

Formulaic Variation Procedures in Mande Griot (*Jeli*) Guitar Playing and Improvisation

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In Mande griot guitar playing, improvisation occurs within strictly defined limits and along formulaic lines. Attending to different levels of variation and embellishment (*birimintingo*), guitarists use stock note patterns as formulas or recurrent themes (*kumbengolu*) to continually recompose a particular framework or model that identifies each piece and its associated performance(s). Themes are arranged, juxtaposed, and interpolated in improvised solos, whereby a form of discourse is created through extended variation—a term that loosely characterizes acts of composition, improvisation, and playing (*foli*). Units of greater length are often composed with formulas and themes in syntagms as episodes. As with spoken languages, a discernable style (*langue*) emerges from the use of patterns as expressions (*parole*) that follow one another in succession. The aim of this essay is to show the extent to which the use of formulas and themes predominates in Mande griot guitar improvisation and how a distinctive style emerges from guitar playing in performance. While the degree to which parts are recomposed and reordered varies from one performance to the next, formulaic variation procedures characterize Mande guitar improvisation as well as other types of Mande instrumental playing (*foli*).

For griots, the term variation denotes additions to or alternatives to an instrumental accompaniment (Charry 2000, 314). In her study of theme and variation in *kora* (21-string harp) music, Lucy Duràn (1981) broadly conceives different types of variation in three categories. Of these categories, only two are relevant to guitar playing. In the first type of variation, improvised playing is based upon melodic ideas that are inherent in or wed to the recurrent themes. It

involves the use of additional notes and figures as either passing tones or substitute *kumbengo* notes that are typical of a particular piece. These internal embellishments are often learned as formulas that adorn the main pitches of each theme. Duràn describes the second type of improvisation as variation departing from the *kumbengo* or theme. It consists of the substitution of a new phrase for part of the theme, usually as a rapid ornamental formula. From her preliminary study, one can begin to see how formulas are employed to either embellish or move away from the themes whose realization(s) and juxtaposition comprise and identify a performance, especially if there are no vocals. Whether a player is “coming” or “going,” he is bound to the associated variations and suitable places for inserting ornamental phrases understood in relation to a theme whose parts are learned, internalized, and recycled by guitarists and other instrumentalists.

Moving from Duràn’s analysis, it is important to consider other studies of variation in African music. In Northern Ewe song, a handful of melodic and harmonic models provide the basis of variation procedures that affect nearly all of a song’s dimensions (see Agawu 1990). Vocalists internalize a single melodic shape whose normative realization and modification by truncation, extension, or internal repetition of fragments inform different types of singing. In Ful’be praise song, a model or *taakiyaare* is employed and subjected to variation in different idioms (see Erlmann 1985). Singers choose from a stock of *daaride*—clusters of pitches and rhythmic patterns organized in recurring cycles that follow one another—to create song as an improvised expression of an individual performer. Varying the sequential arrangement of different *daaride* in these cycles is an integral part of Ful’be song, thereby linking Erlmann’s study to my understanding of Mande guitar playing and improvisation. While variation in vocal music is significant and by no means limited to this brief survey of two more recent works,

scholars have also examined the use of variation procedures in different instrumental practices of Africa.

In Shona *mbira* (22-key lamellophone) music of Zimbabwe, ways of playing (*miridziro*) are conceived in terms of variation (*musaku*) as changes that occur naturally in the course of performance (Berliner 1978 cited in Erlmann 1985, 90). In Kasena flute ensembles (Ghana), variation is highly regulated by each of the three player's role or responsibility to maintain the hoquet structure of the music. One flute part (*wubala*) is afforded the greatest degree of variability, while variation in the remaining two parts is extremely limited (Koetting 1984, 166). In his analysis of the Banda Linda horn repertoire, Arom (1984, 192) discovered that each piece is founded upon a melodic-rhythmic formula belonging exclusively to it. As the pattern of a particular piece, the formula shapes all of the piece's subsequent realizations. In all, variation is conceived as a part of composition in which models and formulas play a significant role. It characterizes and circumscribes the paths musicians take in creating new material from the appropriate set of resources.

Like Berliner and Duràn, I do not make any theoretical distinctions between the concepts of variation and improvisation. For some scholars, including Arom, only non-metric music can be improvised, while others distinguish between levels of variation (i.e., mono-modular and multi-modular) in metered music (see Lortat-Jacob 1983). I employ culturally determined or emic concepts to reflect upon how different types of variation (*birimintingo*) occur in performance. Since griots clearly prefer instrumental improvisation that makes smooth connections between metrically defined recurrent themes, it seems the term variation best describes this practice. As *kora* player Nyamo Suso once remarked, "good *birimintingo* depends on leaving and returning to the *kumbengo* smoothly" (quoted in Duràn 1981, 191). In any case, I hope to account for more

extended variation in selected excerpts of guitar music, while expanding the concept to include formulaic variation as discourse.

This essay is based exclusively upon my research as a participant-observer and guitarist in New York. As a student of Mande guitar styles and collaborator, I have studied the extent to which the relocation of Mande professionals to Manhattan and Brooklyn has impacted the griot repertoire and performance practice. In general, styles of presentation that emphasize instrumental playing (*foli*) prevail in clubs and concert halls, while the verbal art of the griot predominates in exclusively Mande contexts such as rites of passage celebrations. For fifteen years, Mande professionals have moved to New York in search of greater opportunity and personal freedom. As vocalist Djoss Diabaté once declared, “In America, you can do anything.” As I discovered, the repertoire is more a matter of practice than product as familiar models are continuously recomposed by griots and non-griots. The use of formulas as expressions binds the musicians to the style (*langue*) and one another. A shared discourse emerges from projects that range in style from idiomatic to idiosyncratic, though Mande professionals embrace these changes, alterations, and adaptations in their practice, which in their eyes would be inconceivable in Africa.

A MANDE GRIOT’S INSTRUMENTAL RESOURCES

Like Mande vocal music, instrumental playing (*foli*) is understood in terms of two complementary criteria: *kumbengo* and *birimintingo*. While I have indicated that the term *kumbengo* (pl. *kumbengolu*) refers to a recurrent theme, its meanings are numerous and differentiated. It refers to a tuning, a note, or the key (“le ton”) of a piece. The term is built around the Mande verb *ben*, which means literally “to meet or agree,” signifying the point to

which all variation must return. In practice, a *kumbengo* constitutes a version of a named piece that identifies a song or *donkili* in the repertoire, acting as aural marker for performers. Knowledge of a piece is best reflected in the degree to which an instrumentalist can vary, embellish, and find viable substitutions for the *kumbengo*. For Knight (1984), the *kumbengo* acts as a point of reference, stability, and consonance. Duràn reduces themes to their melodic skeletons and key phrases, highlighting the most significant melodic-rhythmic progressions in a two-part voice-leading scheme. A theme's realization into specific patterns of pitch, however, is never fixed, and a *kumbengo* is nothing more than a musical framework, whose parts vary from one performance to the next. The degree of variability depends upon the instrumentalist's role as either an accompanist or soloist and his skill. My Mande colleagues judge a player's competence according to how many themes he knows for a piece and how easily he can move between them in performance. For obvious reasons, players prefer to play the pieces for which they know the greatest number of themes and variations. Each of the *kumbengolu* is frequently expounded in turn as a performance unfolds. Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabaté has encouraged me to "take" or learn parts from recordings as he has done in rehearsal as preparation for Mande events and concert parties.

The other criterion of instrumental playing is *birimintingo*. It is associated with any and all playing that departs significantly from the theme(s) of a piece. In its narrowest conception, *birimintingo* refers to rapid descending scalar passages, which are highly embellished, formulaic and idiomatic, employed as material to transition from one phrase or episode to the next. More generally, it refers to the part of an instrumental performance without voice. Since the voice predominates in a great deal of Mande music, opportunities to take "solos" are rare and in some contexts such as transition rites celebrations practically non-existent. In clubs and concert halls,

however, the instrumental aspect of performance is highly valued by non-Mande listeners, making *birimintingo* as solos and featured instrumental playing a focal point. Interestingly, none of my Mande colleagues recognized or could define the term *birimintingo*. Remarking candidly, Djoss admitted, “We don’t use those words,” referring to *kumbengo* as well as nearly every other theoretical term of Mande practice, including terminology relating to vocal performance (*sataro* and *donkili*). In most cases, French substitutes such as “l’accompagnement” for *kumbengo* and “solo” for *birimintingo* are used and are sufficient. The Mande terminology, however, has been used to teach griots and non-griots in African music schools and conservatories. The stark binary juxtaposition of these terms as multi-dimensional concepts leaves considerable room for interpretation and analysis.

In socio-linguistic terms, the *kumbengolu* act as expressions or aspects of *parole* (speech). “Talk” consists of using one’s knowledge of a piece to internally embellish and depart from themes in performance, coordinating one’s parts with other musicians. Formulas are learned, shared, and varied through discourse, thereby providing the basis of the Mande style, idiom, or *langue*. While it may seem as if I am merely substituting one set of contrasting terms (*kumbengo* and *birimintingo*) for another (*parole* and *langue*), Saussure’s concepts allow for a closer examination of how griots use their instrumental resources in practice, rather than simply describing their function or itemized limits. Also, since the Mande term for playing, *foli*, translates into English as “to speak,” a socio-linguistic interpretation of the Mande style is appropriate, especially when players such as percussionist Mackane Kouyaté characterize *foli* in terms of “having something to say.” The sound patterns of familiar spoken phrases inspire playing that also comprises a language (Sunkett 1995, 56). The formal constraints of this system, however, are more difficult to circumscribe since increased blending and musical hybridity have

greatly expanded the meaning of *jeliya* or the practice of the *jeli* and the griot musical vocabulary beyond their current limits.

THE SHARED REPERTOIRES OF MANDE INSTRUMENTALISTS

Several sources have fed the repertoire of *jeli* instrumentalists. The earliest named works originated on the *simbi*—a harp used in societies of Mande hunters. Among the Mande, the hunter (*simbon*) embodies strength and leadership, and hunter’s songs such as “Kulanjon” and “Janjon” are among first significant pieces to be performed. With the rise of Sunjata Keita and the genesis of the Mali Empire during the thirteenth century, the collection of pieces that celebrate Sunjata, his allies, and rivals (The Sunjata *fasa*) became the basis of the *jeli* repertoire. As a complex of works, it consists of a series of recurrent themes that are identified with the patrons for whom they are named. The Sunjata *fasa* is performed on the *balafon*—the emblematic instrument of the *jeli*—and the *koni*—a four or five string Malian lute. These pieces have been adapted to the *kora* as well.

Each of the three hereditary instruments—the *balafon*, *kora*, and *koni*—predominates in different regions of Mande West Africa, making specific pieces and playing styles more pronounced than others in certain regions. The *balafon* and its repertoire, which includes “Mamaya,” “Nanfulen,” and “Keme Bourema” are important in Guinea, while the *kora* is the *jeli* instrument of choice in Senegal and The Gambia where “Tutu Jara” and “Allah l’a ke” are widely known *kora* pieces. In Mali, the *koni* is a significant *jeli* instrument. Its music features a high degree of ornamentation and embellishment, though its repertoire is largely shared with the other instruments. In any event, the repertoires of all these instruments have fed one another over the centuries as musicians have continuously recycled themes and stock formulas. Since the

1990s, the BOSS DR-5 drum sequencer has become a significant instrumental resource at Mande rites of passage celebrations and concert parties in Africa as well as in New York. It is used to perform stock bass line patterns and figuration with simple rhythm parts to accompany singers and instrumentalists who play along with the various melodic-rhythmic ostinati. Also, *jelis* use this sequencer to rehearse and practice pieces in preparation for concerts and other events.

While the use of traditional instruments varies in Guinea, Mali, and Senegal, the guitar is ubiquitous throughout Mande West Africa. Since the 1920s, it has been a mediator of musical change and exchange in modern Mande music, as griots have performed all the most significant works on the guitar in different types of ensemble. Urban-based electric dance bands (orchestras), which were led by griot guitarists, adapted traditional pieces as well as music from Latin America and other parts of Africa. Nuances of playing style emerged in Mali and Guinea, reflecting the predilection for certain hereditary instruments. Guinean guitarists (who begin as *balafon* players) graft parts and phrases from *balafon* music, while Malian guitarists base their style upon the music of the *koni*. In New York, Malian Abdoulaye “Djoss” Diabaté and Guinean Mamady “Djelike” Kouyaté display these differences of approach in their playing. In either case, the use of formulas permeates guitar playing and improvisation in general, especially in versions of “Mami Wata.”

“MAMI WATA”

As one of the most widely shared pieces in the griot repertoire, “Mami Wata” exemplifies formulaic variation procedures as a method of composition. Named for a powerful and capricious water deity who manifests as a mermaid, the piece first appeared as “Ya Amponsah” in the repertoire of palm-wine highlife bands (i.e., The Kumasi Trio) during the 1920s. In his

discussion of “Na Mapa Nu Kyew” by George Williams (1925), Kaye (2008, 93–94) refers to its basic phrase as an incipient model of early West African popular music. Its eight-beat harmonic pattern (I-I⁷-IV⁶-V⁷) is a familiar resource in the guitar music of the Guinean Coast as well as other regions of Africa. As evidenced by subsequent recordings, this framework has been continuously recycled and recomposed by African and American musicians, including Paul Simon who adapted “Mami Wata” in his song “Spirit Voices.” During the 1970s, *Bembeya Jazz National*—the premier government sponsored dance band from Guinea—recorded the seminal version of “Mami Wata.”

Sekou “Bembeya” Diabaté is among the most celebrated griot guitarists. His prowess as an instrumentalist has earned him the honorary title of “Diamond Fingers.” Like many Guinean guitarists, Sekou began his musical training on the *balafon* before switching to the guitar, though his knowledge of *balafon* playing greatly informed his parts for “Mami Wata.” In “Mami Wata,” Diabaté uses two formulas (see Figure 1) as the basis of his improvised solo. Nearly all of Sekou’s formulas or stock patterns are eight beats in length and have been reordered by Sekou in subsequent performances.¹

Labeled A and B in Figure 1, these melodic-rhythmic formulas and their variants recur as refrains (vocal and instrumental) throughout the piece. They are paired and frequently ordered as I have transcribed them. The formulas are wed to specific melodic-rhythmic figures and pitch-level coincidences that also recur in many other versions of “Mami Wata,” binding this performance to other West African popular music styles. In the piano reduction, the right-hand part performs the rhythm guitar vamp, while the left hand plays the bass part from the *Bembeya*

¹ For a live version of “Mami Wata” (1994) performed by *Bembeya Jazz National*, please visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2OmOUgh4BE>.

Figure 1. Formula 1 and 2 for “Mami Wata” (time cue 00:14–00:33).

Audio Example 1



Jazz recording. These parts are some of the significant musical resources in the guitar solo, which embodies discourse as previously mentioned.

Sekou begins his solo with an eight-beat formula (see Figure 2), which he uses to transition from the vocal section(s) that precede it. Stylistically, formula 3 is reminiscent of a stock *balafon* part, which can be used and adapted in different contexts. Musicians stockpile phrases of this kind that they recompose in different pieces, comprising the basis of each player’s repertoire (*parole*). However, while certain formulas can be used as substitutes in more than one piece, the correct positioning of phrases may differ for each composition. Durán indicates that there are preferred places for interpolating “new” parts conceived as variants by players. In these instances, improvisation occurs within the strictly defined limits of formulaic composition, binding each player’s style to the performance idiom. Extended variation, however, allows guitarists to create an expansive sense of structure with formulas as a resource.

In his next move, Diabaté elides variants of formula 1 and 2 in order to create an extended passage, thereby producing a phrase twice the length of either formula (see Figure 3). He reiterates this sixteen-beat phrase, creating a conceptual template of thirty-two beats or eight

Figure 2. Formula 3 for “Mami Wata” (time cue 2:51–3:11).²



Figure 3. First Episode of Sekou’s Extended Variation in “Mami Wata” (time cue 3:12–3:30 in original recording).

Episode 1 mm. 1–8



measures, which serves as the structural basis of subsequent episodes. While they follow one another, these two musical “sentences” or extended musical ideas, which were formed by conjoining formula 1 and 2, are paradigmatic equivalents whose parts are analogous. As Ruwet

² I have omitted the chord symbols in the remainder of the transcription.

(1972) and Middleton (2002) observe, the concept of equivalence actualized through repetition and by extension variation and transformation characterize musical syntax. Sekou's syntactic processing relies upon conflating what he knows or has in mind as formulas in extended phrases, while the parts of his variations can be continually changed and varied. Through a process of analogy, a form of discourse emerges from Sekou's variation procedures, which can be described in a number of ways.

The remainder of Sekou's solo consists of a series of extended variations in three episodes (see mm. 9–16, mm. 17–24, and mm. 25–32 in Figure 4). Notably, each episode is eight measures in length, following the durational model that Sekou establishes by playing Formulas 1 and 2 (with repetition) in succession. A change of pattern or the introduction of a new theme marks the overlapping of these three episodes. With Episode 2, Sekou introduces a new four-beat pattern, which commences on the “off-beat” of beat two, thereby creating a subtle accentual displacement in the solo since all the previous parts began on beat one of the cycle. This quasi-formula recurs six times with variation. The final phase of this episode consists of a melodic scalar ascent in harmonized thirds, which is followed by a descending step-wise cadential phrase that features both eighth-note and sixteenth-note triplet passagio, filling in two octaves from C to C in seventh position of the guitar. It constitutes *birimintingo* or long melodic runs that is a featured part of many instrumental performances without voice (Charry 2000, 314).

A new eight-beat formula marks the beginning of Episode 3. Sekou decorates a simple motive, F-G-E, with triplet tremolo figures in harmonized sixths before concluding this episode with a scalar descent in rhythmic diminution directed toward the third of the tonic sonority. Episode 4 begins with a figure that constitutes a reiteration of the three-pitch motive, F-G-E, in a lower register played in open position of the guitar. Sekou maintains the integrity of the solo by

Figure 4. Final three episodes of Sekou's solo in "Mami Wata" (time cue 3:31–4:28)

Episode 2 mm. 9–16

Musical score for Episode 2 (mm. 9–16). The score is written in 2/4 time and consists of four systems of staves. The first system shows a melodic line in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The second system features a complex rhythmic pattern in the treble clef, likely representing a guitar accompaniment, with a bass line below. The third system continues the melodic and bass lines, with triplets indicated by a '3' over the notes. The fourth system shows further development of the melodic and bass lines, with a final triplet in the treble clef.

Episode 3 mm. 17–24

Musical score for Episode 3 (mm. 17–24). The score is written in 2/4 time and consists of four systems of staves. The first system features a melodic line in the treble clef with several triplets, and a bass line in the bass clef. The second system continues the melodic and bass lines, with a complex rhythmic pattern in the treble clef. The third system shows further development of the melodic and bass lines, with a triplet in the treble clef. The fourth system features a complex rhythmic pattern in the treble clef, likely representing a guitar accompaniment, with a bass line below.

Figure 4 (continued).

Episode 4 mm. 25–32



reintroducing a variant of formula 2 (see Figure 1) to conclude the final episode, playing it twice at the end of this extended phrase. In his final gesture, Sekou performs another recurring eight-beat formula (see Figure 5), effectively bookending the four episodes of his solo with highly idiomatic phrases that have their basis in *balafon* part playing.

Multiple phrases and formulas comprise Sekou’s variations in “Mami Wata.” Each move or decision emerges from practices of formulaic composition as if Sekou worked from a cognitive inventory of expressions. The four episodes are constructed as “paragraphs” into which comparable modular utterances enter in dialogue with the ensemble parts, which serve to support, reinforce, and complement Sekou’s extended variation as discourse. As a whole, the solo can be represented in a syntagmatic scheme (see Figure 6).

Figure 5. Sekou’s closing formula in his solo in “Mami Wata” (time cue 4:29–4:43)

Audio Example 2



Figure 6. Syntagmatic scheme for Sekou’s solo in “Mami Wata”

$$f_3 - E^1 (f_1 + f_2^{(mm. 1-8)}) - E^2 (mm. 9-16) - E^3 (mm. 17-24) - E^4 (mm. 25-32) - cf$$

Sekou’s *parole* has been studied by griots in New York and elsewhere, informing their understanding of this piece that has been recomposed in more recent works such as “Bara” by the New York band Source. The *langue* of Mande jam music informs the styles of different groups (i.e., Fula Flute, Source, Kakande, and The Mandingo Ambassadors) serving as a resource for griots and collaborators alike who collectively cultivate the Mande sound in urban centers outside of West Africa.

My analysis of this repertoire is informed by the practices in New York. I learned Sekou’s forms of talk for “Mami Wata” from the Bembeya Jazz recording. I studied his parts and their relations in great detail, sharing this knowledge with Djoss Diabaté and other griots who responded favorably to my efforts. I introduced my own variants which they embraced

acknowledging that this sort of innovation was a crucial part of Mande musical practice. I have engaged the repertoire in this way, observing that it is a language to be shared amongst diverse networks of musicians. While I think and write about composition in a manner unfamiliar to griots, I hope to provide insights into the economy of this musical dialect, which is significant to griots and their associates.

“N’TOMAN”

During the 1970s, Les Ambassadeurs International recorded “N’Toman,” which features formulaic variation in the guitar solo of Kanté Manfila, making it comparable to Sekou’s solo in certain respects; that is, it contains a number of expressions that form the basis of Kanté’s lengthy discourse. The word “N’Toman” translates into English as “homonym,” symbolizing the marital union between a man and woman who share the same name after marriage. *Balafon* player Famoro Dioubaté expands this definition to include “namesake,” the person for whom a child is named upon his or her naming, which occurs eight days after birth. While the meaning of its title varies with interpretation, the instrumental playing in “N’Toman” is synonymous with the music of an older named work. Mande griots in New York recognize “N’Toman” as “Nanfulen” or “Come Release Me.” It commemorates a Mande trader who resisted French colonial rule by trading with Gambians during the nineteenth century. Most of the parts, patterns, and figuration that I learned for “Nanfulen,” which Djoss attributes to an itinerant *tambin* (flute) player, originated on the Les Ambassadeurs International recording of “N’Toman.” Griots such as Djoss Diabaté, however, rarely speak of “N’Toman,” deferring to “Nanfulen” as a way of identifying this piece. More recently, Salif Keita recomposed “Nanfulen” in his song “N’B’i fe”

whose introduction and refrain also recur in versions of “Nanfulen” performed by griots in New York.

I learned “Nanfulen” as a series of grooves and figures from Djoss years prior to my discovery of “N’Toman” on CD.³ My discovery allowed me to make the connection between these two pieces that are virtually inseparable in the minds of griots. “N’Toman” or “Nanfulen” consists of a distinctive melodic-rhythmic progression that is based upon three tones, A, F, and G. This progression of tones and the cycle of twelve beats inform Kanté Manfila’s *birimintingo* on the Les Ambassadeurs recording. His solo, which unfolds in a slow and deliberate manner, is based upon melodic ideas inherent in the accompaniment part transcribed in the two lower staves of Figure 7. According to Durán, this type of variation involves additional notes introduced either as passing notes or octave duplications of pitches in the basic phrase. Kanté makes the most of the available resources ensuring that his cascading lines leave and return to the recurring theme smoothly in his controlled displays of virtuosity (see mm. 1, 7, 9, and 12). As previously mentioned, clear connections between phrases of this kind constitute “good *birimintingo*” or a good solo (Durán 1981, 191). The passagio ornamenting the transition from one tone to the next marks the ends of units, while Kanté increases the textural density of the groove with his striking melodic diminutions. His inventory of expressions is less extensive than Sekou’s repertoire for “Mami Wata,” though his solo represents yet another way in which griot guitarists speak through playing (*foli*). It exemplifies a refined practice through which griots deviate slightly from the recurring theme in their variation procedures.

³ “N’Toman” appears on the compilation *Golden Afrique Vol. 1* (2005). “Nanfulen” is contained on the CD *Badenya: Mande Jaliya in New York* (2002), which features Djoss Diabaté and his group Super Mande on several tracks.

Figure 7. Kanté Manfila’s Extended Variation in “N’Toman” (time cue 3:58–4:31 of original recording).

Audio Example 3

V¹ (mm. 2–4) _ V² (mm. 5–7) _ V³ (mm. 8–10) _ V⁴ (mm. 11–13)

The musical score is presented in a system of eight staves, organized into four pairs. Each pair represents a variation (V¹ through V⁴). The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The first variation (V¹) features a complex melodic line with many sixteenth notes and a triplet of eighth notes. The second variation (V²) shows a more rhythmic melody with eighth-note patterns. The third variation (V³) includes several triplet markings over eighth notes. The fourth variation (V⁴) consists of a simpler, more melodic line. The bass line throughout the piece provides a steady accompaniment with eighth-note patterns and rests.

“ASSA”

As a guitarist and bandleader in New York, Mamady “Djeliké” Kouyaté is the torchbearer of the West African dance band tradition. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, groups such as Bembeya Jazz National and The Rail Band successfully integrated the music of griots or *jeliya* with popular music from Europe and Latin America in small urban orchestras. As a member of this generation, Mamady began his career as an accompanist in a regional dance band during the 1970s. As conditions worsened in Guinea, he eventually fled to the United States as a political refugee. In 2006, he formed The Mandingo Ambassadors of New York with a mixed line-up of Mande professionals and non-Mande musicians. This band performs many classics of this repertoire such as “Keme Bourema” and “Allah l’a ke,” inspiring journalist Banning Eyre to write, “If you step into a New York club where the Mandingo Ambassadors are playing, and close your eyes, you go back in time and across the Atlantic to Guinea” to the golden age of West African dance band music (1960s and 1970s).⁴

While “Assa” is not a standard of the griot repertoire, it exemplifies extended variation of a different sort, providing an interesting foil to the *parole* of the two earlier works. Djeliké’s variations are conceived as totalities of pitch-level coincidence in his ensemble arrangements, which are coordinated and subsequently varied by members of the group. While Djeliké is a master of the Mande guitar style, the *orchestré* is the main instrument or “voice” in his variation procedures. The distribution of roles is clear and deliberate as each musician acts as a cogwheel in unified musical gestures. Djeliké provides aural cues with his guitar parts to which members of the group respond, thereby creating shifts in the total image. As a composer, he uses his band

⁴ See <http://www.guitarplayer.com/article/mamady-Kouyaté-60s/Aug-06/22546>

as a resource to create forms of dialogue within the group as well as with listeners in primarily white audiences.

In “Assa,” a series of three variations unfolds in rapid succession at the beginning of the piece (see Figure 8). Each shift of total image is a subtle variant of the phrase that precedes it. The parts collectively articulate a two-measure chordal ostinato, C-G⁷-G⁷-C, to which all of the formulas are wed and adhere, though none of the musicians play or strum the chords as simultaneities at any point in the performance. In variation 1, the ensemble of instruments supports the vocal refrain whose complete phrase is twice the length of the other parts. In variation 2, the voice drops out for a cycle in a moment of repose, and Djeliké introduces a new formula or theme. Variation 3 reintegrates the vocal refrain within the context of the varied framework created by Djeliké’s change of phrase in Variation 2. The instrumental combination in Variation 2 and 3 becomes the basis of the piece as it unfolds, providing the ensemble accompaniment for Ismael “Bon Fils” Kouyaté’s intermittent vocal extemporizations and Andy Algire’s *balafon* solo (time cue 2:00–2:30). These variations are comparable to shifting kaleidoscope points where two or more pitch levels intersect in order to create a varied total sound image as a composite to the ears of listeners.

Admittedly, these three variations only provide a brief glimpse into this compositional style or rather into the mind of the group’s leader, Djeliké Kouyaté. They approximate the shifts of total image that characterize “Assa.” The confluence and pairing of variants allow a patchwork of realizations to be built from formulas in extended variation. Since these studio takes were recorded, the group has acquired a horn section, which is yet another resource for Kouyaté who makes most if not all of the decisions in arrangements. The second guitarist, bass player, and drummer (Mamady, Nick, and Andy) constitute the core unit of the group, providing the basis of

Figure 8. Three Examples of Variation in “Assa.”

Audio Example 4

V¹ (mm. 1–4) — V² (mm. 5–6) — V³ (mm. 7–10)

Variation 1 (time cue 00:18–00:27 of original recording)

Musical score for Variation 1, showing five staves: Ismael (vocals), Djelike (guitar 1), Mamady (guitar 2), Nick (bass), and Andy (drums). The score is written in standard musical notation with a common time signature. The vocal line features a melodic phrase with some rests. The guitar parts consist of rhythmic patterns and melodic lines. The bass line provides a steady accompaniment, and the drums play a consistent rhythmic pattern.

Variation 2 (time cue 00:28–00:30)

Musical score for Variation 2, showing five staves: Ismael (vocals), Djelike (guitar 1), Mamady (guitar 2), Nick (bass), and Andy (drums). The score is written in standard musical notation with a common time signature. The vocal line is mostly silent, with a few notes at the end. The guitar parts feature more complex rhythmic and melodic variations. The bass line continues with a steady accompaniment, and the drums play a consistent rhythmic pattern.

comparison for Djeliké’s guitar variations and solos since their parts rarely vary or change. As parts are omitted, added, and varied, new melodic-rhythmic combinations emerge that inspire listeners to reflect and dance and musicians to compose. “New” works frequently consist of familiar resources, making the repertoire a matter of practice rather than product. Yet through

Figure 8 (continued).

Variation 3 (time cue 00:31–00:40)



analysis, the components of the Mande musical *langue* are revealed, allowing outsiders to engage the Mande griot performance tradition from a number of vantage points.

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