



THE YOUNG MAN'S HARP



Vieux  
Kanté



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## A Malian Roots Master Redeemed

The music in this album is a treasure nearly lost amid the vast sonic wealth of Malian roots music. When the blind *kamalé ngoni* player Vieux Kanté died unexpectedly at 31 in 2005, he was on the verge of being discovered. He had no commercial recordings, but anyone who had heard his band playing in clubs around Bamako knew that he had something special. I had the good fortune to meet Kanté on a research trip to Mali in February of that year. I found him at his manager's house in a neighbourhood of Bamako, and we sat out on a quiet street for an hour or so while Kanté told me his story and played a few short solo selections for my microphone. I had heard some great *kamalé ngoni* players in my time, notably Benogo Diakité, the muse of Wassoulou star Oumou Sangaré's band, and Harouna Samaké, who has now become a star soloist with Mali's most famous singer, Salif Keita. But nothing had quite prepared me for the barrage of pops, slides, harmonics and just plain creativity that sprang from Vieux's able hands that afternoon.



Kanté spoke that day of a recently finished recording he had tracked with his band, but after his sudden death a few months later, any incentive to promote the artist by releasing the recording in Mali apparently vanished, presumably since he was no longer around to promote or profit from it. As best I could tell, the recording never surfaced. Until now. And, no surprise to anyone who knew Kanté, it was worth the wait.

The kamalé ngoni—literally “young man’s harp”—is a variant of the venerable donson ngoni, or “hunter’s harp.” Generally smaller, and higher in pitch, the kamalé ngoni was created in the 1960s by one Alata Brulaye. It was a vehicle for playing recreational music, free from the proscriptions of the donson ngoni, an instrument whose use and repertoire are restricted to ceremonial occasions. The new instrument was unbound, open to all, and by many accounts Brulaye’s invention sparked a non-stop party that animates the Wassoulou region of southern Mali to this day.

This is the world into which Noumoussa Soumaoro aka Vieux Kanté was born in the village of Niesmala in 1974. Blind from childhood, he could not join his older brothers working in the fields. He spent his time listening to the radio and absorbing all the music he could. Kanté knew that his brothers had a kamalé

ngoni in their room, and he took to sneaking in while they were in the fields. He tried to play the sounds he was hearing on the radio on their instrument, and quickly discovered he had a natural talent. “One day they came and saw that I was playing the kamalé ngoni,” Kanté recalled. “Now they knew that I was even better than them. So they left me with their kamalé ngoni until I found my own.”

Kanté was about 12 years old at the time, and before long he found himself wanting to change the instrument to produce more of the sounds he was hearing in his head. Around 1987, with the help of friends, he arranged to add two additional strings to the instrument’s traditional six. Now he could play complete major and minor scales, beyond the pentatonic (five-note) scales of traditional Wassoulou music. His playing attracted the attention of a Dutch hotel owner, who arranged for Kanté to visit Holland and collaborate on a recording there with other musicians from around West Africa. The experience heightened his ambition, and he began adding more strings to the instrument. In 1998 he graduated to 10, and in 2000 to 12.

This was the instrument I saw him play in 2005—a 12-string kamalé ngoni. I asked him if he could play

flats and sharps, notes in between those in a major or minor scale. Referring to these as “jazz notes,” he said, “That is something that is not in the kamalé ngoni. You have to find some other way to play those notes. You have to use your head.” And he did just that. Breaking into a John Lee Hooker blues vamp, he began bending notes like a guitarist. He uses this same technique on this album’s instrumental showpiece, “Sans Commentaire”.

Kanté’s signature techniques bristle through the solos on the seven tracks of this ensemble recording. He can produce cascades of percussive harmonics—notes

played with a second finger placed at just the right point on the string to produce a bell-like tone. The rhythmic interplay between Kanté’s virtuoso riffing and the band’s djembe player, on “Kono” for example, is nothing short of dazzling. It’s easy to imagine that this six-piece band must have rocked Bamako nightspots like nothing else in their day. No wonder there was a buzz among musicians when I hit the ground there in 2005.

Kanté isn’t the only vocalist in the band, and together with Kabadjan Diakite he covers a rich stylistic ground from the tuneful seductive lope of “Lambanco” to the

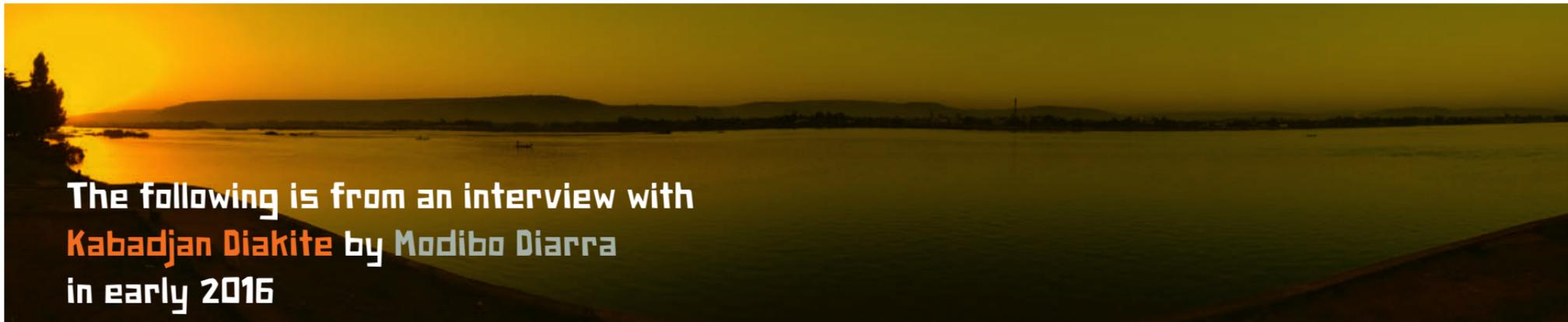




funky swing of “Nafolo” and the chugging drive of “Sinamon” on which Diakite unleashes a full-throated griot praise vocal and Kanté makes his instrument squeak like a Brazilian cuica. No Wassoulou music album offers such a variety of rhythms and textures as we hear here.

The session is a tour de force. Had Kanté lived, he and his group would undoubtedly have been up on the festival stages of Europe and the playlists of many African music DJs. As it is, we must be satisfied with this, a remarkable addition to the annals of soul-satisfying Malian roots music wizardry.

*Banning Eyre is Senior Editor for afropop.org, and the author of **In Griot Time: An American Guitarist in Mali.***



The following is from an interview with  
**Kabadjan Diakite** by Modibo Diarra  
in early 2016

MD: Good morning, can you introduce yourself?

KD: My name is Kabadjan Diakite. I was in the Orchestre National of Guinea, 'Les Badial'. When I came to Mali to see my senior brother Sékou Kanté who was with the 'Rail Band', I first met Vieux whom I naturally admired.

MD: As a matter of fact, let us talk about Vieux. How did you come across him?

KD: My senior brother Sékou asked me to accompany him to Zani Diabaté's so that he could introduce me to him. That was when Vieux entered and I immediately noticed him and said 'Nkoro, who is the person who has just entered?'. He answered that it was Vieux but made no other comment. And without seeking to understand, I told my senior brother that I wanted to work with that man.

I went to him at Torokorobougou, but could not meet him then and so asked his sisters to give him a message. When I finally did speak to him, I said that I'd seen him on television and admired him greatly. I let him know that I came from Guinea Conakry but lived in Mali and that, absolutely, I wanted to work with him.

At that time he was performing at the 'Hotel Les Arbres' and I was performing at 'Mande Hotel', and so I often went to see him at sessions in 'Les Arbres' which continued until the early hours. It was there he suggested that he visit me in my house, and so we became friends. Later he proposed that I accompany him on at the 'Hotel Les Arbres' and the important ladies who came to watch us meant we could really do great things.

And me, filled with wonder about his talent, I asked him if there was a ghost in his kamalé ngoni, because I knew other guitar, kora and ngoni players, but I had never met anyone like Vieux.

He was the head of the band, I was his deputy. My senior brother even suggested I leave ‘Le Super Diatabande’ so that I could work with Vieux, but I couldn’t as I considered this a kind of betrayal. Nevertheless I continued working with Vieux and we recorded at the studio of Salif Keita at Dielibougou. We recorded seven songs, of which he sang four such as

“Tènè tounou tchinnou,

Haaannnn loni deni fari ne wala di ...”

and I sang three among which were ‘Kono’

“Hééééé kônô kônô kônô

Mande Kalou la Kônô bôlén dé Guinée

Djin djin djin ...”

and ‘Sinamon’

“Karamô Kê nana

O ki yala kounngo le kônô

Sina mousso ni djou dô wilila

Ka fô kara mô ke yé

Ni ye dèmè kônô ko ni na o di dia gné

Kouma dikira nara mô kèlà

Kara mô kè fènè ye o lé fôla

Ni mama saa fjou diya nè fèn yéla”

The wicked co-wife who wanted to set a dangerous snake against another wife, but the snake bit her and she herself died. The moral of the song is that when you want to harm somebody you may possibly harm yourself.

He said that I had a golden voice, and I told him “Heeee Vieux, me I am afraid of your talent, and now you want to be afraid of me?!”. He then suggested that I should become the head of the band because I am experienced and have been to foreign countries, but I refused saying that to lead is a matter of destiny.

MD: Did you tour together?

KD: Yes, thanks to Mr Zalé, the ex-mayor of the district V of Bamako, we toured almost throughout the whole Mali (Timbuktu, Gao and Bandiagara) as well as Burkina Faso.

MD: Can you tell us about when Vieux died?

KD: If I have a good memory, he died between 2005 and 2006,

for our collaboration started in 1998, the year of the African Cup of Nation in Ouaga. His wife died a year before him and they left behind a son bearing the name of Mamadou.

His death really shocked me. But despite all, I continue performing. I perform very well with the musical band, even at present.

MD: What is your conclusion?

KD: I thank you journalists for having come over so that we can talk about the death of my friend and brother. I equally greet all the artists, who all know me more or less directly, either by my name or by my work. I greet you and confide in you for the future. I thank you.

**Kabadjan Diakite**



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