

# Musical resources and stylistic adaptability in the *kamalengoni* music of Burkina Faso

Alfonso Castellanos

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales – Institut des Mondes Africains, France

[a.castellanos@ehess.fr](mailto:a.castellanos@ehess.fr)

**Abstract:** Since the boom in wassoulou music from south Mali in the 1990s, the *kamalengoni* harp lute has extended to the neighbouring country of Burkina Faso, leading the way to new forms of cultural appropriation and adaptation of local and foreign music. In the urban center of Bobo-Dioulasso, this phenomenon reflects the development of a proper burkinabé musical identity, mostly inspired by the traditional songs of the dyula *balafon* and reveals the continuous explorations and stakes of musicians looking to achieve their personal style. This article seeks to analyse some of the resources that are assembled in the creative process of burkinabé *kamalengoni* players, while highlighting the notions that give sense to their quest of originality.

**Keywords:** kamalengoni, Mande music, cultural appropriation, musical adaptation and innovation.

## A recent history of cultural influences

The *kamalengoni*<sup>1</sup> is a relatively recent instrument in the Mande region<sup>2</sup> that has played an important role in the modern shaping of Malian music; nonetheless it holds direct links with other musical traditions whose historical depth is significant. Some research has been done on the Malian *kamalengoni*, mainly the works of Durán (1995, 2000) and Maxwell (2002), but none has been conducted in Burkina Faso. Given the dissimilarity in the process of popularization of the instrument in Mali and in Burkina and its links with distinct musical filiations in these countries, here we will explore some of the ways in which the dynamics of appropriation have occurred and developed since the vulgarization of the *kamalengoni* in this country.

In the city of Bobo-Dioulasso<sup>3</sup>, the practice of the *kamalengoni* started spreading in the **1990's as a** result of the commercial boom of the so-called wassoulou music from Mali, whose major international star is the singer Oumou Sangaré. Inspired by the video clips of this new genre and by the concerts of Malian musicians in the city, the instrument expanded **through the regional network of festivals such as the “Semaine Nationale de la Culture<sup>4</sup>” (National Culture Week) and it was rapidly adapted to the** local musical scene. Musicians from Bobo-Dioulasso have grown up listening to large amounts of Mande music and this has had a remarkable impact on their musical taste and feeling. This was unanimously attested by the musicians with whom I have worked, who agreed in saying that Malian and Guinean music had become major inspirations in their lives through the songs that they heard on the radio and through the video clips that were constantly diffused on television.

The Mande influence is then something that prevails in the multicultural context of the city. The dyula, a Mande language, is the *lingua franca* of the region where the city is situated and the principal means of communication. As the work of Lamine Sanogo (2013) has shown, the adoption of dyula as a common language plays a significant role in the construction of a local urban identity as well as in the assimilation of a number of Mande cultural practices. The process of appropriation that we observe through language and music evolves very rapidly in the city. As we can see within the

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<sup>1</sup> Literally “youth harp”.

<sup>2</sup> A cultural compound that founds its historical core in the zone between Guinea-Conakry and Mali, and that includes parts of Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso.

<sup>3</sup> The second largest city in Burkina Faso, it is an important commercial center and cultural crossroads situated in the southwest. Some of the most well known burkinabé musicians, such as the *jembe* player **Adama Dramé, the groups ‘Farafina’ and ‘Les Frères Coulibaly’, as well as the singers Tidiani Coulibaly, Abdoulaye Cissé and Victor Démé** come from this city.

<sup>4</sup> The SNC is the most important cultural event in Bobo-Dioulasso. Produced every two years under the principle of regional competitions, it stands as a platform of diffusion for young people in different domains of arts and sports.

new burkinabé generations, the familiarisation with the dyula language is much more than a platform for the inter-comprehension of different populations. Dyula is a directing referent in all the southwest region of Burkina and its influence has a major impact on identity terms. This influence tends to increase in individuals of younger generations whose bonds with the language and the cultural practices of their parents have disappeared.

In addition to this, compared to countries as Senegal, Mali or Guinea-Conakry, who, since their independence, have benefited from national cultural programmes and created orchestras, musical companies and ballets that became a general model in West Africa, Burkina Faso experienced some difficulties in developing a musical production oriented by a national identity discourse: all of the orchestras of the country **were private and it wasn't until much later that the State developed cultural** programmes that were shaped, by reproducing the very same model conceived by their neighbours.

### **Musical performance in changing contexts**

What is interesting about the *kamalengoni* given this situation? The *kamalengoni* **stems from the hunters' harp lute called** *donsongoni*, a cordophone forming part of a wide variety of West African harp lutes. In the cultural region of the Mande we find several types of harp lute, the most well known certainly being the *kora*, a heptatonic (7-note) griot<sup>5</sup> harp popularised in the eighties and nineties by Mory Kanté and Toumani Diabaté. In an over-all sense, the *kamalengoni* reproduces the model of the **hunters' harp, but the evolution of** the instrument in later decades has brought some modifications. The more evident are of a smaller size than the calabash and the number of strings varies between six or eight and going up to sixteen or eighteen in some burkinabé varieties. Nevertheless, they both use the same playing techniques and the same tuning in an anhemitonic pentatonic scale<sup>6</sup>.

The figure of the hunter is conceived as a foundational element of traditional society **embodying the ancestral values of the Mande people. Hunters' music has** achieved a national character, particularly in Mali, where it became a mass mediated style thanks to cultural policies dedicated to documenting local folklore. Heirs of this period are the singers Baala Jimba Diakité and Toumani Koné (Charry 2000: 83 and Durán 2000: **176**). **These artists have given some examples of the notorious influence of hunters'** music on a number of griot musicians, who have taken it as a source of inspiration for

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<sup>5</sup> Griots, called *djeli* in dyula, are professional musicians belonging to specific family lineages.

<sup>6</sup> Although pitch oscillations are frequent, depending on the musician, the standard tuning of the instrument may be noted as DEGAC.

their compositions.

**Since its advent in the 1950's, the *kamalengoni* became the epicenter of a transformation process that implied its dissociation from the ritual context of hunters' brotherhoods and the opening, by young players who were not hunters, of new social spaces outside this ceremonial environment.** This phenomenon brought an important change in the Malian musical scene and named a new genre - **baptised "wassoulou"** - after the name of the region that saw the birth of the instrument. From this moment on, the *kamalengoni* has been the emblematic element of this music. Today, the *kamalengoni* plays an important role in entertainment spaces such as **festive occasions of Mali's southern villages and of Bamako's neighborhoods.** However, in Burkina Faso *kamalengoni* playing has rarely been integrated in the naming ceremonies and marriages that constitute the festive everyday life of the city. In Bobo-Dioulasso, the social contexts of musical performance are very different, in that *kamalengoni* music is produced mostly in spare time situations that do not belong to a **ceremonial sphere.** A large number of "bobolais" *kamalengoni* players are young men that amuse themselves in a recreational context without developing a professional practice. Very few of them are committed entirely to the instrument and have succeeded in building a professional career<sup>7</sup>. In other cases, many of the musicians that play the *kamalengoni* usually consider themselves as excelling in another instrument (usually *jembe* and *balafon*) or have been drawn toward the *kora*<sup>8</sup>. But despite the amateurism that surrounds the practice of *kamalengoni*, the instrument has been integrated to the concert stage where all kinds of musical styles and actors converge: griots, reggae men, rappers and western musicians, a place of confluence that opens the possibilities for musical exchange and creation.

What is certain is that the assimilation of the *kamalengoni* in Burkina has been a very audacious process. The number of strings has increased considerably, boosting new technical and melodic possibilities. Moreover, the experimentation with new tunings and the mixing of playing techniques (especially the rolling patterns used in the *kora* as well as the simultaneous playing of octaves) are all factors that tend to draw both the *kora* and the *kamalengoni* closer in a certain sense. While in Mali the fields of both instruments are completely different and each one of them is associated with very distinct musical filiations (griot music for the *kora* **and hunters' music for the**

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<sup>7</sup> The few cases of *kamalengoni* players that have developed an artistic career might be those of Dicko Fils, who comes from the region near Ouagadougou, and Baba Commandant who started touring with the singer Victor Démé a couple of years before his death in 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Such is the case of Ibrahim Keita and Kantala Traoré, both musicians from Bobo-Dioulasso that have established in the capital Ouagadougou. The latter has even invented a double-necked "*kora/ngon*" allowing him to play independently on the *kamalengoni* and the *kora* tunings.

*kamalengoni*), in Burkina the porosity between these musical fields is much more generalised. This shows that, given the recent history of the *kamalengoni* in this country and given its localisation in a new cultural context in contrast to the Malian one, the instrument has not only been much less restrained by traditional codes but has also defined a proper musical identity, modelled by the pieces that have a greater visibility in the musical landscape of the region. In this sense, the influence of the pentatonic xylophone is definitely one that has had a major impact in the unique sound of the burkinabé *kamalengoni*.

The pentatonic xylophone is certainly the instrument that is more prominently associated to traditional music in Burkina. Different types of pentatonic xylophones<sup>9</sup> are particularly present in Bobo-Dioulasso, especially the variety known as “*dyula bala*”. **The “*dyula bala*” has become a standard instrument, allowing for the adaptation** of the other xylophone styles in a single one, a phenomenon that might lead us to suggest that a significant parallelism exists between the use of the dyula language as a *lingua franca* and the use of *dyula balafon* as an interface permitting the normalization of a common musical language distinctive of the urban center of Bobo-Dioulasso. Given the broad presence of this music in the city, the *kamalengoni* **immediately took the path of its influence. Songs as “*Sin tè kònò fè*”, “*Orodara Sidiki*” and “*Jarabi*” that belong to the repertoire of the *dyula balafon*,** have thus been absorbed, constituting the popular corpus of the burkinabé *kamalengoni* music. And, if it cannot be said that the burkinabé *kamalengoni* restrains to this corpus, it certainly can be affirmed that of all the musical sources that converge in the *kamalengoni* practice, the music of *dyula balafon* is the one that stands out.

### **Resources and notions on musical creation**

Here, I will focus on some of the ways in which musicians claim their legitimacy regarding the multiple sources that constitute their inspirational background. One particular recurrent case is the one in which the different musical patterns of a pre-existing song (such as melo-rhythmic patterns, melodic lines, and text lines) are emulated or substantially recomposed, producing original compositions. The habit of taking pre-existing melodies, changing the words of the song and adding some original arrangements, for example, is a resource that has been largely exploited by African musicians. It started becoming even more evident with the formation of new orchestras that adapted Cuban, Congolese and European music to local languages. Another ordinary resource is the transposition of a specific rhythmic and melodic pattern (an

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<sup>9</sup> Xylophones are associated with the populations of the region: bwa, dagara, siamou, senufo, etc.

accompaniment or a phrase) to a different scale. In this case the musician takes advantage of a pattern familiar to him, to produce a new sound resulting from a different pitching of the notes. The new pattern may or may not be enriched with the addition of other notes to the initial pattern. In both cases the final result will be very different from the first pattern, due to the musical arrangement of the whole song. In most cases, the arrangement is structured following the model of an introduction, some ornamental breaks and a coda, which might be generally identical to the introduction or a variation of it.

For the musicians of Bobo-Dioulasso, an important amount of musical creation seems to depend on musical arrangement. Their description of the task of musical arrangement and their definition of personal style are commonly explained by the **notion of “mélange” (mixing or blending), an expression that comes out as the conventional and vital term for contemporary African musicians concerning musical creation. As one of these musicians used to tell me: “everyone has his own way of playing. You can create something, but if it doesn’t become a trend and if it is not known by the others, the person who is going to take it over and play it better until it becomes public and liked, is going to wipe away the older thing<sup>10</sup>.”** This argument seems relevant to me in that it stresses the idea that you can copy any existing melody as long as you add something new to it. Even if people already know a certain melody, you can be respected and liked as a musician if you take it and create something different from it. Nevertheless, while constantly evoking this capacity of compositional recycling and **stylistic adaptation, musicians do not cease to highlight the fact that the “origins” of a particular song should not be forgotten.**

The multiple influences absorbed through the burkinabé *kamalengoni* playing make the process of musical creation a constant quest for musicians developing their artistic **project. This stands out through the conspicuous usage of the term of “recherche”** (research) in their discourse. First of all, their use of this notion points out that their relation to the *kamalengoni* is first and foremost an individual act where the singularity featured in technique and repertoire cannot be traced to another specific individual. Secondly, it puts the emphasis on innovation as a result of an artistic approach based on the appropriation and emulation of local and foreign music. Research is certainly crucial in the work of musicians, and particularly in self-taught musicians who, not having learned with any teacher, are compelled to manage themselves to reproduce what they hear and attracts their interest. In doing so, they distance themselves from a process of vertical transmission of knowledge, expanding their musical universe with

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<sup>10</sup> Yaya Diabaté, interview 2014.

the music that circulates in the city. Musicians can be more or less concerned with the **appropriation of sources considered as ‘traditional’ and with claiming, or not claiming,** their importance as a common cultural heritage. Nonetheless, it is quite usual to find in burkinabé *kamalengoni* musicians a clear will to establish the diverse filiations with which they identify themselves and to recognize them as their inspiration, while always accentuating their personal contribution in the creation of a new musical result.

**Finally, another notion that stands out in the musicians’ discourse is that of “évolution”.** **This term helps to validate the musician’s sense of belonging to a particular musical** filiation and, at the same time, it clarifies their awareness of the fact that creativity should not rest, tied (at all costs) to tradition or to a common cultural heritage. Musical exchange with local and foreign musicians is always perceived as an opportunity to learn and to enrich musical experience. Collaboration with foreign musicians in European festivals has a notable effect on musicians, which can be more patent in the use of the chromatic scale and in the growing interest that African musicians have in jazz, even if their idea of jazz can be questioned. The notion of evolution is then understood as music in constant transformation and as the obligation of the musicians to cultivate their own style.

## **Conclusion**

The musical practice of *kamalengoni* in Bobo-Dioulasso is a good example of the new scenarios through which musicians of so-called traditional instruments adapt to a changing musical landscape in urban West Africa. The process of enculturation and the influence of mass media in a context marked by a deep history of commercial and cultural exchange shows us that identity always passes through appropriation and that appropriation is always transformative. Nourished from any kind of influences, the project of these musicians is one based on artistic singularity and creative strategies, as well as the notions that I have mentioned here, illustrate in some way the negotiations between past and present, foreign and local, in musical innovation.

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