

Damba

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Damba, a Malinke pre-marriage rhythm, played on the occasion of the bride's ritual bath before the marriage ceremony. This rhythm has the signature 'Dunumba Family'-kenkeni part. 'Dunumba' rhythms are primarily danced by men as a display of strength and beauty. *Damba* is traditionally played for a young woman preparing for marriage. The break is the garden-variety 12/8 one, not normal signature 'Dunumba' break (sstsss).

*Eh damba n'nya ko la damba leila, eh damba n'nya ko la damba leila
eh damba n'nya ko la damba leila,
kore kore ji da ko man di, damba la ko la fisa*

*Eh the river bank, I want to wash my face by the river bank (3X)
the wash-water is not sweet, it's good to wash by the river bank*

Notes on the lyrics:

The sense of line four is that water you have washed in 'ji da ko', contains the dirt which has left your body. Now that it has the dirt it is 'not sweet' - 'man di' - 'sweet' meaning, by implication, 'clean' or 'interesting'. The imagery is of life before marriage. The singers tell the young bride-to-be that what she has literally and figuratively left behind in the wash water is no longer interesting. In essence, the song tells the young woman that it's time to leave behind the things of childhood and embrace her new identity as a wife. The lyric is a good example of Mande rhetorical techniques of metaphor and indirection.

The partial translation provided in the CD liner notes renders the first line as 'I wash my face'. The lyrics themselves are somewhat ambiguous as to who is singing, the bride-to-be or the other villagers. If they are 'n'nya,' then they mean 'my face'. If, instead, they are 'I'nya,' they mean 'your face'. In either case, the sound indicating possession, 'n' for 'my' or 'I' for 'your', is somewhat hidden by the singers' pronunciation in the context of the song. Both translations work.

Notes on the performance:

Washing is very important in Mande (and in many other West African peoples') ritual, both daily rituals and special rites of passage. On a daily basis, Mande people wash their hands immediately before eating, a cleansing which is especially important hygienically because they eat with their hands. A large calabash full of water is kept by the eating spot so everyone can wash

their hands before reaching into the communal plate. But washing the body has symbolic power as more than removing sweat and soil. Washing also bears the meaning of personal transformation and inner purification. That is, through washing, one becomes more like what one is supposed to be. A young man washes as part of the circumcision ritual to symbolically leave behind his childhood and assume the mantle of adulthood. A young bride washes away her girl self as she prepares to enter her husband's home as wife and, soon, mother as well. Mande Muslims wash to purify themselves for their daily prayers, to make themselves and their prayers acceptable to Allah. Understanding the symbolic importance of the washing referred to in the song can help us perform the piece with a more authentic feel.

Famoudou's performance of *Damba* begins with a solo voice singing in solemn and reverential tones. The solemnity seems appropriate to the occasion. A young woman preparing to enter her husband's house may well feel joy and excitement, but also some fear of the unknown hardships to come and at the loss of childhood freedoms and the comforts of her parents home. When the drums enter, the mood changes to one of vigorous movement forward. The drums urge the young woman on to embrace her new life and to allay her fears. The music itself might be seen as an act of transformation as well. The sound of the drums and song sonically 'wash' the young woman, separating her past from her future. The liner notes for the CD also indicate that this piece is played on the return from the river bank, hence one might also hear this rhythm as a song of welcoming. (Thanks to Adam Rugo for this additional information)

Kenkeni	•	••	••	••	••
	x x	x x	x x	x x	x x

Sangban	○		•	•	
	x	x x	x	x x	x

Doundoun		••	••	••	••
	x x	x x	x x	x x	x x

Call	T	T	T	T	T	T	
	f	r	l	l	r	r	l

Djembé 1	S	T	S	S	T	S
	r	r	l	r	r	l

Djembé 2	S	T	S	S	T	S
	r	r	l	r	r	l

Djembé 3	S	S	T	T	S	S	T	T
	r	l	r	l	r	l	r	l

Sangban	○	●	●	●	○	●	●	●	
variation 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Sangban	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
variation 2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Sangban	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	
variation 3	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Sangban	○	●	●	●	●	●		
variation 4	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Sangban	○	●	●	●	●	●	
variation 5	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

The sangban part is very similar to the sangban for Dunungbè - the bell is the same - but in this piece the sangban has one additional note. The dounoun drum also plays three, rather than two, two-note phrases. You can distinguish between Damba and Dunungbè by the pitch relationships in the ensemble rhythm:

Dounounbe ensemble sound

note here: the "kenkeni window" - the rest in the sangban/dounoun conversation leaves room for one complete articulation of the kenkeni phrase.

Kenkeni	●	●	●	●	●
Sangban	○			●	
Doundoun			●	●	●
Djembé accents					

Damba ensemble sound

note here: the "kenkeni window" only gives space for a single note from the kenkeni phrase.

Kenkeni	●	●	●	●	●
Sangban	○		●	●	
Doundoun		●	●	●	●
Djembé accents					

Sources

Written material: Famoudou Konaté, Adam Rugo