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)

Jan Jansen, Graeme Counsel and Brahima Camara

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, mens’ 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.
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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.\(^1\) The recording was unearthed by chance, by Graeme Counsel during his project to digitize the sound archives of Radio Télévision de Guinée (RTG).\(^2\) 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.\(^3\) 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.\(^4\) 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.\(^5\) Thus many female griots\(^6\) 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. 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 Hale 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. 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.

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. 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,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{15} Siramori Diabaté must have been such a child, born into the right family\textsuperscript{16} 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.\textsuperscript{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. From a male perspective, 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. 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. 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.

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 be kela 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”. 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.\textsuperscript{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.

\textbf{Nanyuman, by Siramori Diabaté}

[the following text is spoken]

…. kiri ni \textsuperscript{28}woɔyɔ \textsuperscript{28} ...confusion and discord.

\textit{Fufunintiki di n nɛnɛ, Kanja Burema.} Kanja Burema, it’s the carrier of a little basket [of kola nuts] who deceived me.

\textit{Aaa, n ko wadi le ɔɔɔɔ, Kanja Burema.} Oh Kanja Burema! It is the fault of money.

\textit{Aaa! Fufunintiki di n nɛnɛ Kanja Burema.} Kanja Burema, it’s the carrier of the little basket who deceived me.

\textit{Ayiw\textsuperscript{a} n badennu!} Yes, dear audience!

\textit{Ne Siramori Jabate kan ye nin di.} It’s me, Siramori Diabaté, speaking.

\textit{N ye min fɔla nin, n ɣɛdɛ sɔn lee.} The story I tell here is of my own failings.

\textit{N t’a fɔla aw kelen ma ɛ mosolu, N ɣɛdɛ sɔn lee.} Women! My story is not directed at you alone, because it’s also of my own failings.

\textit{Fɔlo ngaralu} The famous griots of the past

\textit{Oyi ye nin fɔ fɔlo mosoyi ye,} have told this story to the women of their time,

\textit{Oyi da fudu bato.} and they remained faithful to their marriages.

\textit{Ne fɛnɛ y’a yida} It’s my turn to tell
Mali mosolu, n y’a yida ayi la dɛ the women of Mali
Ay fɛnɛ kaa fudu bato. so that they remain faithful to their marriages.
Nanyuman, fin ’a n’a ke te. Nanyuman had no problem with her husband.
Fɔlɔmɔkɔlu le tun b’a ke, In the past,
Nekɛsoko tele te, motoko tele te, when there was no bicycle or moped,
Ka worofunin ta. the men wore small baskets [of kola nuts] on their head.
N’ayi da woropanye ta, ayi be do bɔ o dala When buying a (big) basket of kola nuts,
K’o ke fufunin do, k’o l’i kun in a smaller basket which they carried on
ka wa duku ni duku. their head from village to village.
Fufunintiki nada jiki Kanja Bureme kan. A carrier of a little basket [of kola nuts] came to
Kanja Burema’s home.
A ko Kanja Burema, i te hina n na “Kanja Burema!” he said, “have pity on me
N ke tele fila nin ke i fe yan. so I can stay few days here at your home.
N be n yaara bukudabolo nin nu na, I’m going to walk to the neighbouring villages,
Ka n ya woro yaara. to sell my kola nuts.”
Kanja Burema ko, o te baasi di. Kanja Burema replied, “that’s no problem.”
Nanyuman! Debeŋ ta i ka la bolon kɔŋ. “Nanyuman!” he called, “go and put the sleeping
mat on the floor of the entrance hut.
Jula le bɛnni bolon kɔŋ. Because a merchant likes an entrance hut.”
Nanyuman da bolon fida, Nanyuman swept inside the entrance hut,
Ka debeŋ ta, k’ala fufunintiki nya. then took a mat and spread it out for the carrier of
the little basket.
A tanbeda sakuma, ka wa a ya fɛnnu feere In the morning, he went to sell his produce
A nada wura la. and he returned in the evening.
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?”

“No! Finally, I came today to talk with you.”

“Nanyuman!” he continued,

“I came to talk to you!”

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.
"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.”
“Oh okay, I will join you,” said Nanyuman.
The man went and sat down at the plateaux.
Oh women!
Nanyuman picked up his belongings,
swiped 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, He said, “Nanyuman since I married you,
fɛn wo fen tele n bolo, a bɛɛ banni. all my wealth has vanished.
N t’i fɛ bi, n t’i fɛ sini, n t’i fɛ sinikɛndɛ. I don’t love you anymore. Not today, tomorrow, or
Nanyuman! Nanyuman ye duku min dɔ the day after.”
Nanyuman! He left the village where he lived with
Nanyuman to settle in another village.
Kɛ d’o duku bila, ka wa duku gwɛdɛ dɔ. Kanja Burema received word.
O tuma Kanja Burema ko. “I did not quarrel with my spouse,
Ko ne ni n moso ma kɛle, so there is no problem between us.
Fin te an ni nyɔkɔn te, gwe te an te, If my spouse vanished under those conditions, I’ll
Ne moso wo ka tunun, ne t’o nyini abada. never find her.
Ala bɛ wa nyini k’o di ne ma. But God will go searching for me and bring her
back.”
Nanyuman went,
Nanyuman wada ole dɔ, slowly to the village, to reach home.
K’i sensɛn wuruu, ka na se so. She went to her father
A nad’a fa sɔdɔ and said, “Oh father! You had warned me well!
A ko: Aaa n buwa! I d’a fɔ n yɛ dɛ! The man has left me.
O ke n’i ban ne dɔ. He even left the village where we lived
Hali ne ye duku min dɔ, k’o bɛɛ bila to go to another village.”
ka wa duku gwɛdɛ dɔ.
A ko: Aaa n den! N y’a fɔ i ye di? The father replied, “Ah, my daughter! What did I
say?”
A ko Nanyuman! I kɛlanka kɔdɔyi ya “Nanyuman,” he continued, “the family of
sanba nalen, your former husband has sent a message,
K’i denkɛnin kelen najikɛ. that your only son will soon be circumcised.
What is your situation?”

“Oh father! It must go ahead.

Search for the drummers,

search for the balafon players,

search for the best griots.

I will join them to

go and celebrate with my ex-husband the circumcision ceremonies of my son,

and to allow my husband to spank my bottom with an old shoe.”

So dear parents! Nanyuman,

after her new husband had abandoned her,

returned home to her former husband and sang a song.

Shall I sing it for you?

Nanyuman abandoned her first husband
to escape with a new one that left her in turn.

Ah, the first born of the former husband will be circumcised.

Patience can meet any challenge.

I did not expect this,

but if everyone was treated that way,

life would be more peaceful.

If everyone who ran away was treated that way,

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

Discography of Siramori Diabaté

c. 1976, 45rpm vinyl.
—. *Sòrójè*. (Editions Jamana, c. 1993 – cassette [partially interview]).
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 Sòròfé [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 Sòròfé (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.

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.


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”.


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 lòlen 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 dondonkòdò di/A lòlen 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: MANS A 7th International Conference on Mande Studies (Lisbon, June 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).
This topic was deemed too sensitive to enquire about during fieldwork interviews.

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).

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

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.

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).


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.


28 The first few seconds of the recording are missing.