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INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIANESE POPULAR MUSICS

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Let's admit that the adjective "popular", refers to a cultural attribute, which, cannot be separated from the notion of people. But the word "music" refers to a concept, which is much more difficult to grasp. It concerns the sound phenomenon, which can be defined in different ways, whether the musical exegesis belongs to such or such civilisation or culture, or such or such people. These factors in fact, determine the parameters and the rules of the composition as well as the musical practice. Thus, for example, according to the classical European conception of the musical sound, the pitch and the tone are two parameters interpreted as components that would be perceived individually by the listener. On the other hand, in other parts of the world, such as Guiana, or Subsaharian Africa, pitch and tone make up more of an indissociable unity. The result is another idea and another process of evaluation of the musical sound. Likewise, about the relationship between dance and music: in Europe, they were perceived as two distinct entities, whereas in Guiana, music and dance remain indissociable. They then mean the same thing: music is dance and dance is music. And that's why one word only will be enough globally to refer to dance, rhythm and music, sometimes even associating the instrument and the underlying musical genre. This is an (about the) African heritage of the conception of the musical fact. In Guiana, the *kaséko*, for example, is the term, used at present to name the performances of the Circles of the Creole Guianese drum Circles that associate together songs, rhythms and stylised dances there implied.

These different conceptions, in Europe and in Guiana, of the musical phenomenon, and the differing logic thus resulting are besides emphasized when the words "folklore" and "popular" are to be defined. These two terms, in the Guianese context, can be endowed with non-existing nuances in their original European meaning. Such are the two fundamental reasons justifying the present reflection about "popular" Guianese music. Its main object is to emphasize different characteristics implied in Guiana, by the concept of popular music. This concept will be analysed in the light, on the one hand of its relationship with the traditional system, and also, on the other hand, by its comparison, or opposition with folklore. The latter term being of a relatively recent use in the designation of popular Guianese music, a prior definition of a few key-words is necessary.

First, it is important to note that Guiana is a heterogeneous mosaic of groups of peoples of Amerindian, European, African and Asian roots. Their evolution has a complex, even confused history. Through a mingling of odd influences, the peoples of this region under French - therefore European - influence were endowed with a rich culture, whence the different sorts of music, which these peoples subscribe to massively. The most popular are Creole and *Bushinengé* (equally called *Busikondé Sama* or *Black Marrons*). In the frame of this study of popular Guianese music, Monique Blérald and I, will tackle first respectively Creole music, and *Bushinengé*. These are hybrid music, from endogenous as well as exogenous contributions, where contributions of traditional as well as contemporary, close as well as distant systems are mingled in varied proportions, contributions of traditional and contemporary systems, with near and far origins.

The need for a definition mentioned above begins here with the concept of popular tradition. The tradition is, in its principle, nothing but the reception and the handing down, whereas the word “popular” refers to what is current among the people, what belongs to them, what is known, appreciated and prevalent among them. What is popular is characterized by attitudes and underlying thoughts, often resting on traditional bases and liable to transformations and adaptations linked to the historical evolution of the sociocultural environment. The word “popular” is often opposed to the word “learned”. However, it is to be noted that if the word “popular” actually means what characterizes the people, the word “people” doesn’t necessarily mean popular. This is what Romain Rolland (1908, p. 812) stresses when he says that “the people” has its own aristocrats, as well as the middle class has its own plebeian souls.

As for folklore¹ (etymologically folk-lore), the word indicates a “popular” derivation from the memory of a distant past. It is characterized by different aspects: it is oral, collective and rural, (possibly maritime), and anonymous. It is also- to quote the expression used by Dévigne, “popular civilization”, which is not only “peasant”, even if it was by peasants (and maybe sailors), who have most faithfully safeguarded the remnants. The folklore practice globally refers to the popular arts and traditions of a country, a region or a human group.

However, in music, the word “folklore” may be confusing, as François Picard remarks (cf. website of Paris-Sorbonne, CRLM). This confusion bears, on the one hand, upon the conditions of observation of the musical genres examined, on the other hand upon their origin and their mode of transformation. Moreover, musical folklorism is based on the model of thought made up around European regional and country music’s in the Romantic age, and that thought used to oppose *learned* and *popular*, or *tradition* and *modernity*. The context and the historical circumstances allowed and justified such distinctions.

It is this reality, which prevails today in Guiana – by default or fake imitation – to refer to popular music. And yet, in fact, the word *folklore* here has neither its intrinsic character, nor a patent historical background that would justify its usage in the European original meaning of the word.

In fact, in the Guianese culture, the different sorts of music are closely linked to daily life, in an ever-present way, and rooted in tradition, even if those that are called “folkloric” today include many novelties. These sorts of music have absolutely nothing to do with a context of contrast or opposition – as it was the case in Romantic Europe with the *learned* –, and still less to do with a *tradition*, or even with no tradition.

In Guiana, rather than an opposition, a continuity can be observed between the musical tradition and the contemporary practices that result from it. Between the two, there are however differences which allow to tell fundamentally traditional music from music which can be called popular, the former being always used as a referent for the latter. For a better understanding, let us consider the following examples. In the Creole tradition, among others, the expressions *Musical* and *Local* were used formerly to name two realities of fashionable music, one called “*musical dances*”, and the other, called “*local dances*”. The former uses some orchestral work with harmonic Western wise treatment and privilege the melodic factor. The latter, “*Local Dances*” are structured rather on the basis of dance,

¹ The word *folklore* comes from English *folk-lore*, who was created by the English William John THOMS, about 1846, to indicate “knowledge, doctrines and wisdom of the people”.

supported by percussion, mainly drums, of African inspiration. The music resulting from its privileged rhythm, and the song then provided its melodic framework. The latter added a rhythmic fervour of global traditional essence through some characters, namely prosodic, rhythmic and metric.

In the frame of the “Musical Dances”, the first Creole orchestra may have been a hybrid, itinerant band, composed of recorders, wooden sticks, *tibwas*, and rattles, *chacha*. This transition group will lead to the emergence of a band qualified as *Creole*. It was composed of a solo clarinet, accompanied by the banjo, the guitar and the trombone. To this number, later, the violins, and the bass guitar, as well as the piano, the synthesizer, the drums and a few more instruments will be added². Together with salon entertainment, on invitation – of rather European nature – another sort of performance was born, the public dance, also rather typically Creole. This genre is the result of orchestral productions, leading to street and dance “*vidés*”. These are carnival parades, beginning in the street and ending after 6p.m. in halls reserved for each band separately. The band usually animated free dances until 8 p.m. – “Titane” Dances. It is also relevant to mention that even today; the “*vidés*” in the streets or in halls represent the musical expression of Creole carnival and are among the most characteristic expressions of popular Guianese culture. The carnival, like a mirror, reflects the diversity of the socio-cultural Guianese phenomena.

As for “Local dances”, they were originally part of the private entertainment of slaves on the plantation. Mainly *belay*, *kamougé* and frenzied’s *kasékò* were danced. These dances were always accompanied by songs, to the rhythm of drums.

Originally, in the XVIIth century mainly, traditional Creole music, of African inspiration, produced sung pieces, danced to the drums, to which were added other percussions, like the *chacha* and the *kès ke tibwa*. These will produce the *kasékò*, the *bélya*, the *léròl*, the *débòt*, the *grajé* and the *kamougé*. In the XIXth century, following, among other things, the colonial rules of popular musical activities³, a lot of drum music, of dances and traditional songs were forbidden or outlawed in public places, in favour of new expressions: the music of European dances (polka, waltz, mazurka and quadrille, to name), accompanied by the piano, the banjo or the violin.

From the cohabitation of these two musical cultures – of both European and African origins – a process of progressive creolisation will come to light, whence the atypical musical syncretism mentioned earlier. Thus, between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the so-called “Regional’s Creole popular Music” or “National Music” first appeared, whose underlying ideology was modelled on European folklore. Then, a beginning of synthesis of local and European musical cultures will take place in two stages and/or at the same time. The result will be a practice of European music played on European instruments with a rather Creole sensibility. It was the case of “popular” dances given out by “Free coloured people”, who played negro music on the banjo and the banjoline (banjo – mandoline). “Guianese rhythms” will follow, illustrated, among other things, by pieces like *pallandé*, as well as the *Creole dance for Biguinin*, of 1908, also by *biguine or Guianese polka*, for *vidé ba moin*, of 1931. All these pieces were written music.

After that, a new popular form generated by the mixture of traditional music of African inspiration played rather on European – sounding instruments. So, for example, to render the rhythm of the *kasékò*, traditionally expressed through a succession and superposition of three

² Read the details in *Itinéraire de la musique instrumentale en Guyane* by Emile Lanou.

³ It is the case of the “Ordonnance Coloniale” of 28 July 1823, ruling the dances of free coloured men and slaves, and more that will follow.

capital parts, which are “*coupé*, *foulé*, and *plombé*” playing, the main part, the *coupé* will be played by the drums. This instrument is originally a rhythmic one, rhythm being moreover and in general the fundamental element of the Guianese musical culture.

The second part, the *foulé* – which punctuates the first -, was given to the toms, bass drum snare drum, and different cymbals. Then, the bass guitar, and sometimes the piano, were in charge of the accompaniment, the *plombé*. Besides this usage of European musical instruments, other extra-Guianese popular genres will also be tried out, such as the Trinidad *calypso*, the Brazilian *samba*, the Dominican *meringue* and even the Jamaican *reggae*. These trials will concern all the Guianese communities practising popular music.

It is only after the Abolition of slavery that will it be possible to see the youths applying themselves to the transformations, especially orchestral and harmonic, of all these medleys, which, later will produce an art that is characteristic to the popular music of Guiana. It is in this context that will be created the Creole “Cercles” and “Akademi”, among which are the Cercle of hunters, the Cercle of Saint-Hubert and the Cercle of the union, not forgetting the “Patriots of Mana”.

Ordinarily, the “musical dances” were played in the form of shows, in the salons of the master on his requirement. Only the *grajé*, the *léròl*, the *kamougé*, and sometimes, the *kaladja* – close to the *grajé* – were admitted in these salons, where the songs could be sung in French⁴. At the time, masters and “free coloured men” would dance, in the beginning, minuets and quadrilles, before the arrival of the waltz, the polka, and the mazurka, which were still in favour in the bourgeois salons of the first half of the XXth century.

The two musical expressions, which are still in current use in the midst of Creole Guianese populations – “Musical Dances” and “Local Dances” – bring forth pieces, the shape of which are however, neither wholly European, nor wholly African, but rather the fruit of a on the whole rather original syncretism. This type of popular Creole music developed side by side in time. For their production, the public was then narrowly associated to the performance of musicians. Then, as time went by, this music became more like productions of stage shows, that the public will attend, often sitting, sometimes standing, making slight gestures of approval or support to the dance. At the same time, they would follow a business logic.

As far as musical culture is concerned, the Bushinengé, because of their historical wanderings and their geographical situation, didn’t know the same cultural development, nor followed the same progression in the popular musical practice as the Creoles. Having freed themselves early from the settler's yoke, their geographical isolation (on the Maroni, Tapanahoni and Lawa, as well as in the inner lands) encouraged a communal way of life close to that of Subsaharians, that they had inherited from their ancestors, who had come from Africa. Consequently, their traditional cultural practices consider Mother Africa as their main reference. As for their society, it is structured into six ethnic communities (Aluku or Boni, Djuka or Ndjuka, Paamaka, Saamaka, Mataway, and Kwinti), with very heterogeneous components, due to the many African origins of their members. As for the rest, we can note that the Guianese Bushinengé have strong links with the members of the same communities

⁴ We may also note that, from the XIXth century to just before 1945, the drums and the *kasékò* were no longer allowed in the public dances, but consigned to the *konvwè* halls, where, in popular neighbourhoods, only music and dances with drums were practised. It is only with the departmentalization of Guiana, in 1946, that the first prefect, Robert Vignon, encouraged society gatherings, authorizing amusements during numerous evening parties, and banquets. This period will also be known for influences coming from Surinam.

living in Surinam. The music favoured by these populations has developed in continuation with traditional practices. It is the same for some of their popular music today, which has absorbed significant outside influences, but still strongly leans on tradition. The result is always an art of sounds woven in the social framework of their everyday life.

Since the 1970-1980 decade, the Bushinengé musical culture has developed some popular music, among which, the *aleke* of the Djuka, Aluku and Paamaka, the *kawina* of the Saamaka and the *bigi poku* (also called *kasse-ko*, in Surinam, and also practised by the young Djuka and Aluku from Guiana⁵).

The three drums of the Creole *kaséko* have already been mentioned, with the *coupé* soloist, the *foulé* accompanist and beat marker, and the *plombé*, who provides the bass part. One finds equivalents of them in the Bushinengé, playing the same part, the *aléké doon*, composed of *pikin doon*, *waka doon* and *gaan doon* (a small (solo) drum punctuating the soloist and the low drum). These drums, medium-sized, come from three others, traditional, this time, and small-sized: *gaan doon*, *pikin doon*, and *tun*. Besides these three basic *aléké*'s drums, the Bushinengé groups (Djuka, Aluku and Paamaka) also use the *djaz*, also called *djasi* or *djashi doon*, a bass drum with a double membrane, built from a half barrel. The saamaka equivalent, the *djansi ma*⁶, is a bass drum, also with a double membrane, but with a wooden, sometimes metallic resonator, which the Saamaka use for their *kawina*.

Apart from the drums, Creoles and Bushinengé add to the number of their instruments the rattles – *chacha*, (using a gourd, of wood or metal), two pairs of sticks and a wooden stool called *kès tè tibwa* by the Creoles, *bangi*, by the Saamaka, and the Aluku, Djuka and Paamaka *kwakwa*, which is rather a long wooden bench.

Concerning these two Guianese communities, it must also be noted that at the origin of their drums, there is a couple, with a male and a female (one long one, and a medium long one): the male *agida*, and the female *mama doon* of the Bushinengé have so far kept their role of sacred drums. As for the Creole equivalents, the *tanbou kamougé mal and femel*, they have over the years, lost this original function of sacred drums, due to the pressure of the masters, who forbade their use. All these drums are monoxyle and their length varies between 5 and 6 feet, for the longest, which, in days gone by, could reach 10 feet, for the male drum (on musical instruments, see below the synthesis of the orchestral evolution of popular Guianese music).

Presently, the bands of popular music, of Creoles as well as Bushinengé, use all sorts of modern music instruments: electric guitars, synthetizers, bass drums, snare drums, and even the drum set, to mention only these. The Creoles add a few wind instruments (saxophones, clarinets, trumpets, trombones, etc.)

It may also be noted that the universe of the Creole drum is structured like in the good old days – in Cercles (singers, tambourine players, and dancers). These circles, more and more often called *kasékò*, refer, at the same time, as mentioned above, to a group of songs, rhythms, and dances. These three components are indissociable, for they create an alchemy, which expresses the very meaning of the resulting drummed musical expressions.

In a general way, among both the Creoles and the Bushinengé, the drum also makes up a fertile element of representations of a good number of recognition strategies, whether restricted or global.

⁵ These are the kinds of music that I'll treat in the frame of this study.

⁶ In certain groups, as at Wi Bassie of Kourou, the traditional name of *timbal* indicating the drum with single skin is entrusted to the large case.

As for the rest, these two communities share the same conception of the art of sound, a conception in which music, dance and song are considered as expressions of the human mind, soul and body, in a relation of deep unity, which help man to communicate with his neighbours, with nature, and with the cosmos.

Concretely, one resorts to the drummed language, to launch all sorts of rhythmical codes to dancers, singers, and instrumentalists, to emphasize important moments, but also specific moments of the musical performance, such as the change of dance steps, the change of tempo, the beginning or the end of a piece of music, etc.

As for the songs, in the culture of Guianese popular music, it is characterized, in a general way by melodic constructions in the responsorial and sometimes antiphony style⁷. In other words, a soloist will strike up the theme, to which a choir will answer often in unison, or in heterophony, and rarely in polyphony, a tendency, which develops more and more at present.

It has been made clear that popular music, in Guiana as everywhere else, is closely linked to the historical and sociocultural upheavals, that the peoples of this country have met. These peoples have managed to assimilate and make theirs the endogenous as well as exogenous contributions provided mainly by the African and European heritages, and the influences from the Americas (with references, notably, to the meringues, *biguines*, *calypsos*, *rumbas*, *sambas*, *guaguancos*, *chachas* and more) and at present, from different places of the world.

We have seen, that in the Creole universe, since the last quarter of the first half of the XXth century, Circles and Associations have developed, which have promoted popular Creole music. Today, the associative framework⁸ is even more stimulating for their organization and their promotion: Wapa, Musanda, Katrépis, Dahlia, are as many associations that illustrate this reality, and the list is far from being exhaustive. Even the Bushinengé have got down to it, not only to increase the value of fashionable music, like *aléké*, *kawina* or *bigi poku*, to mention only these, but also to promote their traditional music, like *awasa*, *songé*, *susa*, as does the Aluku Lavi Danbwa association of Cayenne. Within this association, there are two sections: one devoted to traditional music, the other to popular *aléké*.

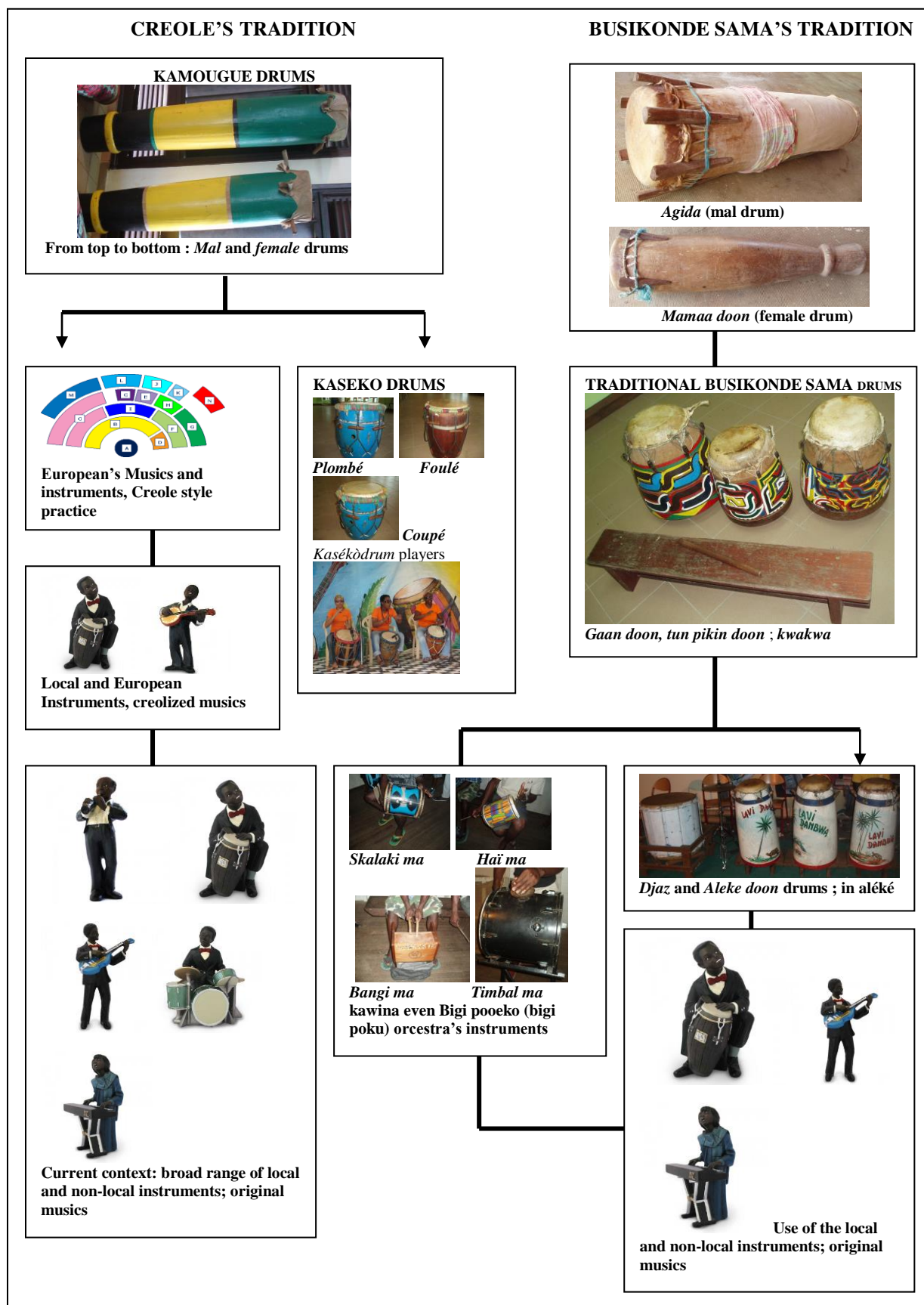
Popular Guianese music represents a new model of conception and representation, of a social and cultural experience. That is a phenomenon very little talked about, with latent rules and deep structures of a local musical grammar, and with expressive contents of varied musical genres. At the same time, they remain symbolic vectors linked to composite strategies of recognition, founded themselves on ill-assorted traditions.

This music summarizes a general state of mind of the Guianese cultural thought and reflects a symbolic universe, that cannot be summarized by a mere label of “popular music” and even less by that of “folklore”, for these words cannot completely express the reality that underlies their essence. This is some neo-traditional music that keeps really close to traditional culture and is the ideal continuum that makes it tradi-music, which can transfer and formally diversify the elements of their construction and production, while saving the main parts, the traditional framework upon which is founded their being and culture.

⁷ By set of questions and answers, melodies alternate, in imitation or variation, of two choruses (rare case).

⁸ In France, that Guiana is a part of, the associative structures are ruled by the 1901 law, which gives people the opportunity to organize and reach diverse aims, while having at their disposal, or benefiting by all sorts of legal tools and financial help to organize these activities.

**SYNTHESIS
OF THE EVOLUTIONS OF THE ORCHESTRAS IN THE GUIANESE POPULAR MUSICS**



KAWINA

In the Saamaka language, the word *kawina* is made up from the demonstrative (*ka* = that), and the verb *wina* (= to vibrate, tremble, shudder), whence the word *kawina*: “vibration, what vibrates and shakes, which gives a start; it’s going to quiver”).



Timbal, chaka, koti, lumba et djansi (groupe Young Boys, Kourou). Cliché Apollinaire Anakesa

Three Surinamese groups - Soukousani, Aisassi and Wi Sani – are the founders of this popular music, whose precursor, in Guiana, was Spoity Boys⁹. Other groups will follow his way, among them, Kasébasaka from Santi, Papa Jacob from Apatu, Wi Bassi and Young Boys both from Kourou, and Umari.

A popular music for entertainment, the *Kawina* is essentially traditional. Its origin is in one of the ancient Saamaka adult entertainments, the *djansi*, its name coming from the first solo instrument among the drums that tapped out the beat of its songs

and dances: a *djansi* (a bass drum, whose resonator is a dug out cylindrical tree-trunk, with a membrane of doe-skin at each end). It shared its role of soloist with one of the two *koti*, little drums with a double membrane. These instruments are supported by two *lumba* (drums with a double medium-sized membrane), and also a *timbale*, a drum with a skin, whose size varies from 1m. to 1,50m and is played standing, using the right hand to strike the instrument with a stick, while the left one strikes it bare-handed). This dance, rarely practised today, is part of festivals, like weddings, but especially the moments of the *booko dei*, practised during the first week after the death of a member of the community and the *puu baka*, the going out of mourning. In former days, it was popular in the traditional frame of Samaaka sociocultural events, the *djansi* was imitated by young people, who will make it evolve, by introducing elements of outward influences in the style of its songs and dances – as we shall see later. However, the use of traditional instruments will be maintained, except that only a reduced number of players will be adopted, only one of each of the two traditional drums. Moreover, synthetic membranes have been adapted on the *djansi ma*¹⁰. Also, the part of the solo initially imparted only to the *djansi ma* and *koti ma* will be extended to all the drums. The total staff of the band of the *kawina* is equally enlarged, due to the addition of a cylinder-shaped metal-sheet rattle, in which is introduced the suitable number of little balls, and that of the idiophone, *kobangi* or *kwakwa bangi*¹¹, a wooden stool, which is struck with two little sticks, to beat time. This instrument shares its role with the *lumba drum*, also called *skranki ma*.

⁹ The forerunner of the *kawina* in Guiana, is the group Spoity Boys, born in Maïman – a Bushinengé village, belonging mainly to Aluku and Saamaka- situated two hours' pirogue away from Saint-Laurent du Maroni. It is composed of eleven musicians: three singers and eight percussionists who have reappropriated this music of African essence, all the way from inner Surinam. Harold is in charge.

¹⁰ It may also be noted that the resonator of the *djansi* is topped by a cymbalette, whose concave part faces out. This enables the musician to play the set of cymbals with the other pair, that he will hold inside out with his left hand, the right hand then striking the membrane of the drum with a drumstick.

¹¹ *Kobangui* or *kwakwa bangui* are the Creole equivalent of the *tibwa*, and the Djuka, Aluku et Paamaka equivalent of the *kwakwa*.

It may also be noted that the *kawina drums* are made with reference to the voices: the *koti*, the soprano (sharp), the *timbal*, the alto, which *often* imitates or reproduces the rhythmic-melodic lines of the choir. The *lumba* plays the part of the tenor, whereas the *djansi* is used as bass.

As for the other terminologies applied to the popular musical genres, in Guiana, the term *kawina* refers to all three components, which are music, dance, rhythm, as well as to the instruments constituting it. It is a synthesis of ill- assorted stylistic, technical, and aesthetic elements, a synthesis of several genres, whose majority is Surinamese: *banaba*, *kotigo*, *kamalama*, *bigi pokoe*, *partibanaba*, to which can be added some music from the Caribbeans among which the reggae. The four basic dances then are: *djansi kasté* and *melengué*, of quick step, *kanina*, of moderate step, and *kamalama*, of slow, gentle step.

The *kawina* is among the original creations of the young Bushinengé, Saamaka particularly, who live on either side of the banks or the Maroni River. In their traditional art of drums, they have included different contributions both internal and external to their societies, both musical and extra musical, which allows them to sing about life, its rights and its wrongs, its pains and its joys, death, hopes and delusions, while bringing forth their vision of the world. To do so, they use all sorts of stories, poems, anecdotes to evoke and question life, but also to reveal themselves, while disclosing their society to the world's knowledge.

The songs are of responsorial style, and their rhythm, polyrhythmic, following the example of African rhythms.

And here is the referent diagram: $c : \text{♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪}$

In practice, before the intervention of the improvised solo of each drum, the instruments join in according to a certain logic. The *hari*¹² (*timbal ma*, a drum with one skin, medium- sized and held standing, that is struck with a wooden mallet, held with one hand, together with the other hand, bare) introduces its rhythm, by way of marking the beat. It is essentially the soloist *par excellence*, together with the *koti*. It is immediately supported, in the same impetus, by the *kobangi*, imitating his playing. Then, the *lumba* or *skranki ma* moves on with short, repetitive and varied sentences, which are often used to punctuate, and to stimulate the soloist, when he does not play this part himself.

The *koti*, or *ari koti* often devotes himself to very skilful prowess. To that effect, his main role is essential in the musical play of the *kawina* as – it is said- he translates its soul, the essential part. Through his playing, - while determining the style of the moment – he enjoys flattering, exulting, and gets the world around going, from the musicians to the audience, not forgetting the singers and the dancers. Then, like a conductor, he directs the global play of the band, while guiding the singers. In the process, he is supported by the *hari*, which directs the steps of the dancers. As for the bass drum, *djansi*, it will sustain the whole harmony, envelop and light up both music and song, giving a meaning to the prosodic-musical speech engaged. As for pulse, the *timbale*, the *kobangi* and the *djansi* support the beat, while determining the variation of the tempo, which may, suddenly slow down, gather speed, then keep up the pace until it stops, usually rather brusquely and dryly. This stirs up the emotions, keeps the musicians in suspense, and also the audience, that in such case, keeps being delighted a few moments after the end of the music.

¹² The *hari* is the traditional equivalent of the *maama doon* drum, which is played standing or lying, by itself or accompanied by the male drum *agida* and the *apinti* drum (of small size).

As for the rest, we can note, that these last ten years, the *kawina* band has been greatly modernized by adopting the instrumentarium of variety bands, using electric guitars, synthesizer and drum set, in place of traditional percussion. The music thus produced is called *kawina* and is close to the practice of *bigi pokoe* or *bigi poku*.

BIGI POKOE OR BIGI POKU

The *bigi pokoe*, also named the Surinamese *kasse-ko*, is part of the Bushinengé popular music, identified above all as belonging to the Saamaka youth. In fact, the youth of the other ethnic groups of this people meet up with them in order to play this music. The identity of the Saamaka *bigi pokoe* is justified mostly by its traditional Saamaka origin. It is the *seketi*, a traditional entertainment dance. As for the other kinds of Bushinengé, already mentioned, this dance is still practised during the ritual ceremonies of the *booko dei* and the *puubaka*, and also during festive ceremonies, such as weddings.

It also accompanies some specific ritual prayers, to pacify the wrath of the gods, delight them, and appeal to their mercy and their help. Today, the *seketi* is also danced for shows, in different circumstances. It is generally practised by groups set up in associations. Such is the case in Kourou, with the Papakaï association, composed essentially of men, joined by a few female dancers, and the Hoï Tanga association, an exclusively female group, divided into two sub-groups, one of young people, one of adults.

There are two kinds of *seketi*: the *seketi ku doon* is practised to the instrumental accompaniment of three traditional drums: an *apinti doon*, which is used to communicate with the spirits (ancestors and divinities), but also for entertainment, devoted essentially for divinities. A *kawina poku*, a mid-sized drum, with a double membrane, the equivalent to the *lumba* used in the *kawina*. And last, a *dien dein*, a little drum with a single skin, built on the model of the big, long sacred drum, the *agida*. This first type of *seketi*, is almost exclusively for men.

The second type concerns the *seketi tongo*, sung without instrumental accompaniment, whose rhythmic support is replaced by a beat marked with hand clappings. It is practised by both men and women.

Technically, the practice of the *seketi* consists of very nimble songs and dances, especially when they are executed by men who skip about, resorting to several body movements, while lowering their bodies. Women usually do the *seketi tongo*, that they sing while clapping their hands, punctuating all with calls. They dance with their bodies lowered, and bowed in the shape of the letter L. This is a very symbolic position. It refers above all to the earth, the foster mother, the foundation of human kind, and carrier of the ancestors' home. It is also a synonym of the respect shown to the present assembly, which through its presence, expresses its respect to the artists and shares with them the pleasure and emotion these very artists have given them with their skill.

The *seketi* songs are often very lyrical chants, in which the voices alternate passages marked by suave vibrations and very swift and soft glissandos. These are the practices that young Saamaka have borrowed from tradition to create their *bigi pokoe*. They express them through some wholly amplified music with the help of modern music instruments (electric guitars, drum sets, synthesizers, mikes for the singers). To these instruments, some groups will add one to three drums with one skin, often the *timbal*, and also the *chacha* or *chacka* rattle.

Like the *kawina*, and the *aléké*, the *bigi pokoe* is the result of the getting together of the Bushinengé and Creole cultures with the Afro-Surinamese and Afro-Guianese traditions.

They all practise hybrid alliances, deriving from mutual influences, that encourage the getting together of the different members of these communities, and foster the Pan-Bushinengé identity of each group. The result consists of different cultural productions, which are presented to such and such ethnic group, who has been at the root of the said production.

This is how today, there exists a deep interethnic collaboration between the young¹³ members of six Guianese Bushinengé ethnic groups, as it happens, then, between them and their brothers- and, in particular, the Surinamese Creoles. This collaboration has resulted in the *kawina* and the *bigi pokoe*, which are identified as the young Saamaka. The *aléké*, I am coming to now, first refers to the Djuka youth.

ALEKE

The *aléké* is Guianese, Bushinengé popular music, which appeared about 1950. It was born from the mixing of different contributions, particularly those that stemmed from popular Saamaka and djuka music from Surinam – the *kawina* – to which elements of Guianese *lonsei* Djuka got mixed. The latter is a suite of traditional dances. Its practice based on improvisation was originally meant for juvenile entertainment, on the fringe of, or during the ritual ceremonies (funeral rite of *booko dei*, which is practised during the first week of the death of a member of the community, and also the retrieval of mourning, *puubaka*, several days later). On these rituals, *puu à tyali* was a day that was reserved exclusively to the performance and the demonstration of the achievements of the *lonsei*, which used to be performed, a long time ago, during celebrations.

In Guiana too, the closest neighbours of the Djuka, Aluku, Pamaaka, had also adopted this suite of traditional dances as professional songs and dances. They used them mainly to embellish entertaining evenings; in order to relieve people of the stress and efforts of their daily work.

As the years went by, the *aléké*, exercised a strong attraction on young people, and became more popular than the *lonsei*, until it became a very fashionable entertainment music, mainly for young people. Following the example of its traditional equivalent, it is still performed on the fringe of, or during, funeral ceremonies (*booko dei*) and retrieval of mourning (*puubaka*).

As for the constitution of its character and nature, the *aléké*, followed from the beginning the changes of society and culture that the Bushinengé have known since about the end of the first half of the XXth century. Up until then, the different ethnic groups of this people of Marrons- having long remained outside the social evolution brought by the settlers – managed to preserve a remarkable degree of endogenous dynamism of the elements of their culture, among them, their music. After this initial period, the new popular music, emerging from its cultural sphere, will start to depart from this rule of principle. This is the case of the *aléké*, in particular, whose birth is the result of a new test of balanced influences both internal and external to the Bushinengé society. Among these influences, we can mention the Caribbean and North-American influences. All these have no doubt allowed an assimilation of varied

¹³ This is the case for the Kaseko Loko group, from Apatou, which includes young Aluku, Djuka and Saamaka.

musical styles, and equally different sources, but they mostly mark the continuation of traditional, original expressions.

Concerning the *aléké*, the experiment was realized in specific frame and circumstances. Like the *kawina* in Surinam, the *aléké*, in Guiana, was born from a specific alliance and transformation of diverse musical styles. As for its origin, there exist several testimonies and stories, whose details differ considerably with each other. However, their data express recurring facts, that I shall try to sum up as follows:

In the 1950's, numerous descendants of Africans, particularly Creoles – coming from the West Indies (Martinique, Saint Lucia, Barbados, Santo Domingo, etc) and from the Surinamese coast- were attracted by the gold washing in French Guiana. Some of them gathered in the territories peopled by the Aluku and the Djuka, especially those coming from Surinam. All these people took part in different activities and intercultural meetings, among them, musical evenings of various kinds. On these occasions, different styles of drum music and dance - *kawina*, *ladja* and Surinamese *kasse-ko* -among others would interest the Guianese Aluku and Djuka. The latter will learn them and at the same time try to practise some European instruments (like the clarinet, that had been introduced by the Creoles in their music, as they had cultural exchanges with their Bushinengé neighbours.

On this side of the Maroni river, in Surinam, then, both Saamaka and Djuka come from the banks of the Cottica river, which have always been highly active Bushinengé places, economically and socioculturally. Similarly, these Surinamese will play a crucial part in this exchange process with their brothers and sisters from French Guiana. Thus, the Surinamese Creoles will influence more particularly their Djuka neighbours. The latter, preserving close links with their Guianese brothers and sisters; will, in turn, share the product of their own influence with them, and with the members of intermediate ethnic groups, Aluku and Paamaka. These influences will extend in Guiana, to either side of the banks of the Maroni, Tapanahoni and Lawa rivers. Through these back and forth movements, all these influences will lead to new perspectives.

It is in this context that between 1950 and 1960, the Surinamese Creoles, migrating to French Guiana were influenced by the Djuka practice of the *lonsei*. They will inspire themselves from it to create the *lama* genre also called *lamba*. This might be the result of the exchanges and the collaboration – towards the end of the 1950's - between the Surinamese Creole, Alexander Grandisson¹⁴ and his team-mate, a Guianese Djuka, a gold- washer, whose name we do not know. In their turn, the Djuka from French Guiana have adopted the different styles of the *kawina* from the Surinamese Creoles and have blended them with the stylistic elements of their own *lonsei* to lead to the *aléké*. In other words, they have practised the *lonsei* adapted to Alékésanda's manner of playing the *kawina*. The Djuka thus paid a tribute to their Creole host, Alexander, whose name they pronounced, in the Djuka language, Alékésanda, and which will end up being called familiarly Aléké. So, this nickname is the origin of the name of their new creation, designating all at once rhythm, dance and musical genre, the *aléké*. Having established itself during the 1970's, this new musical genre will eventually progressively supersede the traditional *lonsei*, and will gradually take its place of entertainment music, practised, during the traditional funeral ceremonies and release of mourning. It has, simultaneously continued, and still does so, to enliven diverse festive occasions, and to be produced in concerts.

¹⁴ According to testimonies in agreement of the Djuka and the Aluku, I was able to interview about it, Alexander Grandisson was a famous artist, particularly of the *kawina*, who lived on a Surinamese river bank, opposite Stoelmans Eiland, near the village of Sikisani.

However, from the *lonsei*, the *aléké* only saved the style, or the lyrical manner of singing, which appeals at the same time to very suave vibratos. The rhythms as well as the dance steps of the *lonsei* have also been modified. In fact, for the performance of its choreography, only one person at a time was admitted on the stage, for improvisations requiring skill and virtuosity, when all the other participants could only behold, while cheering and encouraging the performing dancer. On the other hand, for the *aléké*, everybody dances with one another, and not necessarily in such a spectacular way as for the *lonsei* either. The themes of the songs are love, nature, and the tales of life.

Moreover, at its beginning, the *aléké* was performed with the help of three traditional drums, which were mainly for ritual music. They were *gaan doon*, *pikin doon* and *tun* (cf. the pictures on the *Synthesis of the evolutions of bands...*) The *pikin doon*, acting as a solo drum, is also called *apinti doon*¹⁵. It is only in the 1970's¹⁶ that the drummers – originally Djuka – thought about dissociating the drums used for entertainment and leading their new musical genre – from the drums also destined for ritual use. They will end up building relatively bigger and taller drums than the traditional ones, and that are played standing¹⁷. These new drums, which will be called *aleke doon*, are also three in number. The *waka doon* plays a rhythmic ostinato, which sometimes sustains variations in the course of the relatively long musical speech of the pieces performed, (lasting often more than ten minutes.) The *sholo doon*, the equivalent of the *pikin doon* also plays the solo part, while the *gaan doon* usually reproduces the rhythmic motives of the choir, while improvising from time to time.

This is its referent rhythm:



The *aléké doon* are built roughly on the model of the Cuban congas. They are struck with bare hands, and their resonator is made of wood. To these three drums with a doe skin, is added the bass drum (the *djasi*¹⁸ or *djaz tiki*, which is a plastic half barrel. It is struck with a bass drumstick, and it plays the part of the traditional *tun*, giving the tempo, and marking the different pulses. A pair of cymbals (*simbali*), as well as the *chacha* rattle, complete the instruments of the band.

¹⁵ Succinctly, the *apinti* is both an instrument, but mainly a drummed language, with different codes used differently according to the ritual or the ritual ceremony to which it refers.

¹⁶ Different testimonies that I was able to note on the spot confirm that it was in the 1970's that the *alake doon* had been built by some Djuka, named Afudini.

¹⁷ For the traditional drums, only the solo drum is played in a semi-standing position, at the climax of the performance, during its different virtuoso improvisations.

¹⁸ The *djasi* is covered not only with a double membrane of cow skin, like initially, but rather with some relatively thick cotton cloth, which is spread in several layers (2 or 3 at most), on which is applied some wood paste.



Performance *aléké*, groupe Lavi Danbwa, Cayenne.
Chiclé : Apollinaire Anakesa.

With the *simbali*, the *djaz* makes up one of the symbols of the modernity of the Guianese Busikondé Sama musical culture, a symbol introduced by the *aléké*, that itself echoes another Afro American universe, the one of Jazz. The development of music instruments and voices, using microphones as well, is also another characteristic element of the modernity of the new version of the *aléké*, as the ancient one was only performed with acoustic instruments. This new element of modernity remains, at the same time, the reflection of a popular, urban musical culture, practised by the youth of today. Their *aléké* groups are often made up as associations

headed by a leader. Some of them even work like real companies. Among the most famous Guianese *Aléké* groups, are Fondering, Energy Crew, Spoity Boys, Bigi Ting, African and Sapatia, beside which are lots more, like Lavi Danbwa from Cayenne, to name only this one.

The sung part of the *aléké* is performed like all the other Busikondé Sama musical genres, in responsorial style. A soloist will start a question / answer game, with a choir often composed of three to five singers (seldom more), who answer him, generally in unison, or in heterophony¹⁹. At present, the choir resorts to polyphony. This concerns the new versions found mainly in urban centres, where the musicians are subjected to all sorts of influences coming from multiple horizons.

From a stylistic point of view, from the 1980's on, a double variation, both rhythmical and vocal of *aléké*, called *fonki* (funky) was born. It comes from North American influences of songs performed in the lyrical way of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, and from West Indian carnival songs and rhythms, to which are added the rhythms of the *kasse-ko* (the Surinamese *bigi pokoe*), which the Guianese Busikondé Sama interpret freely, adapting them to their needs of expression. One can also add the influence of Jamaican reggae rhythm. The result of all this are (that) the *reggae-aléké* and the *aléké kaseko* styles, the latter practised by the Yakki Famiri group, which gathers young Djuka and Creoles, a group created in the 1990's.

In a general way, the *aléké* is the image of the painful change, that is imposed on the Busikondé Sama, - in the midst of contemporary civilization, where their traditional culture - based on community links, is at the same time confronted to liberal and individualistic capitalism, which is part of globalization. Facing up to this realization, the young Busikondé Sama try a synthesis, especially in the field of music. But it is difficult to reconcile the interests of conservation, and those of the continuity of traditions, conditioned from now on to the unavoidable changes of their society. To these antagonisms can be added the opposition between the young and the elderly, their several conceptions of life and the world, and the endogenous and exogenous principles and needs that rule their life. So, the young try to break all harsh conservatism, while giving themselves the means to produce and convey new Busikondé Sama expressions and forms of identity, without denying for all that their traditions to which they are strongly devoted. On this ground, the *aléké* is one of the expressions of their modern identity, through which these young Bushinengé take on the acquisitions of their traditions, while trying to find their position in the contemporary Guianese society.

¹⁹ Here, the melodic response is given with several voices an octave higher or lower and is composed of different nuances of internal intonation.

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