Mamady Keita’s “Kassa”

BY B. MICHAEL WILLIAMS

MAMADY KEITA IS AMONG THE foremost jembe players in the world. A longtime member and former artistic director of the Djoliba National Ballet of Guinea, he now resides in Belgium, where he continues to perform and teach the rhythms and culture of his native land. His recordings, on the Fonti Musicali label, exemplify the artistry of the jembe.

This transcription of “Kassa” comes from Mamady’s first CD recording, Wassolon (Fonti Musicali fmd 159), with his ensemble known as Sewa Kan. “Kassa” is a traditional Malinke rhythm of harvest, accompanying the work of farmers in the fields. The ensemble on this recording consists of one lead jembe, one supporting jembe, and three graduated bass drums: a low-pitched dundun, middle-pitched sangba (on which is attached a bell) and high-pitched kenkeni, along with a gourd rattle (shekere) called djabara.

**Kassá**
Mamady Keita
(Jembe Ensemble)

Transcription by Michael Williams

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**Intro**
(Fade in)

**Lead Jembe**

**Jembe 2**

**Bell**

**Sangba**

**Kenkeni**

**Dundun**

**Shekere**

All parts gradually louder until call is sounded.
The performance begins with the dunduns and bell alone playing an interlocking pattern that gradually increases in volume, setting up a call-and-response vocal between Keita and the ensemble. At the song’s conclusion, a jembe call is sounded and the drumming begins in earnest. The ensemble of cyclical, interlocking rhythms supports Keita’s virtuosic jembe solo—a dazzling display of improvisational skill. The call-and-response vocal returns in the middle of the performance, this time interspersed with short statements from Keita’s solo jembe.

Keita’s solo initially grows out of a leading motive characterized by a steady off-beat pattern (see bar 4), which interlocks with the fixed accompaniment motive of the supporting jembe. This leading motive is gradually transcended, however, as the soloist begins to explore new realms of time perception through the use of polyrhythm (also referred to in this article as “cross rhythm”), syncopation
and tonal variation achieved through various combinations of slaps and tones (also referred to here as “tonal configuration” or “sonority patterning”).

In this improvisation, Keita shows a distinct preference for the 4:3 cross rhythm created through a rhythmic sequence consisting of a triplet followed by a single 16th note. This sequence may be found in various tonal configurations throughout the solo (see bars 20, 47, 49 and 61). A partial statement of this same sequence may be found in bar 13, as well as in the call sounded in bar 1 and again in bar 81.

Another example of the 4:3 cross rhythm may be found at bar 91, where the cross rhythm is created within a fixed 16th pattern. A ternary sonority pattern (slap, slap, tone) is executed within an overall binary (16th) subdivision to create a polyrhythmic relationship to the main quarter-note pulse. This use of tonal configuration to create polyrhythm may also be found at bar 25, where a 3:2 cross rhythm is created through the sounding of a binary sonority pattern (slap, slap, tone, tone) within an overall ternary (16th triplet) subdivision.

Two additional examples of altered time perception deserve mention. At bar 58, a four-bar phrase is constructed using a triplet/duplet rhythmic sequence. This series of triplet/duplet figures begins with a contracted gesture consisting of a triplet followed by a single 16th note. This creates an anticipation of each main beat over the span of three bars, culminating in the now-familiar 4:3 triplet/16th cross rhythm in bar 61. The aural result of this systematic procedure is a gradual increase in rhythmic tension, which is ultimately resolved on the final beat of the four-bar phrase.

The same triplet/duplet figure (which ultimately derives from the call motive in bar 1) is used in a slightly different manner in bars 83-85. Here, rather than contracting the gesture by a 16th note as he did in bar 58, Mamady extends the motive by a 16th note, creating what amounts to a 4:5 cross rhythm that undergoes two complete sequences. The first sequence begins on the downbeat of bar 83 and runs to the end of main beat 1 in bar 84 (five beats), and the second runs from beat 2 of bar 84 to the end of beat 2 in bar 85 (also five beats). In each of these five-beat spans, the triplet/duplet figure occurs exactly four times, hence the 4:5 cross rhythm.

Though his polyrhythmic excursions are indeed impressive, the driving force behind Keita’s solo technique may be found in his masterful manipulation of syncopation together with an almost melodic approach to improvisation achieved through sonority patterning. Some notable examples of this technique may be found at bars 27-30, 32-34, 38-42, 51-53, 62-60, 92-96 and 100-108.

One will note the conspicuous absence of bass strokes in both solo and supporting jembe parts in this transcription. According to Mark Sunkett, it is common among Guinean drummers to favor the slap and open tones, as contrasted with drummers from Mali, for example, who utilize the bass stroke prominently (Sunkett 1995, 36-38). In his article “A Guide to the Jembe,” Eric Charry alludes to this phenomenon in his description of the fundamental jembe accompaniment patterns, in which he notes the occasional omission of the bass stroke by Guinean players (Charry 1996, 69).

This transcription reveals Mamady Keita’s mastery of improvisation—a skillful juxtaposition of polyrhythmic ideas with quasi-melodic, syncopated lines. Study and practice of Keita’s work provides valuable insight into the technique and structure of jembe improvisation. What cannot be captured on paper is the emotion and expressiveness, the sheer joy and power of his performance—an experience well worth hearing for oneself.

REFERENCES
Kassá
Mamady Keita
(Solo Jembe)

Transcription by Michael Williams
Gradually softer to end

(Play 9x)
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