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Citation

Jansen, J. A. M. M., Counsel, G., & Camara, B. (2018). Sex, Drugs, and Female Agency: Why Siramori Diabaté's Song "Nanyuman" Was Such a Success in Mali and Guinea. *Journal Of West African History*, 4(1), 57-74. doi:10.14321/jwestafrihist.4.1.0057

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72008>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Sex, Drugs, and Female Agency – Why Siramori Diabaté’s Song “Nanyuman” Was Such a Success in Mali and Guinea

7,254 words (44,230 number of characters with spaces)

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Abstract: This paper presents the lyrics of the song “Nanyuman” by Mali’s legendary female griot (bard) Siramori [Sira Mory] Diabaté (ca. 1925-1989). It will demonstrate how a female griot integrates into her songs topical moral discussions on the position of married women in the Socialist-inspired nations of Guinea and Mali in the 1960s and 1970s. Through the voice of “Nanyuman”, Siramori comments in ways a male griot never could, discussing marriage, sex, men’s roles as husbands, motherhood, and even use of stimulant drugs. This source publication shows that the remarkable rise of female griots in West Africa from the 1960s onwards can be explained by new topical debates on West African society, and not only by technological innovations and new aesthetic appreciations of female voices that have received scholarly attention thus far. The performance of “Nanyuman” also reveals Siramori’s artistic and comedic talents as an entertainer, thus evidencing why she was elevated to the highest ranks of musicians in Mali.

Keywords: Female griot, sexuality, Mali, Guinea, marriage, diplomacy.

Acknowledgements

Graeme Counsel received Major Research Project funding from the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme in 2008, 2009 and 2012-2013. We also acknowledge Nienke Muurling for sharing her knowledge about the Kela griots with us and we thank the two anonymous reviewers of *JWAH* for their reviews.

Introduction: The historiographic importance of “Nanyuman”

The performance of “Nanyuman” for a live television audience in the 1980s is the focus of this paper, as it constitutes the only example of an audio-visual recording of Siramori known to exist.¹² The recording was unearthed by chance, by Graeme Counsel during his project to digitize the sound archives of Radio Télévision de Guinée (RTG).³ Since Siramori Diabaté is a Maninka (Malinké) from the town of Kangaba, close to the Guinean frontier, she was popular in both Mali and Guinea, which contextualises the presence of the video in the RTG archives. More importantly, in the 1960s and 1970s, the political elites in both nations highly valued both (African) Socialism and Maninka traditions, as evidenced through cultural policies, national arts festivals and song themes.⁴ As this article will demonstrate, Siramori created settings in her songs that both challenged pre-colonial and colonial orthodoxies while respecting traditional values of *mògòya*, “being a respectable person”. In “Nanyuman”, these principles are applied to the situation of an unhappy marriage, and in mentioning her own failings Siramori demands that we all consider our own perspectives and values.

Female artists conquered Mali’s male-dominated music scene in the 1970s, a process described by the ethnomusicologist Lucy Durán.⁵ As Durán explains, the introduction of the microphone technically emancipated the female voice. This new technology neutralized the decibel advantage that male voices traditionally held over female voices, a situation that had for centuries limited women to background chorus singers. Moreover, female artists accompanied by one guitar player came into vogue in the 1970s, and, as Durán explains, this popularity was due to mobility. Two performers and their equipment could easily be transported in one car to the location of a wedding or a festive meeting.⁶ Thus many female griots⁷ had considerable advantages over local orchestras, which were expensive to transport and therefore not mobile enough to cover the area of fast-growing cities such as Bamako, or to tour the countryside. Malian and Guinean orchestras had been created through state initiatives under the leadership of Presidents Keita and Touré, and they were largely dependent upon on state sponsorship. In the 1970s, under Moussa Traoré, Mali’s government adopted an ideology of “authenticité culturelle”, a cultural policy inspired by Sékou

Touré's Guinea, which urged the nation's state-sponsored orchestras to adapt their Cuban and jazz-inspired arrangements to the modernization of songs from traditional repertoires.⁸ Although the music of the orchestras remained popular, for the average citizen they were much too expensive to hire. The female griots, however, readily adapted to the new state policy of cultural authenticity. Accompanied by a guitar player or perhaps a balafon player, they demonstrated the "modern" possibilities of their musical styles. They were thus co-opted into the government's cultural agenda and received airplay on the national radio networks, and later they became the champions of the booming audio-cassette market.

These technical, political and socio-economic contexts gave rise to the dominance of female voices in Mali, and authors such as Hale⁹ have explored the singers' impact on the developing local markets for privately sponsored entertainment. Hale's research has focused on the female griots' (classical) literary skills in singing praise poetry and heroic narratives as they emancipated themselves from background chorus singers to solo artists. Hale has dedicated much of his scholarly work to describe and value this process, offering a stage for Siramori in several of his projects.¹⁰ Hale's choice is not inspired by a narrow literary preference, for Siramori was a national hero whose sudden death in December 1989 was a shock which gained mass media coverage at the time.¹¹

Siramori's present-day status in Mali may be best illustrated by the titles chosen for two historical collections of songs presented on compact disc by Mali's Ministry of Culture: *Musiques du Mali I: Banzoumana* (1995) and *Musiques du Mali II: Sira Mory* (1995). These place Siramori on equal footing with Banzoumana Cissoko, who is widely regarded in Mali as the greatest griot of the first decade after independence.¹² Though Siramori's eminence is beyond question, it has yet to be better illustrated how she achieved this status. This paper therefore seeks to address this omission by publishing the lyrics of her most famous song, "Nanyuman". In her video performance it is apparent how Siramori could skilfully develop a narrative that both emphasized classical (Maninka) values of marriage and "appropriate" female behavior while at the same time calling for a woman's right to agency in her married life. Her performance thus addressed the demands on women which

was imposed by both tradition and modernity. It is noteworthy that Maninka songs on the topic of marriage can be quite straightforward in their message to newlyweds,¹³ yet in “Nanyuman” Siramori weaves a diplomatic masterpiece that focuses on a woman’s problem, without hint of scapegoat or blame, and without resorting to caricatures of the central actors.

Siramori Diabaté’s life and career

Siramori’s career is firmly based within the heritage of the famous griots of Kela, a village at the banks of the river Niger, 100 km south of Bamako. The griots of Kela are accorded a very high status due to their affiliation with a royal family in the nearby town of Kangaba, whose ancestors once ruled the legendary Empire of Mali, the realm from which the current Republic of Mali was named at independence in 1960. The Kela griots are known as experts of the Sunjata epic, the centuries old legend of the founding of the Empire of Mali, from which all Maninka trace their descent. Every seven years the Kela griots perform the Sunjata epic in a sanctuary called the kamabolon. This performance is partially concealed, but nevertheless it attracts large audiences and is a focus of media coverage. The Kela griots are also renowned diplomats who, often at the request of the royal family in Kangaba, are actively involved in solving and negotiating marriage, land and kinship issues.¹⁴ During childhood, griots are taught the essentials skills of their craft, but many do not possess the talent or the desire to pursue a life of music. In the village of Kela, where several important griot families live, it is generally recognized which children amongst their cohort have greater potentials as future artists.¹⁵ Siramori Diabaté must have been such a child, born into the right family¹⁶ at the right time, while possessing the requisite talents to launch an illustrious career.

Siramori’s voice is instantly recognizable amongst Malians. A powerful singer, her forceful and somewhat raw tone is contrasted with passages both delicate and tender. In later years her voice softened and was sometimes almost fragile, perhaps as a result of the more advanced equipment used to record her.¹⁷

Siramori organized her career and her marital life in an unusual, extraordinary way that echoes the wilfulness of her heroine, Nanyuman. Siramori's remark, in the beginning of the song, that Nanyuman's story is "about her own failings", might be telling in this perspective.¹⁸ From a male perspective,¹⁹ Maninka society is patrilocal and it is the strict norm that a woman moves to her in-laws' compound after marriage, thus removing her from her own family and friends (and lovers). This is a source of much anxiety for newlyweds, as Siramori herself voiced in the song "Sara", which presents the epic struggles of a young girl to stay at home by pretending extraordinary illnesses that only her local lover appears to be able to cure.²⁰ It is not known if Siramori as a young married girl moved to her husband's compound, but in the 1980s she lived in unique circumstances. She headed a household in Kangaba, and for performances she was often accompanied by her son, the late guitar player Sidiki Kouyaté, who lived in the same compound with his family. Siramori's husband Nankoman, who accompanied her on balafon in the early days of her career, lived in his natal village of Heremankono (ca. 50 km from Kangaba), where he lived with two other spouses, and Siramori and Nankoman visited each other on occasion.²¹ Thus, Siramori lived close to the stages where she performed, in the areas between the traditional village of Kela and the modern city of Bamako. Her own lifestyle was thus in accord with her subtle call in "Nanyuman" for more attention to women's social problems and for a better understanding of women's sacrifice during their lives. It is therefore no coincidence that the video of "Nanyuman" was located in an archive of a country whose Socialist regime explicitly supported equality between the genders. Its location also reflects a much older tradition of female involvement in regional politics.²²

Sex, drugs, and ... – What makes "Nanyuman" a worthy song?

The interpretation of "Nanyuman" available on YouTube is a live recording in which the audience is clearly highly amused, their laughter indicating which of the song lines are the most humorous. This permits a great advantage when analyzing the text, especially when compared to the lyrics of other Mande women's songs that have been published thus far. In those examples, no audience is present,

and it is therefore difficult to determine which phrases and their associated meanings are appreciated.

“Nanyuman”’s four characters form a micro-society of Maninka life. In addition to the protagonist, Nanyuman, the other actors are her father, her husband, and a traveling salesman who is a stranger. Their social obligations and inter-relationships reveal the complexities of a young woman’s world. Events quickly unfold, and Nanyuman is required to make difficult decisions. Her choices are complicated through kinship relations, particularly so when later in the story we learn her son will soon be circumcised. Nanyuman must resolve her own desires with the obligations and expectations towards her son, her family, and her in-laws that kinship demands. These are further complicated by the important obligations of hospitality (*jatigiya*) towards a stranger, as seen when the traveling salesman arrives on the couple’s door.

Before proceeding further, the kola nut demands some attention. In “Nanyuman”, Siramori’s decision to have her heroine seduced by a kola nut trader adds an important layer to the plot. The nut of the kola tree is a bitter fruit and one that is highly appreciated in West Africa. The sharing and giving of kola nuts accompanies many local ceremonies, but what is perhaps less known is that the nut contains very high levels of caffeine. One nut may contain a caffeine content equivalent to ten to thirty cups of coffee, thus pharmaceutically speaking the kola nut could be classed as a psycho-active drug.

Kola nuts are produced in the forests of Guinea, Ghana and Sierra Leone, and from the eighteenth century there is evidence of kola trade routes from the Atlantic coast to Timbuktu. Along these routes traders carried baskets on their heads which were laden with kola nuts. The kola nut trade became a specialization, a craft which demanded particular knowledge of geographical and political conditions in a region which encompassed major slave trading routes and which suffered from systemic warfare. Kola nut traders formed networks which flourished, particularly in the early twentieth century under French rule. Stability in the region permitted the networks to grow, to the extent that kola nut traders were transformed into a distinct ethnic group, the Kooroko, which Jean-

Loup Amselle described in his path-breaking study *Les Négociants de la Savane*, one of the first studies that convincingly argued that ethnicity is a historical construct.²³ The Kooroko vanished, however, from the administrative records after 1950, as fewer people became involved in the trade. New means of transport demanded less manpower to transport kola nuts, and as a stimulant the kola nut had increasing competition from the tobacco industry and *atayi* (strong brewed tea). Siramori's setting of "Nanyuman" is in the heyday of the kola nut trade, in the interbellum, when a kola nut trader was imagined as having many resources. Her audience remembers this era, and thus she creates a nostalgic locale.

The social and historical setting for the song is now clear. Nanyuman is married and has thus been torn from the people and family she loves. In her husband's compound she is a young stranger who is yet to gain respect. It is a situation which is often presented in stories from the region, and a theme that Siramori was well aware of.²⁴ Nanyuman will only gain status and respect in her husband's compound once her son has grown-up and become an adult with a family. At that time she will have become a senior member of the family, but in her younger years she is little but a junior in-law. The importance of a mother to her son is highlighted in the famous Mande proverb – *Bèè b'i ba bolo* – which translates as both "Your mother is your everything" and "Everything is in the hands of your mother". A child will consider his/her mother to be the most important person in life, with a son considering her more important than spouses or children.²⁵

Being a young woman, Nanyuman's marriage to her husband was brokered by two families and was not formed on the basis of affection or of a mutually respectful relationship. Nanyuman's husband has, by definition, deep loyalties towards his mother and his brothers, and when the visitor in the form of the traveling kola nut salesman presents himself at Nanyuman's compound, her husband shows himself to be a respectful man by offering accommodation. He offers the salesman a sleeping place at the entrance hut, a part of the quarters called a *bolon* (a hut with two doors that functions as the entrance of a traditional compound, in French often translated as *vestibule*).

Nanyuman's husband orders her to arrange for the stranger a decent and comfortable place to stay, not knowing that he is inviting a suitor into his home.

The next day, Nanyuman's husband again proves to be an exemplary "good citizen" as he goes to his fields to labor. Many of the Maninka ethnic group in the region are proud agriculturalists. The audience is led to think, "This guy really is okay", and indeed Nanyuman's husband is genuinely surprised when it transpires that she has abandoned him: "I did not quarrel with my spouse," he explains to us. Although he claims innocence, this does not diminish Nanyuman's situation as a young married woman living without affection.

This is the situation the kola nut trader uses to seduce Nanyuman, with his smooth talk and predictable compliments which target her vulnerability. It is important to note that he is not just a simple traveling salesman, but is – one could describe – the regional drugs dealer. Many in Siramori's audience will feel the importance of this aspect of Nanyuman's seducer. Sex and drugs, to dilute the story to its essentials, are the foundations of many songs, and the Maninka, too, have their variants.

Sex, drugs, and ... and female agency – Towards a *good* end

After eloping from her husband, Nanyuman is soon abandoned by her lover. This turn of event could offer a song a neat conclusion with a moral. For Siramori, however, a singer raised by professional diplomats, there remains much to do, and it is at this moment that her narrative skills demonstrate why she was one of the greatest artists of her generation. Siramori solves Nanyuman's apparently hopeless situation by changing the perspective of the narrative and by adding a measure of humor. She closes the door on what has transpired, that of Nanyuman's infidelity, by letting Nanyuman publicly confess that she has done wrong and needs to be punished for her actions. In real life women committing adultery may suffer harsh physical sanctions. Siramori, however, describes these in terms that are much less severe, namely that of spanking Nanyuman's bottom with a shoe. This is a more playful resolution, in many senses, and while contending that a man has the right to beat his adulterous spouse, she nevertheless provides a resolution to the situation that permits all parties

dignity and respect. As Siramori emphasizes to us in the song, “*Aaa, n’a bε kεla tan, dinya ye suma dɔɔnin*” – “Ah, if everyone was treated that way, life would be more peaceful”. That Siramori implicitly has understanding for her heroine’s actions is witnessed in the name she has chosen for her: Na-nyuman. *Na* is a girl’s name and *nyuman* means “morally good”.²⁶ Siramori thus makes a strong call for *mògòya*, respectful behavior.

In effect, Siramori is looking to the future. She consciously breaks with the past by offering a resolution which is morally acceptable to all parties. On her return to her paternal compound, Nanyuman learns that her first son will be circumcised. This is an important step to becoming the adult man who will care for his mother for the rest of his life, in recognition of the proverb *Bèè b’i ba bolo*. The circumcision makes Nanyuman realize that there is a future for her in her in-laws’ compound, and that this future is being the beloved mother of her adult children and, later, the beloved grandmother of her sons’ children. It is in this future scenario that Nanyuman will live a life that both respects her rights and creates her agency. Thus Siramori, after having narrated Nanyuman’s adventures, sings a plea for staying with your marriage partner and mutually showing understanding. In doing so, Siramori perfectly meets the duty of her griot profession by guarding and protecting what is valued, namely the social morals and cultural values of her society as represented by *mògòya*. She also directs our attention to the politics of the era by focusing on a woman’s position in her household, and by warning of how morals and values can be threatened by sex and drugs. For Siramori a (morally) good end is at least as important as a happy end.

Although we present Siramori’s lyrics in the context of new *cultural* arguments which explain the rise of female griots, we note that the lyrics of this song may have a larger historical significance as a source for social history. As explained, women were traditionally married by arrangements between families. French colonial jurisprudence in the first half of the twentieth century penalized women who had left their marriage while also affording other rights. From court cases in French West Africa, a divorce could be declared in cases where the husband was violent to his spouse, for example. In this way, women were attributed a form of agency in the relationship with their

husbands.²⁷ The colonial law, however, did not provide the scope to include marital issues related to love and sexuality. Here, Siramori Diabaté contributes her perspective, describing a lonely woman's dilemma when feeling affection and sympathy for a stranger. Siramori recognizes and supports the woman's agency in negotiating her sexual desires, thus integrating the modern image of a woman's sexual rights. In "Nanyuman", Siramori thus developed a well-worn storyline by elevating it into an important cultural critique and ideological statement. It is a performance which underscores her position as one of the greatest voices of her generation, while also providing insight into the ways in which griots can skilfully operate in contexts which formal legislation fails to address.

Nanyuman, by Siramori Diabaté

[the following text is spoken]

.... kiri ni wɔɔɔ²⁸

...confusion and discord.

Fufunintiki di n nɛnɛ, Kanja Burema.

Kanja Burema, it's the carrier of a little basket [of kola nuts] who deceived me.

Aaa, n ko wadi le nɔɔ, Kanja Burema.

Oh Kanja Burema! It is the fault of money.

Aaa! Fufunintiki di n nɛnɛ Kanja Burema.

Kanja Burema, it's the carrier of the little basket who deceived me.

Ayiwa n badennu!

Yes, dear audience!

Ne Siramori Jabate kan ye nin di.

It's me, Siramori Diabaté, speaking.

N ye min fɔla nin, n yɛdɛ sɔn lee.

The story I tell here is of my own failings.

N t'a fɔla aw kelen ma dɛ mosolu,

Women! My story is not directed at you alone,

N yɛdɛ sɔn lee.

because it's also of my own failings.

Fɔlɔ ngaralu

The famous griots of the past

Oyi ye nin fɔ fɔlɔ mosoyi ye,

have told this story to the women of their time,

Oyi da fudu bato.

and they remained faithful to their marriages.

Ne fɛnɛ y'a yida

It's my turn to tell

Mali mosolu, n y'a yida ayi la de

Ayi fene ka fudu bato.

Nanyuman, fin t'a n'a ke te.

Folomokolu le tun b'a ke,

Nekesoko tele te, motoko tele te,

Ka worofufunin ta.

N'ayi da woropanye ta, ayi be do bo o dala

K'o ke fufunin do, k'o l'i kun

ka wa duku ni duku.

Fufunintiki nada jiki Kanja Bureme kan.

A ko Kanja Burema, i te hina n na

N ke tele fila nin ke i fe yan.

N be n yaara bukudabolo ninnu na,

Ka n ya woro yaara.

Kanja Burema ko, o te baasi di.

Nanyuman! Deben ta i k'a la bolon konɔ.

Jula le benni bolon konɔ.

Nanyuman da bolon fida,

Ka deben ta, k'a la fufunintiki nya.

A tanbeda sakuma, ka wa a ya fennu feere

A nada wura la.

the women of Mali

so that they remain faithful to their marriages.

Nanyuman had no problem with her husband.

In the past,

when there was no bicycle or moped,

the men wore small baskets [of kola nuts] on their head.

When buying a (big) basket of kola nuts, they put some of them

in a smaller basket which they carried on their head from village to village.

A carrier of a little basket [of kola nuts] came to Kanja Burema's home.

"Kanja Burema!" he said, "have pity on me so I can stay few days here at your home.

I'm going to walk to the neighbouring villages, to sell my kola nuts."

Kanja Burema replied, "that's no problem."

"Nanyuman!" he called, "go and put the sleeping mat on the floor of the entrance hut.

Because a merchant likes an entrance hut."

Nanyuman swept inside the entrance hut, then took a mat and spread it out for the carrier of the little basket.

In the morning, he went to sell his produce and he returned in the evening.

A talada i kɔ, o dukusagwe, ka wa a ya
fɛnnu feere

A nada wura la.

Kanja Burema wad'a ya daba l'i kanna

Ka tanbe ka wa fodo dɔ.

Nanyuman wilida telekunna dɔ

Ka wa don fufunintiki kan.

Fufunintiki ko, eh Nanyuman!

I nalen n badola wa?

Ɔɔhɔ, n nalen I bado la bi sa n fa.

A ko Nanyuman!

I tɛ woro dɔ ta!

Nanyuman ye woro ta.

Ee, mosolu! Lahawutani, walakuwata!

An ka siran!

Nanyuman ye woro wo ta, a y'o nyimi.

A ko: Nanyuman!

A ko: e moso nyumanba nin!

A ko: i dɔnɔkɔnya dɔgwɛ kɛ!

Ne natuma ni kelen ni sisan tɛ,

jurukenin kelen nin le y'i kanna.

Ne ma juruke gwɛdɛ y'i kanna.

A ko: Aaa nfa!

Nayi ye an ta lanɔkɔ nin le dɔ yan.

A ko: Nanyuman!

The next day he went again to sell his produce

and returned in the evening.

At the same time, Kanja Burema put his hoe on his
shoulder

and went to the field.

Nanyuman rose in the early afternoon

and joined the carrier of the little basket.

He exclaimed, "Eh Nanyuman!

Did you come to talk to me?"

"Yes! Finally, I came today to talk with you."

"Nanyuman!" he continued,

"Have a kola nut!"

Nanyuman took the kola nut.

Hey, women! How can this be possible!

Be in fear of punishment!

Nanyuman took the kola nut and chewed it.

He said to her, "Nanyuman!

You are a very beautiful woman!

But it looks like you are deprived!

Since I've been here,

you've worn only one blouse.

I've not seen you wear another."

She replied, "Oh, my lord!

We live in misery here."

"Nanyuman!" he replied.

N'i keda ne fe,
Ni sanu don, n b'o d'i ma.
Ni wadi don, n b'o d'i ma.
Ni fani Numan don, n b'o d'i ma.
A ko: Aaa n fa!
N'i keda ke n fe, n fana y'i fe wala.
A ko: Ayiwa Nanyuman!
N'i ke nada bi, n be n sara ko n be wa so sa.

Sini sakuma, n be n bolofinnu ta, n be wa.

Ayiwa Nanyuman!
Ayi ya kuruninkun min ye yen,
N be wa n siki yen, k'i makonon.
I ka wa n sodo yen.
A ko: Wa! N y'i ko.

Ke wo d'i siki kuruninkun do.

Ee Mosolu!

Nanyuman nada, k'a bolofennu fara
nyokon ma,

K'a ya sokonola fida, k'a heen.

Kosokoso kosokoso!

Nanyuman wada o ke ko.

[Much later...]

Ka ke wo ya sanu ban,

K'a ya wadi ban.

"If you love me,
if it is gold, I'll give it to you.
If it is money, I'll give it to you.
If it is beautiful clothes, I'll give it you."
"Ah, my lord!" replied Nanyuman,
"If you love me, I love you too."
"Okay, Nanyuman!" the man continued.
"When your husband returns from the field, I will
say my farewells to him.

And I will pick up my things to leave tomorrow
morning.

So, Nanyuman!

At the little plateaux, yonder,
I'll sit and wait for you.

You and I will meet there."

"Okay, I will join you," said Nanyuman.

The man went and sat down at the plateaux.

Oh women!

Nanyuman picked up his belongings,

swept his room, and took off.

She went!

Nanyuman had run off with the man.

The man's gold was exhausted,
his money was finished.

A ko: Nanyuman! Kabini n d'i fudu,
fen wo fen tele n bolo, a bee banni.
N t'i fe bi, n t'i fe sini, n t'i fe sinikende.

Nanyuman! Nanyuman ye duku min do

Ke d'o duku bila, ka wa duku gwede do.

O tuma Kanja Burema ko.

Ko ne ni n moso ma kele,

Fin te an ni nyokn te, gwe te an te,

Ne moso wo ka tunun, ne t'o nyini abada.

Ala be wa nyini k'o di ne ma.

Nanyuman wada ole do,

K'i sensen wuruu, ka na se so.

A nad'a fa sodo

A ko: Aaa n buwa! I d'a fo n ye de!

O ke n'i ban ne do.

Hali ne ye duku min do, k'o bee bila

ka wa duku gwede do.

A ko: Aaa n den! N y'a fo i ye di?

A ko Nanyuman! I kelanka kodoyi ya
sanba nalen,

K'i denkenin kelen najikito.

He said, "Nanyuman since I married you,
all my wealth has vanished.

I don't love you anymore. Not today, tomorrow, or
the day after."

Nanyuman! He left the village where he lived with
Nanyuman

to settle in another village.

Kanja Burema received word.

"I did not quarrel with my spouse,

so there is no problem between us.

If my spouse vanished under those conditions, I'll
never find her.

But God will go searching for me and bring her
back."

Nanyuman went,
slowly to the village, to reach home.

She went to her father

and said, "Oh father! You had warned me well!

The man has left me.

He even left the village where we lived
to go to another village."

The father replied, "Ah, my daughter! What did I
say?"

"Nanyuman," he continued, "the family of
your former husband has sent a message,
that your only son will soon be circumcised.

O ko ye di?

What is your situation?"

A ko: Aaa n buwa! O ko te nya gwede ma.

"Oh father! It must go ahead.

Ayi be jenbefolayi nyini,

Search for the drummers,

Ka balafolayi nyini,

search for the balafon players,

Ka jalimosoɗarayi nyini,

search for the best griots.

N ka la ayi kan,

I will join them to

Ka wa n den soli si n ke kɔɔɔ bada,

go and celebrate with my ex-husband the

circumcision ceremonies of my son,

N ke ka samada kɔɔɔ ta, ka n jufidi mabenben

and to allow my husband to spank my bottom with

an old shoe."

Ayiwa, n badennu! Nanyuman donto,

So dear parents! Nanyuman,

Ke kuda bid'i b'an dɔ,

after her new husband had abandoned her,

A ke kɔɔɔ, a donto o bada, a ye dɔnkili min la.

returned home to her former husband and sang a

song.

N k'o la wa?

Shall I sing it for you?

[the following is in sung]

A ko Nanyuman d'i ban a ke folo le dɔ

Nanyuman abandoned her first husband

A d'i bari kekudalu fe, kekudalu d'i ban ne dɔ.

to escape with a new one that left her in turn.

Aaa kekɔɔɔlu konɔnyafolo lajikitɔ.

Ah, the first born of the former husband will

be circumcised.

Dimi ma to baasi dɔ.

Patience can meet any challenge.

Tan-te-n konɔ,

I did not expect this,

n'a be kela tan

but if everyone was treated that way,

Dinya d'i fere dɔɔnin

life would be more peaceful.

Ayiwa n'a be kela jonjonjonyi na tan wo,

If everyone who ran away was treated that way,

an di fere dɔɔnin.

life would be more peaceful.

Aaa n’a bε kela tan,	Ah, if everyone was treated that way,
Dinya ye suma dɔɔnin	life would be more peaceful.
N’a bε kela kedabanmosoyi la tan wo,	If all women who leave their husbands were treated
ɔdi fεε dɔɔnin.	that way,
	life would be more peaceful.
Kanja Burema lee, n’a bε kela tan	Kanja Burema, if everyone was treated that way.
Dinya di fεε dɔɔnin.	life would be more peaceful.
Ayiwa n’a bε kela minantalayi la tan wo,	If all those who are packing their bags were
	treated that way,
An di fεε dɔɔnin.	We would be more peaceful.
Aaa, n’a bε kela tan,	Ah, if everyone was treated that way,
Dinya ye suma dɔɔnin.	life would be more peaceful.
N’a bε kela kedabanmosoyi la tan wo,	If all women who leave their husbands were treated
	that way,
Dinya di fεε dɔɔnin.	life would be more peaceful.

Discography of Siramori Diabaté

Diabaté, Siramori. *Samouloukou mousso / Manding siki*. Société Ivoirienne du Disque/Kibaru KIB 05. c. 1976, 45rpm vinyl.

—. *Sagno / Sagno*. 45rpm vinyl, Société Ivoirienne du Disque/Kibaru KIB 07. c. 1976, 45rpm vinyl.

—. “Sara” / “Konaté” / “Banindé” / “Kanimba” / “Fié” / “Banindé”, from *Sira Mori* (Syllart 83106, c. 1985 – cassette).

—. *Sòròfè*. (Editions Jamana, c. 1993 – cassette [partially interview]).

—. “Banindé,” from *Musiques du Mali. Volume 2 - Sira Mory* (Syllart/Mélodie 38902-2, 1995 – compact disc).

—. “Kanimba,” from *Mandekalou. Les Voix Mandingues* (Africando / Syllart SYLLAF96060, 2000 – compact disc).

—. *Griot Music from Mali #3* (PAN Records PAN 2104, 2002 – compact disc).

¹ Siramori Diabaté performing the song “Nanyuman” (circa 1987, video clip);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb7PAdTryxQ> on Counsel’s Radio Africa channel

(<http://www.youtube.com/c/RadioAfrica1>). In the process of archiving, Counsel also informed Camara and Jansen about the Siramori song, knowing of their close relationship with this artist whom they either knew as part of daily life and radio (Camara) or had worked with as a young researcher (Jansen). Camara and Jansen’s research indicates that Siramori had declared that “Nanyuman” was her favorite song (Brahima Camara and Jan Jansen, “A Heroic Performance by Siramori Diabaté in Mali,” in *Women’s Songs from West Africa*, ed., [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013], 136-51, 147, quoting *Sòròfè* [c. 1993], end of Side A). A paper with the same lyrics of “Nanyuman”, in which the three authors discuss issues of copyrights and ethical concerns, was published in 2017 in an Open Access-publication: Brahima Camara, Graeme Counsel and Jan Jansen, “YouTube in Academic Teaching: A Multimedia Documentation of Siramori Diabaté’s Song ‘Nanyuman’, ” in *Searching for Sharing: Heritage and Multimedia in Africa*, ed., (Open Book Publishers, <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/590/searching-for-sharing--heritage-and-multimedia-in-africa>, 2017), 81-108. The publication also features a shorter, and textually less rich, version of the song, probably recorded by Radio Mali, and collected from an audio-cassette that Camara had bought in the 1990s from a “revendeur” at the Bamako market. A third interpretation of “Nanyuman” by Siramori is on *Sòròfè* (c. 1993), and is performed for a live audience. It is relatively short in length and elaborates on the dialogues between Nanyuman and the traveling merchant. The audience is highly amused by it, though a full translation is not yet available.

² The only other footage of Siramori is a recording of a classical praise song in Kita in 1985, and performed together with her cousin Kelabala Diabaté,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwxvt8qAbj0>. This is a recording by the Malian National Television where the regional rival griot families were publicly reconciled, with Kela's griots performing the role of externally appointed negotiators. The rivalries among the Kita griots are longstanding, and have served, for instance, as the background for several novels by one of Mali's most acclaimed authors, Massa Makan Diabaté, who is himself a griot of Kita origin. The 1985 event attracted significant media attention in Mali and is a focus of a monograph by Barbara Hoffman *Griots at War – Conflict, Conciliation, and Caste in Mande* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

³ From 2008-2013 Graeme Counsel undertook a major project at Radio Télévision Guinée (RTG) for which he archived, digitized and preserved audio materials from Guinea's state-sponsored Syliphone recording label in addition to audio materials recorded on reel-to-reel magnetic tape. The RTG audio archives, which contained over 10,000 songs, had been left in neglect for decades after state sponsoring fell away with the death of Guinea's first president, Sékou Touré (1958-1984). During the project of archiving the thousands of songs, Counsel commenced researching the RTG's video archive, which, although outside the parameters of his project, sat adjacent to the audio archive and contained hundreds of hours of recordings of Guinean music. It also contained a small number of videos by Malian artists recorded by the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision du Mali (ORTM). On one of these video cassettes Counsel noticed a Siramori recording, and it is this video that is presented for discussion in this article. In order to share the video with the wider community, Counsel made the footage available on YouTube.

⁴ Graeme Counsel, "Music for a Coup – 'Armée Guinéenne'. An Overview of Guinea's Recent Political Turmoil," *Australasian Review of African Studies* 31(2) (2010), 94-112; Graeme Counsel, "The Music Archives of Guinea: Nationalism and its Representation under Sékou Touré," in *Proceedings of the 36th Conference of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific: African Renaissance and Australia* (Murdoch University, 28 November 2013,

http://afsaap.org.au/assets/graeme_counsel.pdf); Graeme Counsel, "Digitising and Archiving Syliphone Recordings in Guinea," *Australasian Review of African Studies* 30(1) (2009), 144-150; Graeme Counsel, "Conserving the Archives of a National Broadcaster," *Context* 37 (2012), 121-27; Graeme Counsel, "Music for a Revolution: The Sound Archives of Radio Télévision Guinée," in *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme*, ed., (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 547-86; Mohamed Saliou Camara, *His Master's Voice: Mass Communication and Single Party Politics in Guinea under Sékou Touré* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2005); Ryan T. Skinner, "Cultural Politics in the Post-Colony: Music, Nationalism and Statism in Mali, 1964-75," *Africa* 82(4) (2012), 511-34.

⁵ Lucy Durán, "Ngaraya: Women and Musical Mastery in Mali," *Bulletin of SOAS* 70(3) (2007), 569-602.

⁶ In her presentation at the MANSA 3rd International Conference of Mande Studies, Leiden, National Museum of Ethnology, March 1995.

⁷ For arguments to use "female griot" instead of "griotte", see Barbara Hoffman, "Male Gods and Female Griots: Two Cases of Sexism and (Trans)Gendered Translation in African Languages," *Mande Studies* 18 (2016), 93-108. But see also discussion in Marloes Janson, *The Best Hand is the Hand that Always Gives – Griottes and Their Profession in Eastern Gambia* (Leiden, Research School CNWS, 2002).

⁸ See, for instance, Cheick M. Chérif Keita, *Outcast to Ambassador: The Musical Odyssey of Salif Keita* (Saint Paul MN, Mogoya Books, 2011), in particular the chapter "The Artist and the State: An Uncomfortable Alliance", 59-68. See also Eric Charry, *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Graeme Counsel, "Popular Music and Politics in Sékou Touré's Guinea," *Australasian Review of African Studies* 26 (2004), and "Music for a Revolution".

⁹ Thomas A. Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Word and Music* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Aissata G. Sidikou and Thomas A. Hale, *Women's Voices from West Africa: An Anthology of Songs from the Sahel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); Thomas A. Hale and Aissata G. Sidikou, ed., *Women's Songs from West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). For lyrics of a classical hunters' song performed by Siramori, see Sidikou and Hale, *Women's Voices from West Africa*, 97-102. For the lyrics of the hunters' song "Gwèdè", see Camara and Jansen, "A Heroic Performance".

¹¹ See references to newspapers and magazines in Mali in Jan Jansen, "'Elle Connaît Tout le Mandé' – A Tribute to the Griotte Siramori Diabaté," *Research in African Literatures* 27(4) (1996), 198-216.

¹² Siramori Diabaté's extraordinary status is further illustrated by the fact that her skills transgress established performance styles. Hale et al., for example, note in their anthology of oral epics in Africa that Siramori is a prominent exception in the performance of Mande epics in that the performers are invariably males. Thomas A. Hale, John W. Johnson and Stephen P. Belcher, ed., *Oral Epics from Africa – Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

¹³ An example are the [unfortunately understudied] songs women sing to welcome a new bride in their family. A good example of this genre comes from the fieldwork of Mamadou Fakanda Keita. The song "The Rooster" ("Dondonkòdò") pictures the husband as a rather "one-dimensional" being: "Le mari est un coq/Kokiloko [onomatopea]/Il est arrêté au milieu de la cuisine/Kokiloko/S'il voit la première épouse/Il se glisse serré, glisse serré, glisse serré/S'il voit la nouvelle épouse/Il se gonfle, il se gonfle, se gonfle/X est un coq/Il est arrêté au milieu de la cuisine/Kokiloko" ("Kè ye dondonkòdò di /Kokiloko /A lònlen gwa tèma/Kokiloko/A mana moso kòdò ye/A d'i mòlonti a di mòlonti-mòlonti/A mana moso kuda ye/A d'i nyaka, ka i nyaka nyaka/Adama ye dondonkodò di/A lònlen gwa tèma/Kokiloko"). This song is performed by the (classificatory) mothers of a new bride; the rooster

has numerous spouses (chicken); he is the master of the part of the compound where the kitchen is located. Text and interpretation from: Mahamadou Fakanda Keita, "Le mariage des maninka de Sibi: alliance et antagonisme – Expressions des chants cérémoniels," paper presented at *Mande Studies Association: MANSA 7th International Conference on Mande Studies* (Lisbon, June 2008).

¹⁴ For Kela and the Kamabolon ceremony, see Jan Jansen, "Hot Issues: The 1997 Kamabolon Ceremony in Kangaba (Mali)," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31(2) (1998), 253-78. For the Mali Empire, Kangaba and the origin of the Kamabolon sanctuary, see Jan Jansen, "In Defense of Mali's Gold: The Political and Military Organization of the Northern Upper Niger, c. 1650 - c. 1850," *Journal of West African History* 1(1) (2015), 1-36. The Sunjata epic is a multi-disciplinary research field in itself. A good introduction is Ralph A. Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata – The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Simon Toulou Abah, "Devenir griot professionnel: education formelle ou informelle? Analyse des enseignements langagiers dans la perspective de la transposition didactique," PhD dissertation, Université de Genève (Genève, 2008).

¹⁶ The griots of Kela consist of several sub-lineages, but only one of them – locally known as "Bintoula" [descending of Bintousiné] – has produced a stream of gifted griots for which the village is famous: Kelabala [El Haji Bala] Diabaté, his younger brother [El Haji] Yamudu Diabaté, Siramori, and, for a younger generation, the famous singer Kasse Mady Diabaté (see the well-documented http://musicwikicentral.com/kasse_mady_diabate, accessed 31 March 2016) and his younger brother La(n)fia, a former singer of the legendary Rail Band. Another successful descendant of the Bintoula branch is the New York based musician Abdoulaye Diabaté, who moved from Kela to Côte d'Ivoire in the 1970s and from there to the USA. Abdoulaye worked with the musicologist Ryan Skinner.

¹⁷ For example, Jansen's field recordings of Siramori a few months before her unexpected death, on the compact disc *Griot Music from Mali #3* (PAN records).

¹⁸ This topic was deemed too sensitive to enquire about during fieldwork interviews.

¹⁹ For a discussion on the male bias in kinship terminology, in particular in Mande societies, see Saskia Brand, *Mediating Means and Fate – A Socio-Political Analysis of Fertility and Demographic Change in Bamako, Mali* (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2000).

²⁰ The lyrics of “Sara” have been published in Jansen, “Elle connaît tout le Mandé”.

²¹ Siramori’s oldest daughter, Sanungwè, also a professional griot, lives in a similar “neo-local” way on her compound in Bamako. One notes that Siramori and her husband may have lived together in an earlier phase of their marriage, since Nankoman, a gifted balafon player, accompanied his spouse when she was touring.

²² For an in-depth study, see Elizabeth Schmidt’s *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939-1958* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2005).

²³ Jean-Loup Amselle, *Les Négociants de la Savane. Histoire et Organisation Sociale des Kooroko (Mali)* (Paris: Anthropos, 1977).

²⁴ This is also a leading theme in the Sunjata epic, in which Sogolon Kejugu first suffers as the king’s second spouse, but later is highly respected as the mother of Sunjata.

²⁵ Another example is found in the song “Bélé bélé”, by Balla et ses Balladins: *Ah bélébélé sira fanfan, i na le bolo* – “Ah, wherever you stay the night, you are in the hands of your mother”, and by El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté in the song “I na le bolo”. Balla et ses Balladins, *Bélé bélé. Balla et ses Balladins. The Syliphone years* (Sterns STCD3035-3036, 2008 – 2 x compact discs); El Hadj Djeli Kouyate, *Guinée: Anthologie du balafon Mandingue Volume 2* (Buda Musique 92534-2, 2005 – compact disc).

²⁶ Jean Derive, “Belles Choses, Belles Femmes, Belle Langue: Objets et Critères de l’Appréciation Esthétique chez les Dioula,” in *Langues et Cultures: Terrains d’Afrique, Hommage à France Cloarec-Heiss*, ed., (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2004), 89-98.

²⁷ Emily S. Burrill, Richard L. Roberts, and Elizabeth Thornberry, ed., *Domestic Violence and the Law in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Athens OH, Ohio University Press, 2010), in particular the chapter

by Marie Rodet, "Continuum of Gendered Violence: The Colonial Invention of Female Desertation as a Customary Criminal Offense, French Soudan, 1900-1949," 74-93.

²⁸ The first few seconds of the recording are missing.