because if we balafon players are going to sit down somewhere to have a friendly chat, we joke a lot. Every balafon tune has a meaning for us. When the death has to be announced and they are calling for the riflemen, if it's someone old and the poro drums are played, then we play, saying that the dead are saying: 'Here's one of them just arrived with us!' "[7].

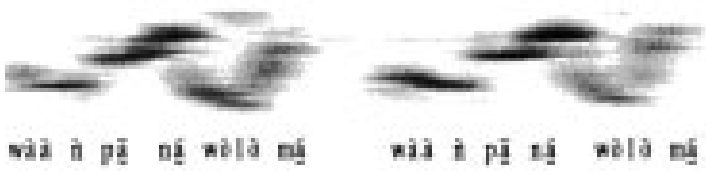
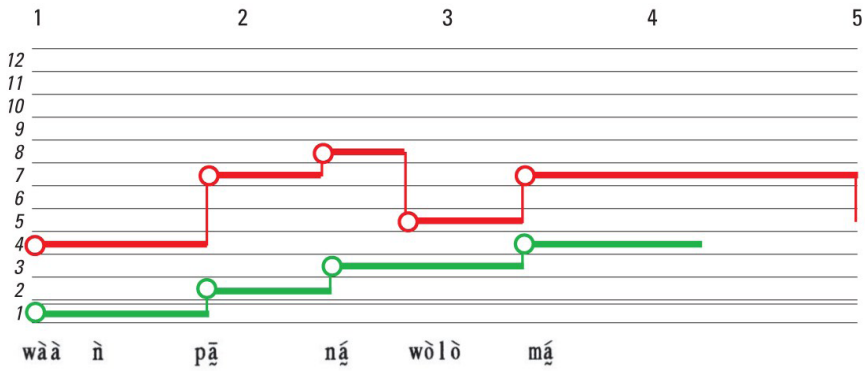


Fig. 1. Sonagram of the fundamentals (partials 1) of the phrase: "Here's one of them just arrived with us!" spoken twice



[7] The whole translation, which had to be shortened in the film, is restored here.

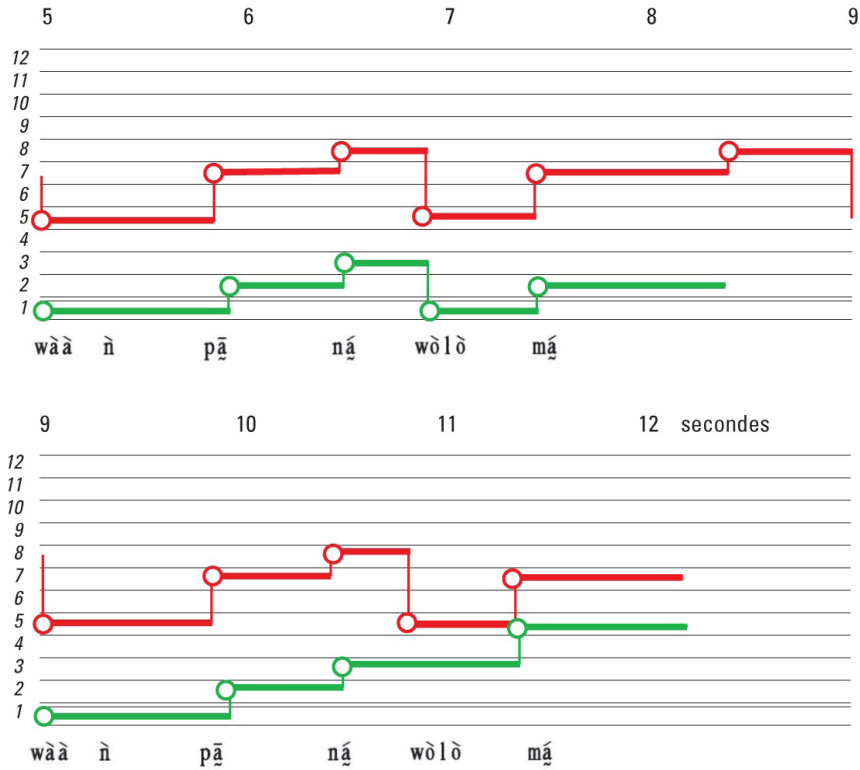


Fig. 2. Graphic transcription of the played version of the phrase "Here is one of them just arrived with us", played three times consecutively by Nahoua Silué.

Transcription system used

The Senufo balafons have an equipentatonic scale, i.e. characterised by five equidistant degrees to the octave. On the classical five-line music stave it is not possible to represent a music with an equipentatonic scale. Due to this difficulty with the xylophones of Uganda, Gerhard Kubik juxtaposed a number notation with the classical stave, thus showing how the latter should be corrected (1994: chap. IV, orig. ed. 1969). For the Senufo balafons, Ciompi (1989) proposed a four-line stave, each line and space corresponding to the sound of one key. Tiago de Oliveira Pinto (1987), who did some transcriptions for the write-up of Till Förster's disc (1987), chose a graphic transcription where each key is shown by a horizontal line, each stroke being marked with a dot, and regular vertical lines showing the pulses.

For myself, I have invented a graphic transcription which allows one to visualise all at once the layout of the balafon keys, the impact of the strokes and their resonance, the interplay of the two hands and the melodic movement. To produce this graphic, I started from a sonagram in which I redrew the fundamentals (harmonics 1), equalising the distance between each sound (the sonagram has a logarithmic scale). Watching and

listening to the video shots at slow speed, frame by frame, with synch sound thanks to the Final Cut Pro editing software, I was able to ascribe each stroke to the left or the right hand with certainty[8].

In my graphics, the keys are shown by numbered spaces, marked off with thin horizontal lines; the extra space between Keys 1 and 2 is a reminder that the interval between the two sounds is twice as wide as the other intervals, as if one key of the complete scale were missing. On the left of the graphic is the numbering of the keys, from 1 (the lowest sound on the balafon) to 12 (the highest key). The lower lines (green in the original French version) indicate the left hand part, the upper lines (red in the French version) the right. The small circles show the impact of the stroke; the thick horizontal lines represent the resonance, which is actually longer, but is shortened in the diagram for better readability of the melodic movement which is shown by the thin vertical lines. The pulses are not shown for two reasons: to avoid overloading the diagram and to make the melodic movements more visible in relation to the language tones; and because the sound examples were played solo without the regular beats of the accompanying balafons giving the pulse reference.

Fig. 2 shows how the phrase "Here's one of them just arrived with us" was played, three times without interruption by Nahoua Silué [CD No. 1]. The high register right hand part follows the tonemic shape of the phrase; note that the word mą́, with high tone, at the end of the phrase is played on Key 7, like the word pą̄ on mid-tone. What counts is not the absolute pitch but the relative. Here, in any case, the word mą́ is played on a higher tone than the low tone of the preceding word. However, looking at the sonagram of the spoken phrase (Fig. 1), one can see also that at the end of the phrase the high tone of mą́ is at a pitch corresponding to the mid-tone of pą̄. It is well known to linguists that phrase intonation modifies the tonemic, semantic and grammatical pattern. We could thus say that by playing these words on the balafon, Nahoua Silué is faithfully following the tonemic pattern and intonation of the phrase. The second time he plays it the left hand follows this same melodic contour in the lower octave. This octave doubling can be easily read in the diagram: the keys 1 and 5, 2 and 7, 3 and 8 are played simultaneously, in homorhythm. The first and third times the left hand does not go down again for the word wòlò, but continues rising in stages. So this is a variation.

Other versions of words exist with the same tune, the same number of syllables and the same language tones; the first seems the most widespread and probably corresponds to the original version:

[8] As early as 1965, Gerhard Kubik used frame by frame analysis of an 8mm silent (!) film for transcribing xylophone music. Nevertheless modern virtual editing software is more comfortable and verifiable.

wàà ǹ tō ná wòlò má
someone (i.p.) fall here us with
"Here's one of them just fallen among us!"
(i.e. One of ours has just died.)

wè ǹ kā ná gbɛ̀gɛ̀ má
this one (i.p.) give here bier with
"This one has been given for the bier."
(A person has died and must be laid out on the bier.)

kù ǹ yīɛ́ ló ʿàlà wó
dead (i.p.) to be others for
"The dead, was he [only] for others?"
(The understood response is no, since everyone has to die.)

wò ǹ nā bá gòlò kpó
we (i.p.) arrive for chicken kill
"We have just arrived to kill a chicken."
(The time has come for us to kill a chicken.)

As with the drum languages, it is not enough to speak the language unambiguously to understand the sense of the underlying words. The listener's interpretation of the words is oriented towards the context of performance. So, during a young people's evening dance, none of the dancers would imagine the balafon words above which are strictly reserved for a burial. On the other hand, during a funeral, the solo balafonist can play praises for farmers if the deceased (or a descendant) was a champion of the soil in his youth. Equally he can strike up tunes "to make the women dance". Funerals allow plenty of possible interpretations, both to the musicians in the choice of pieces, and to the listeners and dancers in how they understand the significance of the instrumental tunes[9].

Oumar Coulibaly (1982) transcribed, translated and annotated some twenty texts which he classified according to their distribution (village, region), audience (old, young), circumstances (funeral, cultivation, entertainment), theme (death, praise, morality, historical fact, love). He tells how on Independence Day 1977, in the city of Korhogo, a competition was organised among a score of jegele orchestras. The winner succeeded in playing a chain of eighty-two pieces without stopping, each one forbidden to exceed two minutes. Clearly such an artificial situation does not allow one to evaluate the extent of a particular orchestra's repertoire, much less the total musical repertoire of a type of orchestra, because many pieces are linked to place, the songs come to the musicians' minds while they are playing on definite occasions, and certain

[9] Cf. the twenty-eight balafon pieces whose words appear in the sub-titles to Film 1.

pieces linked with funerals and especially with the death of a balafonist can only be played at such ceremonies.

In a recent article Marianne Lemaire (1999) published annotated translations of some sixty cultivator's songs, recorded 'out of context', as the Tiebara sub-group of the Senufo no longer have communal work parties. Without referring to her predecessors Oumar Coulibaly (1982), Till Förster (1987) or Philippe Ciompi (1989) she states that "[...] no farmer fails to know which short verbal phrase to correlate with each musical phrase played by the xylophonists" (Lemaire 1999: 36). She adds in a note, however: "It is enough for the verbal phrase to be spoken beforehand only once for the farmers to be able to reconstitute when they hear the musical phrase which follows the same tonal pattern". In other words, if the phrase is not previously spoken, the words are not necessarily understood by all. The problem is that, when playing 'in context', the musicians do not speak the words that they are striking on the balafon, and that, when there is a singer, he sings words which often have nothing to do with the words of the balafon.

Composing a tune or new words

The balafonist who wants to compose a new tune generally has some words in mind. Composing a balafon tune is called kɔ̀, literally "to cut"[10] a song. Nahoua Silué explained how and why he made his first composition when he was still a child. As his mother was ill he was not playing much with the other children but mostly played the balafon. To comfort her by showing her his skill, he composed a tune with his mother's and his own name: "Nahoua, son of Pefungojomon, you are really good at the balafon".

Certain tunes linked to funeral ceremonies (death announcements, winding the deceased in cloth, burials as such) are considered to be very ancient (which does not stop the musicians from playing variations); each village, and even each section of a large village, has its own version. On the other hand, tunes for the women or young girls to dance to at wakes or informal dance evenings are subject to short-lived styles. Till Förster (1987: 26-28) described how many round songs (dɔ̀'ɔ́rì) of young girls are included in the repertoire of balafon-with-harp orchestras (bɔ̀lɔ́rì), either when the balafonists borrow melodies they like from the round songs, or when the young girls explicitly ask the soloist to include a dɔ̀'ɔ́rì song in his repertoire. Some of these song lyrics reflect the young girls' preoccupations with their friends and with the constraints on parent-arranged marriages which will put an end to their freedom of choice.

It also happens that young girls compose songs specially for a balafon orchestra. Accordingly, the girl dancers of the Kanoroba village bɔ̀lɔ́rì orchestra composed two songs in honour of the balafon soloist: "Yenneman doesn't like anyone to say that another [balafonist] is better than him", and "Yenneman, if you like, take one [of us]!"

The dancers sing in alternation with the orchestra, especially when the whole group

[10] The Mandinka of Senegambia have four terms corresponding to the notion of 'composing', of which one, *kuntu*, is also translated as 'cut' (Charry 2000: 310).

moves somewhere. The musicians also sometimes start up balafon tunes they have heard elsewhere, paying no attention to the words. Balafonist Yenneman responded to some questions from Sikama Soro on the subject:

> Do the tunes you play have any meanings?
> *If you want to play a tune with a meaning, it will have one. You know that every tune has a meaning, but we ignore it at times.*
> You, the balafonists, you don't know the meaning, even though the young girls are singing for you?
> *Every tune has its own way of being played. If we're playing and they want there to be a meaning, if the women want to give a meaning, then they compose ["cut"] some words to get them out. Often you're in the middle of playing and you don't even know there is a meaning. Then someone comes and sings next to you to show you the meaning.*

Nahoua Silué, the master balafonist of Nafoun, says no different:

> Do all the tunes you play have words that can be spoken?
> *They don't all have words, but many do.*
> Many have words?
> *Many have words. At least, many have words with us. It happens that you're playing a tune that you think doesn't have; you play it right through, and for you it doesn't have words, well, then you see a youngster passing by and he's singing them. He's the one who will teach them to you. But you had never thought of that tune in that way. In principle, every tune has words.*

Putting new words to a melody is an everyday process which allows one to recall a local event in a few words, to replace the name of a well-known local personality with another name, and in some way to acclimatise the tune in another area or for other circumstances.

Variation and improvisation

A good soloist is not happy to repeat the main musical phrase of a tune without changing its words, or else he will soon lose all the dancers, especially the women, who will go off to follow another orchestra. Competition reigns and the best balafonist draws the greatest number of dancers along behind his orchestra. Is it not said of the repertoire of informal dance evenings, as of the wakes, that it's all about "balafon for the women" (cēkpōyì)?

Even if you ask a soloist to repeat a simple phrase he will not play it twice in the same way. One of the tunes often played during funerals to honour the descendants of the dead man or woman was originally a tune to honour young men during friendly cultivating competitions:

ŋàɔ̄ wàà mɔ̰̄ míɛ̰́ nū mīyɛ̄ yínɛ̰́ nāyīlīpɛ́ɛ́wà
man (limiter) you also you-yourself consider man strong, brave
"Man, you consider yourself a strong man" [11]

Fig. 3 contrasts the sonagrams of the phrase as spoken and sung first by Sikaman Soro, then by Nahoua Silué [CD No. 2]. Having played this phrase the first time on the balafon, Nahoua went straight back to the beginning. On Sikaman's request, he then repeated this one phrase (Fig. 4). Comparing the two figures the same melodic contour is evident, with in Fig. 4 a systematic rhythmic staggering of the parallel octaves (keys 5-10, 6-11, 4-9 etc.), while the playing in Fig. 5 is more homorhythmic. Once again, one should not expect that each of the three tones will correspond each time with one and the same key: the balafon has twelve keys, not three. The natural language allows the balafonist a certain liberty in interpreting it into music.

Fig. 3. Sonagrams of the fundamentals (partials 1) of the phrase: "Man, you take yourself for a strong man"; top – spoken and sung by Sikaman Soro; bottom – spoken and sung by Nahoua Silué [CD No. 2].

[11] Till Förster (1964) translates the same song into German: "Du hältst dich [jetzt] für einen grossen Burschen", retranslated into French in the disc write-up as "[Maintenant], tu te prends pour un gars fort". However, the German and French translations have a negative connotation which is absent in the Sénar since it was originally about praising an excellent farmer who wins a hoeing competition. Perhaps these translations would be closer to the sense in Senufo: "Man, you can now consider yourself a strong man!", or "Man, you are now considered one of the strong men!".

Fig. 4. Graphic transcription of the phrase "Man, you take yourself for a strong man", played on balafon by Nahoua Silué.

In another part of the interview, not retained in the final edit of the film, Nahoua Silué said that for fun he sometimes added his own and his mother's name, Pefungojomon, or his father's name Nibotennen (Fig. 5).

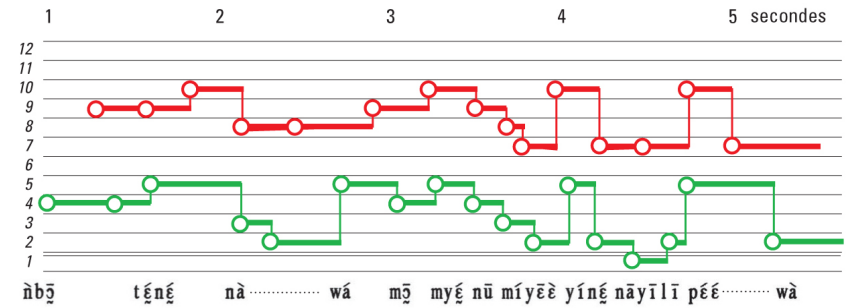


Fig. 5. Graphic transcription of the phrase: "Nahoua, son of Nibotennen, you take yourself for a strong man", played by Nahoua Silué.

A solo balafonist is not content with repeating words numerous times before taking up a new tune, unless the repetition itself has a purpose, for example honouring someone during a farming work party or a funeral. Thus, when the soloist of the Taléré balafon orchestra came and knelt in front of me playing "Man, you take yourself for a strong man!" he repeated these words a dozen times with minimal variations, only interrupted by several strokes on the low notes [CD No. 2, from 1:10].

Good musicians play variations, add improvised interludes, and always manage to find the first sentence again in relation to the accompanying balafonists' ostinatos. During a filmed interview Nahoua Silué varied the words: "Man, you are considered a strong man" [CD No. 2, 0:27], putting in his own name once ("Nahoua, son of Pefungojomon, you are considered a strong man"), then improvised a section without explicit reference to words [from 0:43] before returning to the word variations [at 0:59]. Musicians are free to select certain words in a phrase, to change their order, or to diverge from them completely.

Photo 1. Nahoua Silué (foreground) plays in his orchestra during a wake. (Large drum on left.)

Photo 2. Nahoua Silué encourages the workers during a hoeing competition with words played on his balafon.

During an interview about balafon words, one listener spontaneously asked Nahoua Silué for a difficult tune, one which would allow judgment on the expertise of a balafonist from another village. Nahoua laughed without announcing the words, and played a tune for forty-five seconds belonging to the farmers' repertoire, for communal un-earthing in the yam fields: "Sonan worked. His clothes slipped and fell off. He didn't want to stop."

Figs. 6 a, b and c transcribe the first seventeen seconds. The left hand starts on Key 7, the "key-which-separates" [CD No. 3]. This key "separates" the low notes which essentially play the words, from the high notes used for accompaniment, whether this be the ostinato patterns of the accompanying balafonists, or the soloist's right hand which accompanies his left hand part. A solo balafonist is judged by the mobility of his left hand, which only rarely goes higher (e.g. Key 8 in Fig. 6a). The accompanying balafonists can in fact go below Key 7, without however touching the three or four lowest keys, and the soloist's right hand can stay in the low half of the keyboard and contribute to playing the words (Fig. 6c). The importance of the bottom half is illustrated by the parallel the musicians draw between the first seven keys and the initiates of the poro men's society. The top half of the keyboard represents the uninitiated, those who still know nothing, and do not have the right to speak at their public meetings.

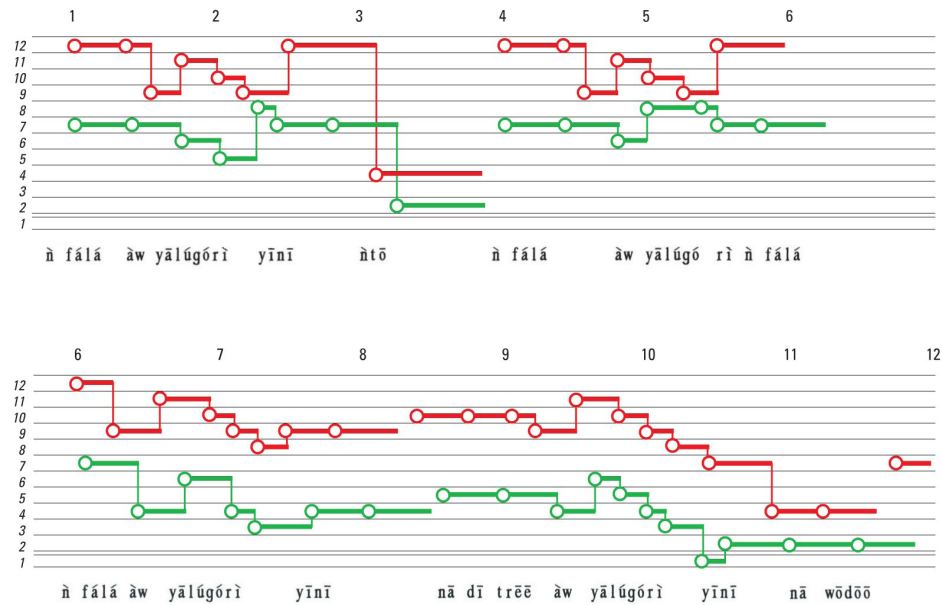
No one is supposed to try and understand all the words, all the snatches and variations of these phrases. However, listening to the recording, Nahoua Silué gave words to the whole of his demonstration (the timings given refer to Track 3 of the enclosed CD):

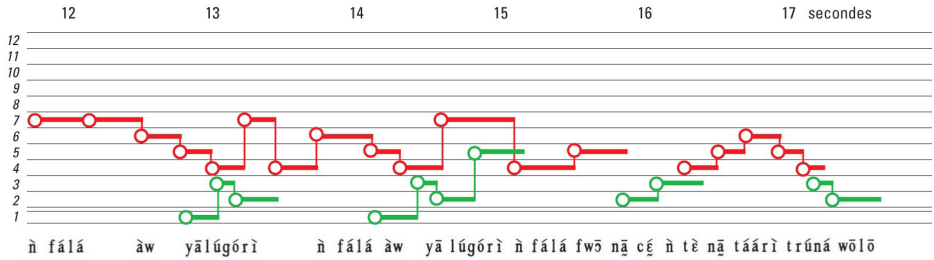
0:00	worked, his clothes slipped and fell
0:03	worked, his clothes, worked
0:06	worked, his clothes slipped
0:08	while trampling [the earth], his clothes slipped and fell one by one
0:12	worked, his clothes
0:14	worked, his clothes, worked until he cried
0:15	really while hollowing the earth, while removing it completely
0:17	really while hollowing the earth, while removing it everywhere
0:21	really while hollowing it, while removing it everywhere
0:23	really while working with his bones [with power]
0:24	as he works with his bones
0:25	as he works with his bones
0:27	ah! Sonan worked!
0:28	ah! Sonan worked!
0:30	ah! Sonan worked!
0:31	all of you, look!
0:32	or else would he then be a great lion?
0:34	as he works, you'd say that
0:36	you'd say a great lion
0:37	you'd say that
0:38	you'd say a great lion
0:41	all of you, look!
0:42	would he then be a great lion?

Afterwards, judging from his own experience as a balafonist, Sikaman Soro thought it very unlikely that Nahoua Silué had really meant to play these words, but that he had played variations as he pleased and later, on listening to the recording, had ascribed to them what words came to mind.

Looking at the transcription diagrams (Figs. 6a-c) confirms the rich musical invention which renews itself continually. No three to four second segment is the same as any other. In the context of the orchestra, the soloist plays fragments of several seconds, separated by short breaks, and positions these fragments in relation to the accompanying balafons. At the start of his solo demonstration (Fig. 6a, b), Nahoua Silué separated the first three segments but, lacking both the backing balafon ostinato and the drum rhythm, he subsequently played in a continuous pulse pattern.

During a friendly work party at the end of the following rainy season, Nahoua played Sonan's tune at length. On this occasion he started with the first fragment of the phrase, as in Fig. 6a, but went on immediately to other variations [CD No. 3, from 0:49]. The workers, swinging their big hoes and building mounds certainly don't have the time to follow the variations phrase by phrase, and even if they had the spare time, they would not be able to understand all the snatches the musician strings together. They recognise the main tune by its title "Sonan worked", as part of the farming repertoire which gives the workers energy and cheer.





Figs. 6 a, b, c. Graphic transcription of the first 17 seconds of variations on the words "Sonan worked...", played by Nahoua Silué.

For the balafonists, what counts is the pleasure of playing, of continuous variation to avoid monotony, of making music which is always interesting for those taking part – whether, as in this tune they are workers, or men or women dancers in other styles – and for the people in the audience. And to be sure, these are always many, both during collective work in the fields and during village dances.

On the occasion of a funeral, before starting to play, the musicians of the orchestra group together – the balafonists check the sound of the keys and the correct buzz of the mirlitons, the drummers heat their drum skins to tighten them – the solo balafonist generally plays a solo prelude. Even at a distance the regulars of the orchestra can recognise the soloist by his playing, a kind of signature. This prelude is called jédiɔ̄ɔ́í. Using this word, composed of the roots jé, balafon, and diɔ̄ɔ́í, the Jula language, the musicians make a connection between the prelude, which is non-text based, and the pronunciation of the Julas who, according to the Kafibele locals, speak fast and do not say much of any importance. Another term used is jézaari, the second lexeme zaari meaning "to cross", "to return to"; thus, after this prelude has been crossed, the soloist returns to the main tune.

Balafon words, drum languages

Reading Nketia's *Drumming in Akan Communities*, one can only be struck by the similarities between the technique of the Ghanaian drums and the Senufo balafons. To resume some of the description here, Nketia (1963: 17ff) distinguishes three modes of drumming: the *signal mode*, the *speech mode*, and the *dance mode*. The first is characterised by short, repetitive rhythms at one pitch level, with no connection with natural language. The *speech mode* can be recognised by rhythmic groupings separated by pauses and played at two pitch levels. The *dance mode* is built on regular pulses, played on secondary instruments such as the accompanying drums, the words being sounded by the *master drummer*. The drums with the deepest sound are the *master drums*, while the highest drums provide the musical ground (Nketia 1963: 27). The *speech mode* shares the musical basis of other drumming modes; many drummers first learn the rhythms, and only later the words. Combining tones and rhythms, beating

rhythms which are not translated into words, rehearsal and other aspects of style have to be handled by the *master drummer* to keep the musical interest up (ibid: 29). The use of texts as the basis of drum rhythms allows flexibility in the use of drumming modes, especially for dances. As long as there is a musical ground, the *master drummer* can move from *dance mode* to *speech mode*, or give instructions to the drummers, greet or praise the dancers, or quote a proverb if the situation calls for it. For the listener, it seems to be more important to appreciate the drum music and to make the appropriate body movements than to translate the words played on the instruments, although the pleasure given by the drumming and the depth of response are increased by understanding the texts (ibid: 49).

All the above features are equally characteristic of the Senufo balafons, except the *signal mode*, which only exists in the drumming. If we replace the words *master drummer* and "drum music" with "solo balafonist" and "balafon music", we get a description very close to what is proposed in our article.

Philippe Ciompi, in his Masters thesis on the kpōyē balafon music of the Tiebara Senufo (1983: 171-2), nevertheless reaches a negative conclusion regarding comparison with drum languages. But his arguments rest on a too-restrictive concept of drum languages. They can be outlined in four points:

1) Polyphony prevents a melodic line from being associated with the tones of a language.
2) The soloist's phrases are not as time-flexible as speech, as they are subject to the pattern of cycles and pulses.
3) There are numerous differences between linguistic tones and musical formulas.
4) The fact that most pieces are limited to one or two phrases goes against the idea of the primary procedure of conveying language information.

Philippe Ciompi's hypothesis is that the kpōyē pieces are simply instrumental versions of songs which the Senufo can recognise, just as a European listener can recall the words of a song played on a musical instrument if he has known the song before.

On my side, my analysis allows me to state that:

1) In practice, identifying the words (for those who know them) is not a problem, as they are essentially played by the soloist, just as in an Akan drum orchestra.
2) Temporal flexibility in order to imitate the flow of the spoken language is not a requirement, no more than in the Akan drum orchestras or the Baule bell ensembles[12].
3) Differences from linguistic tone equally exist in drum languages, just as they are also frequent in sung melodies in Africa (Wängler 1983).
4) Many of the words of balafon tunes are never sung. Regarding the risk of overvaluing the importance of music, it is not ethnomusicologists but semioticians who write:

[12] In a Baule bell trio, the highest bell provides a rhythmic ostinato, while the two bells playing the proverbs at two pitches follow strictly the pulses. In another recording on the same disc, the *master drummer* alternates solo phrases in the *speech mode* with phrases in the *dance mode* played over the musical ground of the accompanying drums [Disc 2, B6, 7].

> "The superimposition of musical structures upon verbal ones — most notably in instrumental surrogates — not only increases the intelligibility of messages but may serve certain aesthetic goals as well." (Sebeok & Umiker-Sebeok 1975: XX).

There is no doubt that balafon playing among the Senufo is part of the *abridgement system* of word substitutes proposed at the beginning of this article. Yet we can also see that certain tunes have a secondary function as "lexical ideograms". During our filming of a work party, the champion put down his hoe at the first sound of a tune and came to dance in front of the orchestra carrying a bird sculpture, the protector spirit of the workers. In another tune, two boys ran to look for leafy branches to dance with. The words were not known by the young balafonists, nor by the young farmers, but the meaning of the songs was identified immediately.

From his research among the Tiebara and the Nafara, two neighbouring Senufo groups, Oumar Coulibaly stated that the Nafara prefer a slow tempo, agreeing with their calm, well articulated way of talking, while the Tiebara talk in a more lively way and play with a faster tempo. This difference is recognised by listeners; some prefer the Tiebara manner, others the Nafara. Oumar Coulibaly quotes a Tiebara man who particularly appreciates "the poetry, the calm, the articulation, the precision" of Nafara balafon playing (1982: 93-4).

It is evident that the relationship between natural language and balafon playing goes beyond mere imitation, or rather transposition, of tonemes and long and short syllables. Senufo balafonists not only reproduce linguistic statements: they produce them while also making music. Balafon tunes, with their underlying words, bring into play interactive communication, artistic creativity and aesthetic pleasure. They bring joy to the musicians and to all those who take part in the event.

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[2] *The Joy of Youth*, 70 minutes, 2002.
[3] *The Wood and the Calabash*, 47 minutes, 2002.
[4] *Friend, Well Come!* 27 minutes, 2002.

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