Senufo Balafon Music

by Hugo Zemp

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Repertoires: Themes connected to circumstances

Other sets of circumstances during which different types of ensembles of balafons perform have more specific repertoires. Of the 60 texts translated in Marianne Lemaire’s article, all without exception had to do with work and competition. The author correctly saw that contrary to the songs made to accompany tamping down the earthen floors of houses, there was not “the same profound interweaving of the music and the gestures of working, nor the same inclination in the music to imitate the movements made while working” (1999:56). In effect, each worker wields his hoe at his own rhythm, independently of the rhythm and the tempo of the music, in contrast to what is found in many other forms of collective work in Africa, in which the rhythm of working movements is actually synchronized with music being played.

At the c³ʒm³ ceremony that takes place before the boys go into the sacred woods, balafons and flutes play words directly connected to that event and also to the relations between the sexes. The adolescent boys who play transverse flutes know the texts that go with their tunes; they use the words to help memorize the tunes. Young girls who dance to them know the words “by their intelligence,” as one of them said, without anyone having to teach them. The balafonists play different words at the same time [film 2]. We find here a simultaneity of different words analogous to the one between the solo balafonist and a singer during funerals and collective labor.

As for the dance-music of the ng³r³ celebrating the end of the cycle of initiation into the poro, the baba (‘father’ in Jula), leader in Nganaoni, maintained that the young female dancers knew only dance steps, but not the words of the balafons, understood only by initiates [film 2]. Förster (1984:32) published translations for three balafon tunes (or flute tunes ?) from the ng³r³, but he is an initiate. At any rate there are other words played on musical instruments and linked to the poro rites that are secret: those beaten on the big drums at funerals, whose meaning is only known to the drummers, who receive special training regarding it (Förster 1997:316, 361, 396).

Joy through Balafon Music

Amusement-game-music-dance

Among the Kabibele Senufo – as in most African societies – activities that would be characterized in the West as “musical” are not designated by an equivalent expression which occupies the same semantic field. One word often used in reference to balafon performances is k⁵r⁵i (definite singular), which includes such Western ideas as “amusement,” “game,” “music,” “dance,” whose verbal form is k⁵r⁵. Mills’ dictionary of
Tiebara speech gives 5 terms for “amusement” of which one is also translated as “music”: kɔ₃ɔᵣᵲ. Förster (1997:590) gives two different meanings for kɔ₃ɔᵣᵲ (with no nasalization and no glottal stop): 1) “that which is hidden,” 2) “music, dance” (without mention of the idea of amusement).7 Francophone Senufo, speaking of a festive event that includes music and dancing, generally use the word “dance,” a word whose acceptation for them is broader than it is in French, and which corresponds to their term kɔ₃ɔᵣᵲ.

Another word, used in a more restricted sense, is closer to French “danser”: yōō, whose nominal form singular is yɔᵣᵲ. This is only used to describe bodily movements without reference to music or to the world of “amusement”: for example, in speaking of the spinning movements of harp players, or of young girls dancing to the sound of the bɔᵣᵲ ensemble.

At the funeral of an old initiated man, the most important and costly of Senufo ritual performances, two kinds of ensemble are indispensable: that featuring the drums of the poro, the men’s initiatory society, and the kpɔyē balafon ensemble. When the novices and the initiates of the poro come out of the sacred woods marching in a column, beating long drums and barrel-shaped drums, and when they mill around the body wrapped in cloths, they are not performing an “amusement-game-music-dance” (kɔ₃ɔᵣᵲ), but a “work of the poro” (pɔᵣᵲ fәlû), that is, a ritual. There is nonetheless a word for “dance” (yɔᵣᵲ) in the more restricted sense of bodily movements that take place when, to the sound of drums, the masked ones (yәrәjә) come near the dead person one after the other, pressing against one leg, lifting another up, and finally mounting the body to pantomime a sexual act. The day after the burial, they repeat the same dance around a catafalque containing a stick wrapped in cloth to symbolize the dead person.

Förster (1999:58-59) has given a detailed analysis of the role of these masked persons, who do not produce an aesthetic pleasure for the people who attend the ritual (initiates and the direct descendants of the dead person), but whose actions are considered necessary. The leading poro masked figure, wearing an animal-form head in sculpted wood, has the task of assuring that the spirit has left the dead person in order to travel to the “village of the dead.” For this purpose the masked person strikes with increasing rapidity a small drum that is placed on top of the body wrapped in cloths. During all of this ritual – from the moment the big poro drums are heard, struck by the initiates coming out of the sacred woods, up to the moment the drummers return to the sacred woods – the balafons and the other ensembles gathered for the funeral must keep silence.

“Without the balafon, there is no joy”

Nahoua spoke these words while speaking of other “doings of the poro” (cãmã): the festive behavior two or three years before the boys enter the sacred woods to be initiated (cɔ₃ɔmә) and the festivities that bring a six-year period of initiation (ŋɔ₃ɔᵣᵲ) to an end. In both cases it is an “amusement-game-music-dance of the doings of the poro” (cãmã kɔ₃ɔᵣᵲ) during which the balafon brings “joy” (fʊdәrᵲ). Even during collective work in the yam fields, this feeling is not lacking.

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According to the Senufo tradition, if you want to cultivate a big field, you hire a balafon ensemble. When it plays for the field workers, they are filled with joy. If this was a field [showing with an arm gesture], without the balafon they would stop and leave the rest. But thanks to the balafon, to this joy, they’ll work to the very end.

– Finishing it thanks to the balafon?
– Absolutely! With joy! The balafon is indispensable for us! [film 2]

In an inquiry in the Tiebara region (in which collective labor had not been performed in twenty years), Marianne Lemaire (1999:58-59) insisted to the contrary upon the “moral and physical suffering” that balafonists shared with laborers. According to her, the Senufo did not think of the balafon playing as entertaining, in contrast with the singing of voices, but as a kind of work she compared to the demanding work of the laborers. At all events, in the Kafibele region, even if balafon playing during collective work can be called ‘work’, it still remains just as much an example of “amusement-game-music-dance,” because the pleasure of playing makes it easy to forget fatigue.

The words struck on the balafon and the words sung by the singer, if there is one, not only give joy to workers, but also “physical strength” (fǔgǔ). A few days after my arrival in Sirasso at the end of the rainy season, a old man, having learned that I wanted to film people working collectively in the fields, came to tell me he was about to organize collective labor. Later in the day I received the message that the owner of the field to be worked in wanted to reduce the expenses, essentially for food and beer made from corn, which would be connected to the hiring of musicians, and which would be added to the cost of the laborers. Still later I learned that the young people of his neighborhood refused to work without music, and finally a “friendly contest” indeed took place, with an ensemble of balafons – otherwise the workers would not have used their hoes to pile up large hummocks of earth in the man’s field, in which yam roots must then be planted.
The main day of a funeral, the day when the body is buried and when a vigil or wake is also held, is called kufúló, “crying over the dead.” Nonetheless, as Förster wrote concerning the ceremonial dance during the enshroudment of the dead person [film 5, commentary]:

It is striking that images familiar to us, of persons almost broken by sadness or bent under the weight of grief are lacking here .... At the same time, the dancing of people who are dressed for a party, even bizarrely dressed to our eyes, is a powerful expression of the joy of life even in the face of death.

Otherwise, Förster (1987:30) qualifies his remarks regarding wakes on the night following interment:

It is only for the young that enjoying oneself becomes the main goal. They come to see people they know from other villages, to make friends, to meet people. For older people, and especially for those who knew the dead person, the dance is an expression of grief. They explain to strangers that they organize all these events not for pleasure, nor for the beauty of the thing ; a simple question concerning this subject fills the respected elders with amazement. What is happening has more the character of a duty one must respect, something which must count as much as the death of someone close.

Nahoua may have a tendency to exaggerate the importance of his favorite instrument, but he is quite insistent about the “joy” grieving people get from the balafon, even during the ceremonial part of the funeral when the body is wrapped in cloths:

If you want a successful funeral, you must have joy (fudârî). If your father or your mother have died and there is no “amusement-play-music-dance” (kôsrô) to encompass them, there will be discontent. The whole village will insult you. But if I want to bring life to the funeral so as to lessen my grief, the balafon is essential. It is an “amusement-play-music-dance” that is really old. It stops the tears coming to our eyes and diminishes our grief. [film 2]

Older people know the tunes and lyrics that the balafons are playing when the dead are wrapped for burial, because they have danced dozens of times to the sound of the same songs. The young girls who dance behind the ensemble of balafons at wakes or at informal dance parties also know a large number of popular tunes, as evidenced by the enthusiasm with which they sing them [disc 4, A5, B1]. That which Nkétia (1963:49) wrote about the drum ensembles of the Akan of Ghana is equally true of the Senufo balafons:

For the listener the ability to appreciate the music of the drum and to make appropriate bodily movements or other responses counts far more than the ability to translate, though his enjoyment of drumming and the depth of his response would be enhanced were he able to do so.

The inner joy of the musician

Pleasure is felt not only by participants, whether workers or dancers; it comes also to musicians. At the end it is the solo balafonist, the one playing the lyrics, who expresses this most visibly, whether by crying out from joy or by dandling his instrument on his left knee. To understand this gesture we must recall that unlike Maninka musicians, Senufo musicians play standing and move around with the instrument, which is suspended from a strap around the player’s neck. The bottom of the frame rests on the thighs just above the knee, with the forward ends of the keys pointing downward. In other words, if the balafonist tried to walk normally, he would have the bottom of the instrument constantly being bounced up on one leg after the other. In order to keep the instrument level, musicians, with each step of the left leg, balance it back toward themselves, leveling the row of keys. Some players do this in an exaggerated manner, adding a visual element to their performance. When the musicians stay in one place, they can rest the bottom of the instrument upon both thighs. But in a particularly animated passage, like one that occurs in the nyôrô, [film 2] some balafonists can keep their left legs (and the instrument) going up and down in a choreographed movement performed while facing the row of young girls dancing. I was able to film a solo balafonist moving like this in honor of someone who had died, right in front of the house in which
Kpoyé balafon ensemble of the Tiebara Senufo, 1961.
the deceased was laid out. The balafonist hit the instrument so hard it flipped over.

In other circumstances the solo balafonist expresses his joy in playing at the beginning of a new song, and later at any moment, by bowing deeply forward, lowering the front of the instrument, and then kicking it upward with the left knee. Nahoua likes doing this just as much at funerals as during the collective field work [film 2]. On just such an occasion he expressed his joy at seeing the workers work so well – throwing up clods of earth in his yam field! – by crying out the lyrics as he was playing them.

Sikaman also expresses in a magnificent manner his personal experience as a balafonist:

I have played in many different circumstances – during occasions of rejoicing and also at the saddest funerals – and I was always filled with joy even if I could not show it, as at the death of a young person [something considered more tragic than the funeral of an older person seen as having lived a full life]. Here, I’ll give you another example: the first time I stopped crying over my mother’s death, at her funeral, was when I started playing the balafon while she was being wrapped in her shroud before being buried. This often happens when a balafon player loses a mother or father.

When I play, there is an inner joy that is expressed by movements of the body or cries of joy. This feeling of joy is even stronger when I begin a song whose words I know perfectly well. And the more I vary the words, the happier I am. One has told me, and I believe it, that the balafon is an instrument of djinni who make sounds while guiding the hands of the musician, as if they were within him. When I play the balafon, I can forget all care and I don’t feel tired at all. That is the inner joy of the balafonist.

What is the future of Senufo balafon music?

Ethnomusicologists have regretted the disappearance of traditional music genres in many different societies, a disappearance that is the result of changes that have dramatically accelerated, especially since the impact of globalization and the world music industry. When I came back to the Senufo land in 1998, I found balafon music extremely alive. As in the sixties, there were balafon performances every two or three days (sometimes every day) in neighboring villages. This is not the case, for example, with the trumpet ensembles that were associated with war and chieftainship: most youngsters have never seen nor heard such ensembles and were surprised when they heard my old recordings.

Balafon music doesn’t seem to be in imminent danger of disappearing, at least not among the Kafibele sub-group. In some areas, the situation might be different. According to a study that has been cited, the neighboring Tiebara have abandoned playing in yam fields as well as the collective work that went along with it. On the other hand, balafon performance, like traditional music in other African societies, has gained new venues, such as playing in church, for political rallies and national festivities, and in tourist centers. But all these opportunities are relatively infrequent. But there is one traditional circumstance in everyday life (if one may so express it) that will never disappear, that is held up as the principal reason for the perennity of balafon music. Nahoua, my main informant, answered a question from my research assistant, Sikaman, about the reason why many Kafibele youngsters still prefer to learn to play the balafon rather than the western instruments popular in the southern forest regions of Côte d’Ivoire:

Because of the funerals! With the balafon you begin the funerals, you wrap the dead, you greet the authorities. Suppose it was possible to replace it… Ah no! A man cannot know the future like God, but us, we believe in the perennity of the balafon. We can’t create modern musics and replace the balafon.

– Better not throw yourself away on futilities?
– We’re staying with the balafon!

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Different authors propose different tone notations and different translations of lyrics, and this does not have to be because of an error. Tones (and sometimes vowels) vary by aspect and mood of the verb, and by nominal form; the addition of a suffix can modify the tones of the root. Also, dialects and local parlance can produce not only variations in prosody, but also variations in segmentation of semantic units. Among for example the Dan of Côte d’Ivoire the dialect of the south (as also that of the Kafibele Senufo) includes a term which indicates such things as “amusement, (danceable) music, and dance,” tlo, while northern dialects separate “amusement,” tlo, from “(danceable) music and dance,” tâ (Zemp 1971: 69).

References


Discography

Filmography

Author’s note
Because of an error in the software transmission, the open ‘o’ has been printed as ‘a’ in part one of this article. The open ‘o’ is a different phoneme than the closed ‘o’ which exists also in Senar, the Senufo language. Please note corrections below:

Page 4:
kpØkmØ: timpani player (kùmØ or kmØ “to strike”)
jëgmØ: balafon player (kmØ, “to strike”)
jébØlØ: name of ensemble also referred to in briefer form as bØlØrØ after the name of the harp with two strings
jìsØsØ: characterized by large, cylindrical rattles made of metal, jìsØ,
bØlØsØrØ: an ensemble whose timpani have cases made from a calabash gourd
cØsØmØ: music and dance of the poro (pØrØ), the initiatory society for men
ògØrØ: music and dance of the poro (pØrØ), the initiatory society for men
jëngØrØ: trance-inducing music

Page 5:
kØjëŋgØ: that is, “carve out a balafon song”

Page 6:
(dØrØ): sung by young girls
bØlØrØ: balafon/harp ensemble

Page 7:
kØdØlØ: name of a type of mask