

Mamady Keita's "Kuku"

BY B. MICHAEL WILLIAMS

Mamady Keita has established himself as the standard-bearer of jembe improvisation. People chuckle when I refer to him as “the Michael Jordan of the jembe.” The reference conjures the image of complete mastery—of an uncanny ability to make the difficult (and, for many of us, even the impossible) appear effortless. We chuckle because we realize how rare such mastery is, and how joyous it is to be in its presence. Our breath has been taken away by one of Jordan’s thundering dunks or acrobatic lay-ups. Highlights such as these are etched in our memory, and yet they represent only a glimpse of a total performance picture. Even Jordan has to play defense and make his free throws.

One of the benchmarks of compositional mastery (including improvisation as spontaneous musical composition) is what I refer to as “economy of means.” Keita’s mastery of motivic economy has been illustrated in my two previous articles, “Mamady Keita’s ‘Kassa,’” (PN 35/2, April 1997) and “Mamady Keita’s ‘Mendiani’” (PN 37/4, August 1999). In a nutshell, “economy of means” refers to the art of “doing more with less.” As we shall see, in no instance is this concept better illustrated than in Keita’s recording of “Kuku.”

“Kuku” originated as a social dance of the Manian people from the forest region of southeastern Guinea, around Beyla, near the borders of Mali and Ivory Coast. Originally played for women as they returned from fishing, “Kuku” was traditionally played only on jembes (without dunduns) with one tuned very low (Billmeier, 150). This is exactly how it is presented on Keita’s recording: two accompanying jembes and a shekere (djabara) support Keita’s solo, which is performed on a very low jembe. The entire solo consists of six motives that undergo various manipulative processes including repetition, alteration, fragmentation, elaboration, and extension.

The initial motive is a call (also known as a “break”) that appears only at the beginning (to signal the ensemble to com-

mence playing) and at the end (to signal the ensemble to stop). This motive is instrumental in generating the five other motives in the solo.

The next motive (Motive A) has the most entries of any other (20), and serves to underpin the entire improvisation. It is a two-bar motive (as are all six motives), consisting entirely of silence save a single ringing stroke on the last sixteenth-note subdivision of count 3 (the “a” of the beat) in the second bar. Whenever it appears, Motive A is always immediately repeated and never undergoes further manipulation other than simple repetition. As such, it seems rather innocuous, and yet that single ringing stroke on the last sixteenth-note subdivision of count 3 appears in every other motive in the entire improvisation. All the other motives are generated from combinations derived from the Call Motive and this single ringing stroke.

Motive B is derived from the Call Motive and demonstrates an excellent example of rhythmic alteration. It can generally be described as a triplet figure sandwiched between two syncopated gestures, yet it appears only once in this original form (bar 5). In subsequent entries, the syncopated gestures gradually become “tripletized,” first in bar 23 (on the downbeat of the motive’s second bar) and then in bar 45 (on the initial gesture). All the remaining entries are in this altered (“tripletized”) configuration.

Motive C is derived from the two syncopated gestures found in Motive B’s initial configuration. It appears in its original form at bars 9, 63, and 95. At bar 13, the figure is elaborated by a 4:3 cross rhythm in muffled slaps (this figure immediately generates Motive D in bar 15), and again in bar 37 (this time with the 4:3 cross rhythm appearing as open tones). It appears in various degrees of fragmentation in bars 19, 31, and 111.

Motive D is generated by the elaborated version of Motive C appearing in bar 13. In bar 15, the figure takes on its own identity and undergoes processes of extension (bars 25, 87, and 89), elaboration (bars 47, 69, and 103), tonal alter-

ation (bar 103), and rhythmic alteration (bars 69 and 113).

Motive E is related to Motive D in both size and shape. Both are characterized by a tied, syncopated figure in the first bar followed by a “straightened out” version without ties in the second. The motive appears in its original configuration at bars 27, 41, 59, and 97. The figures are altered by the insertion or omission of ties in bars 33, 43, and 71. In bar 73, and again in bar 91, the motive is elaborated with muffled slaps as seen in Motive D. It is extended by means of syncopated gestures in bar 101.

Notice that all the motives grow out of one another, and all can ultimately be traced to both the Call Motive and Motive A. Through the ingenious application of the processes of repetition, rhythmic and tonal alteration, fragmentation, elaboration, and extension, Mamady Keita takes a single motive and creates a complete improvisation with incredible economy of means. Nothing is added or subtracted that isn’t somehow related to the original generative idea—and all this is spontaneously improvised!

No thundering slam dunks or skywalking lay-ups here; just a breathtaking example of “defense and free throws,” of doing more with less. Like Jordan, Keita makes it all seem effortless. Listen to the recording and it sounds so simple. In reality, it is nothing short of amazing.

REFERENCES

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**“KUKU”
NOTATION KEY**

Notation Key

bass tone slap muffled slap

JEMBE ENSEMBLE

Call Solo

Lead Jembe (Tuned very low)

Jembe 2 Shekere

Jembe 3

ESSENTIAL MOTIVES

bar 1, 115

Call Motive (2 entries)

bar 3, 7, 11, 17, 21, 29, 35, 39, 49, 53, 57, 61, 65, 75, 79, 83, 93, 99, 105, 109

Motive A (20 entries)

bar 5, 23, 45, 51, 55, 67, 77, 81, 107

Motive B (9 entries)

bar 9, 13, 19, 31, 37, 63, 95, 111

Motive C (8 entries)

bar 15, 25, 47, 69, 87, 89, 103, 113

Motive D (8 entries)

bar 27, 33, 41, 43, 59, 71, 73, 85, 91, 97, 101

Motive E (11 entries)

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JEMBE SOLO

Call

The musical score is written on 11 staves in common time (C). It begins with a 'Call' section indicated by a bracket. The notation includes various rhythmic figures such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and triplets. Some notes are marked with 'x' to indicate specific playing techniques. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, with repeat signs (double bar lines with dots) used to indicate repeated rhythmic phrases. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The musical score consists of nine staves of music. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, rests, and articulation marks such as accents (>), accents with a fermata (>>), and breath marks (x). Trills are indicated by '3' under groups of notes. The score is divided into sections by double bar lines with repeat dots. The first staff begins with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C).

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