



Lullabies and children's songs  
of the Bozo and Bamana, Mali

Photo: Mamou Thiero with child

Text, photos and video: Elisabeth den Otter

[Click here to watch the video on Youtube](#)

This article describes the songs and their context as seen in the video

The songs were recorded in Kirango (Mali), in December 2009 and January 2010 for the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage/Al Ain Center for Music in the World of Islam, with the aim to celebrate, preserve and perpetuate the music arising within the worldwide cultural heritage of Islam.

In 2018 the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism published ‘Lullabies in the World of Islam’, with contributions from 23 countries, accompanied by a DVD and a CD.

Since only a small part of the recordings/videos was used, and none of the children’s songs, I decided to publish the material on my website.

# Lullabies and children's songs of the Bozo and Bamana, Mali

recorded in Kirango (Mali), December 2009-January 2010  
by Elisabeth den Otter

## INTRODUCTION

Kirango (commune of Markala) is a village with over six thousand inhabitants, located on the bank of the Niger river about 40 kilometers northeast of the city of Ségou, in what is now Mali (West Africa).

The kingdom of Ségou was founded in the 18th century by Mamari 'Biton' Coulibaly. Kirango is one of a string of villages along the Niger river which were founded by descendants of Ngolo Diarra in the 19th century. In 1920 the French conquered the area and named it the French Soudan; in 1960 it became the Republic of Mali. Between 1934 and 1945 french colonial authorities constructed a large dam in Markala, two kilometers upstream from Kirango, to irrigate the surrounding farmland, permitting the cultivation of rice and sugarcane. Many people from Kirango were involved in constructing the dam, exposing them to outside influences and bringing many changes to the local culture. Schools and a hospital were constructed, as well as new quarters to accommodate the workers. Nowadays, formal education, urbanization and migration are all factors of change, leading to a loss of traditional culture.

The quarters of Kirango are organized along ethnic and occupational lines: the Bamana are farmers, whereas the Bozo/Somono are fishermen (the Bozo are considered the 'original' fishermen, whereas the Somono originated from other ethnic groups; the term 'Bozo' shall be used for both groups). Bamana is spoken by both groups. The population is formally islamic, although traces of animism can still be found.

Kirango is well-known for its masquerades, when large puppets in the shape of animals are made to dance by puppeteers that are hidden inside. They alternate with masked dancers representing animals and humans. The Bamana and the Bozo each have their own form of puppetry, and the songs accompanying them refer either to particular qualities of the characters or serve as metaphors for a variety of human behaviors. Singers Mamou Thiero and Maimouna Koné, who sang lullabies for this project, also are the main singers during masquerades.



## SONG TEXTS

The Bamana and the Bozo sing in Bamana language. For the transcriptions, the dictionary of Charles Bailleul ('Dictionnaire bambara-français', Editions Donniya, Bamako, 2007) was consulted. To simplify the texts, tonal accents on the vowels are omitted, and 'ɛ' and 'ɔ' are written 'è' and 'ò'. In order to save space, repetitions in the song texts are omitted; variations are indicated by a), b), c). Some words/lines are difficult to hear, but I was assured that they are sung, albeit rapidly.

Singing is an important way of transmitting culture. Song texts express the prevailing attitudes and values of a culture: they comment upon aspects of daily life and are a reflection of the concerns of the culture of which they are a part.

Lullabies are sung to lull babies to sleep, but also to criticize the behavior of others (a husband, a co-wife). Such is the case in the lullaby 'Fajuguden' sung by Maïmouna Koné, about a querulous husband. Another example of a rather harsh text (not found in this selection) was sung to me by a friend: "Your father's girlfriend is dead; one less enemy." Lullabies are usually sung by grandmothers, since the mothers are often occupied with household tasks. In Bamana they are called 'denwnaani donkili', songs to console children.

Groups of girls sing at night at crossroads in the village. The girls stand in a half-circle, in order of their age, singing and clapping their hands. Each girl does a short solo in the open

space, whirling around with her arms in the air, or jumping. During some songs the girls let themselves fall backwards into the arms of the other girls who lift them up and throw them in the air.

An important theme is behavior towards boys, who are potential husbands. Many songs deal with the girls' preparation for their role as married women: choice of mates, show of physical strength, how to deal with in-laws. Another important theme is the right thing to do, and help others who are in need. The importance of tradition is also expressed in the songs. Due to the arrival of electricity in the village, the girls nowadays prefer to watch television instead of singing, but there is also a sense that tradition is valuable and can disappear if people do not hold on to it.

The Bozo are represented by Mamou Thiero, who sang lullabies, and a group of 14 young girls who sang children's songs.

The Bamana are represented by Maïmouna Koné, who sang lullabies, and a group of 13 young girls who sang children's songs.

## Bozo lullabies, sung by Mamou Thiero



### **‘Bakaï’**

This is a praise song for Sidi Bakaï, a new-born in the well-known marabout family named Kundana.

Bakaï ye cè ye, Kundana / Sidi Bakaï ye cè ye, Kundana

a) Arabu cèw ye kèmè bò

b) Arabu musow ye kèmè bò

Kò Sékou Sidi Bakaï den nyògòn tè

*Bakaï is a man, Kundana / Sidi Bakaï is a man, Kundana*

*a) You're worth more than one hundred arab men*

*b) You're worth more than one hundred arab women*

*The child of the great Sékou Sidi Bakaï has no equal*

## **'I daden'**

A child is a gift of Allah, and cannot be bought with gold or silver. 'Kunkurunnin' means 'little bit', a term of endearment.

I daden, kunkurunnin, i daden / Fèn tè Allah bò  
I daden, sanu tè fèn min sòrò, i daden / I daden, wari tè fèn  
min sòrò, i daden

*Be quiet, little one, be quiet / Nothing equals Allah  
Be quiet, one cannot buy a child with gold / Be quiet, one  
cannot buy a child with silver*

## **'Sususu'**

This song --really more of a recitation-- is to remind the child that the mother has other tasks as well, such as doing laundry, and cannot always be with him.

Sususu, i daden, i ba taara koli kè banin kòfè

*Sususu, be quiet, your mother has gone to the river to wash.*

## **'Kumba boi boi'**

This song is of moorish origin, and no transcription was available.



## Bozo girls' songs, by girls of the Jaka quarter



### 'Madani Diakité'

Boys used to take charge of the education of girls, until the girls got married and had to take leave of them. The boys make fun of Madani Diakité, the good-looking boy referred to in the song. The girls are mentioned one by one, beginning with Tata.

Tègèrè tulong y'o, Madani Diakité / Kana nimisa ne tilala  
Furudon mana se / Tata ka cèlasigi don mana se  
Cèmisènw bi boli ka taa u danbere bò

*Handclapping game, Madani Diakité / Don't regret my leaving*

*When the wedding day arrives / When the day that Tata goes to her husband's household arrives*

*The boys run to make faces*

## 'Kulu tèmènen ne na'

A group of boys walks by a group of tea-drinking girls; it's difficult for the girls to make a choice. In this version, the girl drops a tea-glass; in an earlier version the girl was getting water from a well, which is a public place, and let the cord slip out of her hands.

Kulukulu tèmènen ne na / Cèmisènnin kulu tèmènen ne na  
O y'a sòrò an bè te minna / Te min wèrè tilala n a  
Walade, ne bi jènni ta / Ka jènni to

*The group walked past me / The group of boys walked past me*

*They found us drinking tea / The tea-glass fell out of my hand*

*Walade, which one will I chose / Which one will I let go*

## 'Fata i bin ka na'

Let's celebrate our youth; death will not spare us. 'Sa' is the Bamana word for 'snake', but may also refer to 'death', 'saya'. The girls are mentioned one by one, repeating the verse, let themselves fall back into the arms of the other girls and jump back up.

Fata, i bin ka na, sa bina, sa tè n to  
Sa bina, sa muluku bina, sa tè n to  
Sa bina, sa yariyari bina, sa tè n to

*Fata, fall down and get back up, the snake has come, the snake will not spare me*

*The snake has come, the snake that crawls has come, the snake will not spare me*  
*The snake has come, the wriggling snake has come, the snake will not spare me*

### **'Cèncènnin'**

The mother compares her child to fine sand, which is volatile. One has to help needy people, but it is difficult to help those who do not make an effort. The exclamation 'Laayilaayilaa mamadusurula' (literally 'There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet') expresses admiration or joy. The song finishes with a verse addressed to the child to stop complaining. The verse is sung once for each girl and they each jump 10 times.

Cèncènnin misèn / Badala cèncènnin misèn  
N ba ye malokisè di ne ma / Ko n ka dennin kelen balo la  
Den kelen sen kelen balo la / Den kelen bolo kelen balo la  
Ko kelen, ko fila, ko saba, ko naani, ko duuru, ko wòòrò, ko  
wolonfila, ko segin, do kònònton, ko tan  
Tan na man gèlèn / Fò sigiyòrò kelen, dayòrò kelen  
Laayilaayilaa mamadusurula  
Ka kini dun / Ka dègè min / Kònònin bè ndanyi

*Fine sand / Fine sand of the river*  
*My mother gave me some grains of rice / To feed the child*  
*which is alone*  
*To feed the lone child that has only one leg / To feed the*  
*lone child that has only one arm*  
*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten*

*The tenth is not difficult / If you have a place to sit down, a place to lie down  
Laayilaayilaa mamadusurula  
You have eaten rice / You have eaten porridge / Your little stomach is bloated*

### **'Bin ko kelen'**

Age groups, boys as well as girls, organize battles in order to determine leadership of the group. If one is thrown down twice, one has to leave. A case of physical and moral training.

Bin ko kelen, finesi / Bin ko fila de ye / Denkolon ya ye

*To fall down once, with grace / To fall down twice / This child lacks courage*

### **'Kurubè'**

A newly wed young woman has to kneel down in front of her parents-in-law, to show respect. They advise her and inform her of the rules of the house; the young woman now has to perform daily tasks which she did not have to do when she was a girl. Each girl kneels in front of the other girls in succession and sings the name of the girl followed by 'I kneel down'; the group sings 'Kurubè' and the remaining lines.

Fata, ne nyòngiri la  
Kurubèkurubè, ne nyòngiri la

Don o don finiko ne ma deli o la / Don o don minènko ne ma deli o la

*Fata, I kneel down*

*I turn around, I kneel down*

*I am not used to do laundry every day / I am not used to wash dishes every day*

## Bamana lullabies, sung by Maïmouna Koné



### 'Dafu bè kungo'

Other people have children that go out and look for fibers, but this woman has no child to spin her cotton, which is hard work. She hopes for the day that she will have a child of her own.

Dafu bè kungo / Nyamafu bè kungo

a) Ni ne ye denkènin sòrò san minna / Denkènin nyumannin sòrò san minna

b) Ni ne ye denmuso sòrò san minna / Denmuso nyumannin sòrò san minna

Ne ti kòòri k'o sanna

*The fibers are in the wilderness*

*a) The year that I will 'find' a little boy / The year that I will 'find' a beautiful little boy*

*b) The year that I will 'find' a little girl / The year that I will  
'find' a beautiful little girl  
That year I will not spin cotton*

### **'Den bi kasi'**

The baby cries, because her mother has no milk and someone may harm her. But her mother loves and protects her: there is pap in the jar and the mother will hit the person who has made the baby cry.

Den bi kasi / Sintan laminè, ba bi kasi  
Daanin sigi tògò  
Jòn ka Ami kasi / Bere ba ta u fè  
A gòsi, a gòsi, tuuu tuuu / A neni, a neni, tuuu tuuu

*The child is crying / One has to accept that there is no milk  
in her breast, the mother is crying  
A little jug has been put down in her name  
He who made Ami cry / We'll take a big stick  
To beat him, to beat him, tuuu tuuu / To insult him, to insult  
him, tuuu tuu*

## 'Fajuguden'

This song criticizes the father of the child, indirectly.

Fajuguden, na n'k'i dònin dòn  
Fajuguden, sunguruntigela juguden ye  
I fa tè maa bugò n'a m'i

- a) Sen kelen kari
- b) Bolo kelen kari
- c) Nyè kelen ci

*Child of a mean father, I will make you dance a little  
Child of a mean father, child of a father who chases girls  
When your father hits people*

- a) He breaks their leg*
- b) He breaks their arm*
- c) He splits their eye*

## 'I daden'

A child is a gift of Allah, and cannot be bought with gold or silver. You come from good families, both on your father's side and on your mother's side.

I daden, kunkurunnin, i daden / Fèn tè Allah bò  
I daden, i fa u ye maa ye, i daden / I daden, i ba u ye maa  
ye, i daden  
I daden, kunkurunnin, i daden / Fèn tè Allah bò  
I daden, sanu tè fèn min sòrò, i daden / I daden, wari tè fèn  
min sòrò, i daden



*Be quiet, little one, be quiet / Nothing equals Allah  
Be quiet, your fathers are respectable people, be quiet / Be  
quiet, your mothers are respectable people  
Be quiet, little one, be quiet / Nothing equals Allah  
Be quiet, one cannot buy a child with gold / Be quiet, one  
cannot buy a child with silver*

## **'Jònmuso'**

The newborn will be named after someone, in this case Maïmouna Koné (the singer), Elisa Samaké (the researcher), or Moussa Diakité (the research assistant), who were present at the recording. The song starts with cooing sounds which are sung in the baby's ear.

Weyou...kurulu....

Jònmuso kelen bè Alu ka so / K'o tògò da jènni toma na  
a) K'o tògò da Maïmouna toma na / Maïmouna Koné toma  
na

b) K'o tògò da Elisa toma na / Elisa Samaké toma na

Weyou....kurulu....

Jonkè kelen bè Alu ka so / K'o tògò da jènni toma na  
K'o tògò da Moussa toma na / Moussa Diakité toma na

*There is a baby girl at Alu's house / Whose name shall we  
give her*

*We shall give her the name of*

*a) Maïmouna / Maïmouna Koné*

*We shall give her the name of*

*b) Elisa / Elisa Samaké*

*There is a baby boy at Alu's house / Whose name shall we give him*

*We shall give him the name of Moussa / Moussa Diakité*

## Bamana girls' songs, by girls of Bamana quarter



### 'Kònònin'

The frightened little bird is a symbol for the frailty of life; death is inevitable.

Kònònin bè denmisènninw bolo / Kònònin daji bè bò  
Kònònin bè denmisènninw bolo / Kònònin nuji bè bò  
Allah ka laban nyi an na / Laban wèrè tè an na / Jeni-ka-  
nyimi ko

*The small bird is in the hands of the children / Saliva comes out of the mouth of the little bird*

*The small bird is in the hands of the children / Water comes out of the nose of the little bird*

*May Allah make the end of our life good / There is no other way for us / Than to be grilled and eaten*

## 'Bilakoro siso'

The house where the boys sleep is often next to the mud-pool, a little bit away from the village. Boys will try to bring the girls there, but they should not go with them. The girls provoke the boys by calling the house dirty, and by extension the boys who do not clean the house.

Sonin, sonin, y'o / Bilakoro siso / Sonin nògòlen  
Sonin min ye bwa dingèn da la / Walai, sonin nògòlen

*Little house, little house / Boys' sleeping place / Dirty little house*

*The little house next to the mud-pool / Walai, dirty little house*

## 'Sanganyògon man'

The crossroads and the public square is where boys and girls meet at night.

Sanganyògon man bè dankun na / N teri yonkon, yonkon  
Npogotigi kulu bè fèrèba la / N teri yonkon, yonkon  
Cènmisènnin kulu bè fèrèba la / N teri yonkon, yonkon

*Those who are alike are at the crossroad / My friend lifts me up lightly*

*The group of young girls are in the big square / My friend lifts me up lightly*

*The group of young boys are in the big square / My friend lifts me up lightly*

## **'N bi taa n da dubalen kòrò'**

The girl does not have any parents, and is forced to sleep in a public place; a woman has taken care of her, and she dances with joy.

N bi taa n da dubalen kòrò, jama / An ka yuguba  
Falaw naanibaa ko dò, jama / An ka yuguba

I am going to lie down under the fig tree, people / Let's dance  
For the person who consoles orphans, people / Let's dance

## **'Nyi toli'**

A bad tooth is a symbol for a physical or moral shortcoming. The first three lines are sung once, and the next three lines are repeated for each girl, mentioning her name.

Nyi toli ka bò an na / Npogotigi nyi toli ka bò an na / Kasa bè  
Aw m'o nyininw ye / Aw ma Shoané nin nyininw ye / O jè me

*The bad tooth has to leave us / The girl who has a bad tooth has to go / It smells  
Did you see the small teeth / Did you see Shoané's small teeth / They are white*

## 'Ji ko'

This song talks of how verbal and non-verbal respect is shown. A woman does not call her husband by his given name, but 'Kòkè' (Big brother). She kneels down when putting down the water. She has brought him water three times, but he refuses to wash himself with it, and she does not understand why he behaves this way.

Kòkè, i ka ji ko nyè cogo / Wa ji ye  
Ne nyòngiri ko fila / Ne nyòngiri ko saba  
Ka ji kelen ko fò / Wa ji ye

*Kòkè, regarding your water / Here is the water  
I have knelt twice / I have knelt three times  
To tell you that your water is here / Here is the water*

## 'Finibolo balanna'

The thorns of the lemon tree symbolize the difficult situation a girl finds herself in; she is engaged to be married, and has to be careful. Reference is made to two types of skirts made of traditional cloth (kòba and bayo), which may refer to the importance of traditional behavior.

Finibolo balanna, lenburu bolo la / Finibolo balanna, ne ka  
kòba taffy  
Bolo balanna, lenburu bolo la / Finibolo balanna, ne ka bayo  
taafe  
Bolo balanna, lenburu balanna

*The edge of the cloth is caught, by the branch of the lemon tree / The edge of the cloth is caught, my skirt*

*The edge is caught, by the branch of the lemon tree / The edge of the cloth is caught, my skirt*

*The edge is caught, caught by the lemon tree*

### **'Cè'**

The girl rejects the boy who wants to be her fiancé, and insults him.

*Cè y'o, ne maminè cè y'o / Jègè jalan*

*Ka t'i sigi i wulu ku kan / Jège jalan*

*E bi kè ne maminè cè ye / Ale e tè kè ne maminè cè ye /*

*Jègè jalan*

*My fiancé / Dried fish*

*Go sit down on your dog's tail / Dried fish*

*You want to be my fiancé / You will not be my fiancé / Dried fish*

### **'Syè'**

A girl is in love with a boy who is a blacksmith. She cannot have a relationship with him, because blacksmiths belong to a caste that cannot marry outside its group, but she keeps going back to him. 'Patyanga' is a popular balafon (xylophone) rhythm, used here as a 'filler'. This is a type of a song that uses an image of an animal in order to criticize certain types of behavior indirectly ('tigelimani').

Syè o, e de ye syè ye, patyanga / Syè ko nyè ye, jarabi ye,  
tulon tè  
Ni Babelen ka numuya kun tè / Ne kuna si Babelen fè  
Tònkònò den npogotigi y'o / E yèrè bi yaala kojugu  
Ma, ne ko ne ti yaala / Yaala dan ye yòrò kelen ye  
Syè ko nyè ye, jarabi ye, tulon tè

*You are a chicken, patyanga / A chicken means passion, not  
play  
If Babelen were not a blacksmith / I would spend the night  
with Babelen  
Little female duck / You roam about too much  
Mother, I don't roam about / I only go to one place  
A chicken means passion, not play*

### **'A ni su'**

The women of the town of Djenné are well educated and sought after. A group of boys goes to Djenné to look for a woman to marry, but the group of girls hides her. The boys say that they see a woman's leg/arm/head, but the girls answer that it is only a girl's leg/arm/head. This is a case of wordplay: 'Jènèntugannin' means 'little domestic pigeon of Djenné'.

(Boys)

A ni su, a ni su, jènèntugannin / A ni su, a ni su,  
Djennékadenw  
Ko, a ni su, a ni su yan, jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Girls)



Aw bè munè kò, jènèntugannin / Aw bè munè kò /  
Djennékaden bè munè kò, jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Boys)

An bè muso kò, jènèntugannin / An bè muso kò /  
Djennékaden bè muso kò, jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Girls)

Muso t'an bolo yan, jènèntugannin / Djennékamusu t'an bolo  
yan, jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Boys)

Muso senkala ye, jènèntugannin / Djennékamusu senkala  
ye, jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Girls)

Muso senkala tè, jènèntugannin / Djennékaden senkala dò,  
jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Boys)

Muso bolokala ye, jènèntugannin / Djennékamusu bolokala  
ye, jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Girls)

Muso bolokala tè, jènèntugannin / Djennékaden bolokala  
dò, jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Boys)

Muso kunkolo ye, jènèntugannin / Djennékamusu kunkolo  
ye, jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen  
(Girls)

Muso kunkolo tè, jènèntugannin / Djennékaden kunkolo dò,  
jènèntugannin  
Hnnn, hayi, Djenné kololen

(Boys)

*Good evening, good evening, little pigeons / Good evening,  
good evening, children of Djenné*

*Good evening, good evening here, little pigeons / Hnnn,  
hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

(Girls)

*What are you looking for, little pigeons / What are you  
looking for / Are you looking for a child of Djenné, little  
pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

(Boys)

*We are looking for a woman, little pigeons / We are looking  
for a woman / Looking for a woman of Djenné, little pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

(Girls)

*We have no woman here, little pigeons / We have no  
Djenné woman here, little pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

(Boys)

*We see the leg of a woman, little pigeons / We see the leg  
of a Djenné woman, little pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

(Girls)

*There is no woman's leg, little pigeons / It is the leg of a  
Djenné child, little pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

(Boys)

*We see the arm of a woman, little pigeons / We see the arm  
of a Djenné woman, little pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

*(Girls)*

*There is no woman's arm, little pigeons / It is the arm of a  
Djenné child, little pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

*(Boys)*

*We see the head of a woman, little pigeons / We see the  
head of a Djenné woman, little pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

*(Girls)*

*There is no woman's head, little pigeons / It is the head of a  
Djenné child, little pigeons*

*Hnnn, hayi, the people of Djenné are respectful*

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## **CREDITS**

- The Bozo are represented by Mamou Thiero, who sang lullabies, and a group of 14 young girls who sang children's songs.
- The Bamana are represented by Maïmouna Koné, who sang lullabies, and a group of 13 young girls who sang children's songs.
- Moussa Dakité (Kirango), research assistant, organized the sessions and assisted with the transcriptions and translations.
- Lassine Sidibé (Kirango) made a further analysis of the song texts.
- Singers Mamou Thiero and Maïmouna Koné (Kirango) talked about the meanings of the songs.
- Nienke Muurling (University of Amsterdam) checked the Bamana texts and the translations.

## **AUTHOR OF THE NOTES**

Elisabeth den Otter (1941) is an anthropologist specialized in non-western performing arts and audio visual anthropology.

She studied Cultural Anthropology at the University of Leiden, The Netherlands, and did fieldwork in Peru, Burma, Brazil, and Mali.

From 1988 to 2003 she was curator of the Department of Ethnomusicology at the Tropenmuseum / Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. In 1996 she curated a large exhibition on Asian and African puppetry. In 2005 she started her own label, Samaké Records, to produce CD's and DVD's of material she collected, mostly in Mali.

(For more information, see her website: <http://elisabethdenotter.nl>)