

# A Jembe Lesson with Yaya Diallo

By B. Michael Williams

**Y**AYA DIALLO, MASTER JEMBE artist and author of *The Healing Drum* (Destiny Books, 1989), is also a gifted teacher. In February of 1995, I had the pleasure of taking a jembe lesson with this Minianka master drummer from Mali, West Africa.

The thirty exercises presented in this article, gleaned from that singular encounter, represent a systematic approach to developing the essential techniques of jembe drumming. The three basic strokes ("bass," "tone," and "slap") are presented in a thoroughly logical sequence with the intent of developing clarity of sound and ambidexterity. In addition to the basic developmental exercises, Yaya includes some typical accompaniment patterns (exercises 19 and

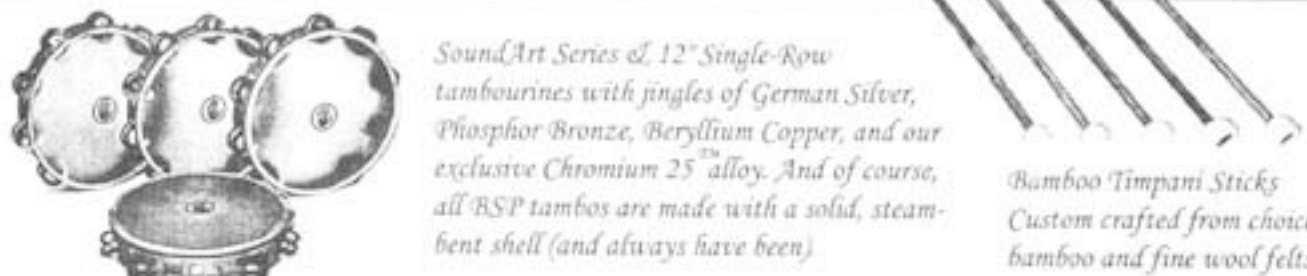
20) and a composition from his native village of Fienso in Mali ("Outeme," exercises 25-30). "Outeme" is recorded on Diallo's recent CD, *Dounoukan* (Everyone's Drumming ED 1195, P.O. Box 361, Putney, VT 05346, Ph/Fax (802) 387-2249).

It is of utmost importance to maintain a sense of rebound (what Diallo refers to as "up and down" motion) in both tones and bass strokes. The broken 8th-note patterns that accelerate (exercises 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 13, 15 and 16) should create a sensation of "churning" from the elbow as the hands lift off the surface of the head. The faster one plays these exercises, the more the 8th notes should "straighten out," until they eventually sound as straight 8ths in 4/4 time. The exercises marked "cross" re-

fer to crossing from one hand to the other, rather than literally crossing the hands.

Diallo describes the tone stroke as the most difficult and encourages careful attention to the rebound in developing a full sound. Slaps should be approached in a relaxed manner, with a whip-like motion "at the last second." Like a Zen master, Diallo advises: "Don't think about it, then you will see." He also stresses the importance of practicing tones and slaps with the weak hand (for which exercises 6, 8, 14 and 16-18 are especially helpful).

These exercises will improve any hand drummer's technique, and can be applied equally to conga drums as to jembe or other similar drums. As Diallo concludes: "Practice these exercises every day, and you will



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# Yaya Diallo

Jembe Exercises

Transcription by Michael Williams

## Notation Key

3/4

Bass      Tone      Slap

### 1 Bass

### 2

R L R L      L R L R      L R L R

L R L R      R L      R L R

### 3 Tone

### 4 Bass/Tone

*accel.*

R L R L      R R L L R R L L R

L R L R

### 5 Tone/Bass

*accel.*

### 6

R R L L R R L L R      R R R R L L L L R

### 7 "Cross"

*accel.*

### 8

*accel.*

R L L R R L L R R      R L R L R L R L R L

### 9 Slap

### 10 Bass/Slap

*accel.*

R L R L      R R L L R R L L R

L R L R

11 Slap/Bass *accel.* 12

R R L L R R L L R R R R L L L L R

13 "Cross" *accel.* 14 *accel.*

R L L R R L L R R R L R L R L R L R L

15 Tone/Slap *accel.* 16 *accel.*

R R L L R R L L R R R L L R R L L R

17 18 Bass/Tone/Slap

R L R L R L R L L R L R L R L L R L R

19 Typical accompaniment patterns 20

R L R R L R L R R L R L R R L R L

21 Additional Tone/Slap Exercises 22 23

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

be able to play anything. In two months you will be able to play percussion, and people will say, 'Wow!,' because you will be able to play the bass, the tones and the slaps and know how to control them."

As with the study of any musical instrument, the development of technique on the jembe should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a means to the greater end of artistic expression. "Rapid,

dexterous playing fascinates youth but represents only a stage through which a musician passes," says Diallo in *The Healing Drum*. "Playing the instrument should look easy. It is art."

24 Tone/Slap with Ghost Strokes

R R L R (L) R R L R (L)

25 "Outeme" (wo-TIM-ee)  
Introductory Exercises

R R R L R

26 Outeme (skeleton)

R R R L R

27 Outeme - Running with Ghost Strokes

R R R L R R L L R

28 Variation 1

R (L) R (L) R L (R) (L) R (L) R L (R) L R (L)

29 Variation 2

R (L) R (L) R L (R) (L) R (L) (R) L (R) (L) R L

30

R (L) R (L) R L (R) (L) R (L) R L (R) L R L PN



"The Minianka appreciate a musician who has internalized his skills to the point that he can relax while playing." **B. Michael Williams** teaches percussion at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, where he also directs the Winthrop Percussion Ensemble. He holds a BM degree from Furman University, MM from Northwestern University, and Ph.D from Michigan State University. Williams is active as a performer and clinician in symphonic and world music, and his compositions are published by HoneyRock Publications.