

Mamady Keita's Djembe Kan

By

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Mamady Keita is an undisputed master of the djembe who has dedicated his life to furthering the art of West African music, dance, and culture throughout the world. I like to call him “the Michael Jordan of the djembe.” His performances epitomize the art form. Mamady is known to play special improvised and unaccompanied djembe solos (called “Djembe Kan,” or “the sound of the djembe”) for his classes on rare occasions. It is indeed a treat to witness these electrifying performances. This transcription comes from the earliest recorded performance of which I am aware, issued on the double CD recording *Mögöbalu* (Fonti Musicali fmd 205) in 1995. You will most certainly want to hear this amazing performance as you study the transcription. You can purchase *Mögöbalu* online at Rhythm Traders here:

<http://www.africanrhythmtraders.com/html/djembecds.html>

While you are there, I also highly recommend Mamady Keita's other CDs *Nankama* and *Wassolon*, and the DVD *Djembe Kan*, featuring four American performances of this amazing improvisation. Each one is a unique creation. If you want to follow along with this particular transcription, however, you'll need to get *Mögöbalu*.

Djembe Kan is a study in the ambiguity of African rhythm. When I first listened to it, I couldn't tell if it was in four or in six! The effortless flow of rhythm seemed to weave between 12/8 and 4/4 time, now in one feel and now in the other. In his wonderful book, *The Conga Drummer's Guidebook*, Michael Spiro gives the following description this rhythmic phenomenon: “Instead of being evenly spaced, certain subdivisions are pushed closer together, which makes the time feel blurry. Half the time you can't tell is you're in a duple feel or a triple feel. And we're just not used to that ambiguity. Sometimes it even upsets us! I call the ‘averaging’ of rhythm between a four and a six feel ‘fix,’ (Four and Six)....” (Spiro 38). As you will see, Spiro hit the proverbial nail on the head with that assessment.

The notation key at the end of the transcription gives the most basic strokes commonly employed in djembe drumming (bass, tone, slap) plus some common embellished strokes (ghost strokes, muffled slaps, and high-pitched rim tones played with fingers). In order to keep the transcription clear and to avoid confusion and visual clutter, I intentionally left out two frequently-employed techniques Keita uses on this solo: muffled tones (“muffs”) and a secondary slap (sounds slightly lower in pitch and a bit more rounded in tone quality than a normal slap). When you listen to the recording, it should be apparent when these sounds appear.

The performance opens with a free introduction; unmeasured and spontaneous. Tempo is firmly established at measure 1 (fifth line in the score) with the basic djembe accompaniment rhythm to *Tiriba*, a festive rhythm from coastal Guinea, near Boke. Most performances of *Djembe Kan* include some reference to *Tiriba*. In this transcription, the reference is comparatively brief, but it does establish a strong 12/8 feel. Things get a little fuzzy in measure 10, which I believe serves as a bridge to what I call the “A” section. The “A” section is characterized by a lilting feel of eighth notes on either side of a pair of sixteenths. This section (measures 11 – 34) is firmly in “fix.” The pair of sixteenths (as I notate them) show clearly what Michael Spiro referred to as “certain subdivisions...pushed closer together, which makes the time feel blurry.” In fact, the figures are nearly identical to Spiro’s description of Mark Lamson’s conception of “fix” as triplets with an “inside flam” (Spiro “Example 9” 41). The two middle notes are “squeezed together” ever so slightly, just enough to blur the distinction between “four” and “six.”

The “A” section comes to a close in measure 34, where an unusual phenomenon occurs. A quintuplet appears just before the “B” section commences in a straight 4/4 feel. Later on, septuplets also appear in both the 12/8 and 4/4 sections. These types of “grupetti” (as John Cage and Henry Cowell used to call them) are not commonly found in African drumming, but my guess is that Mamady employed these figures simply to allow his dominant hand to land on the “downbeat” without doubling. This could be viewed as similar to the “squeezing” of the sixteenth notes in the “A” section. The quintuplets and septuplets are simply and effortlessly “squeezed” into the flow of time. The “B” section, firmly in 4/4 with a rock-like feel recalling the *dundunba* part to *Tiriba* (although *Tiriba* is a 12/8 rhythm, the lowest *dundun* part lays down a straight four feel), runs from measure 35 to measure 76, where another grupetto leads back into a new section in 12/8.

At measure 77, Keita slips back into “fix,” in 12/8 time, a return of the “A” section running to measure 128. At measure 129, a five-bar “bridge” section in 4/4 sets up the final return of the “B” section in a much faster tempo marked “Vif” at measure 131. From there to the end of the solo, Mamady pulls out all the stops with a dazzling display of drumming.

I view the form of this *Djembe Kan* as essentially a four-part form, with the unmeasured introduction and brief “Tiriba” section preceding the opening:

Intro “Tiriba” (bridge) A B A (bridge) B

While some may argue against transcribing African music, I have found the practice invaluable for developing an understanding of a musician’s creative process and expressive vocabulary. I hope others will try transcription practice as an effective means of honing their improvisational skills. For students interested in improving their djembe strokes, take note of Keita’s clarity of sound, especially regarding the volume and presence of his tones and the melodic variation he achieves by way of ingenious employment of muffs and secondary slaps interwoven among the primary strokes in the flow of rhythm.

References:

Keita, Mamady. 1995. *Mögöbalu*. Fonti Musicali, fmd 205.

Spiro, Michael. 2006. *The Conga Drummer's Guidebook*. Petaluma, CA: Sher Music Co.