

ON THE ROAD WITH Mamadou Ly

Recording Traditional Drummers in Senegal and The Gambia

BY ADAM NOVICK

*Photos by Hall Anderson,
Carl Holm, Adam Novick, & Betty Press*

I first saw Mamadou Ly at the Fifth Avenue Theater in Seattle. He was performing with the National Ballet of Senegal. When the Mandinka drumming started, he came out on stage by himself, playing a sabaro drum, which hung at his side. He inched forward in a gospel two-step, barely moving his hands, looking upward as though in a trance.

Two younger men waddled after him, each playing a drum hung between his legs. They were bent low to the ground, but they craned their necks upward to look at Mamadou, and I could see their faces were already sweating and grimacing from the effort of keeping up with his playing.

That was 1987. I didn't know Mamadou at the time, but I would find our lives weaving together over the next ten years. My friend Carl Holm and I would study drums with him, produce a recording of his troupe in Senegal, and hire him as a cultural consultant to make other recordings in Senegal and The Gambia. But best of all, we would become friends.

A MASTER RETURNS

Veteran Mandinka drummer Mamadou Ly (MA-ma-doo LEE) listens to a sabaro (SA-ba-ro) drum just presented to him by a former apprentice, in The Gambia.



Meeting in Dakar. The next time I saw Mamadou Ly was in Dakar. Carl and I had been studying Mandinka drumming for a couple years in the States. We felt we were ready to study it first hand in Africa.

I had learned Mamadou's name from a Senegalese drummer who had immigrated to the States. As soon as I described Mamadou's unusual appearance with the National Ballet, the drummer smiled and said it was Mamadou Ly. He told me Mamadou had played with the Ballet for years and was called "uncle" by generations of artists.

Carl and I spent our first day in Africa tracking down Mamadou in the backstreets of Dakar. With the help of our host — Wolof drummer Maphathé (ma-PA-tay) Diop — we learned that Mamadou had just retired from the Ballet and was living in Dakar, but we had no address. Maphathé led us from one residential compound to the next, chasing a trail of rumors, trudging on foot through the sand of unpaved streets.

We found Mamadou's compound that evening. When he came to the court yard entryway, I recognized him immediately. He seemed bewildered at first. When it sunk in that we had come from the States to study with him, he was visibly moved.

Speaking a strange English, he invited us into the one room he rented in the compound. We sat with him and two other retired Mandinka musicians. Like Maphathé, the two men wore traditional robes and sandals, but Mamadou wore a denim-colored shirt, matching pants, and low-cut leather boots. He reminded me of Chuck Berry.

While we talked, Mamadou's friends warmed their hands over a charcoal brazier on the floor. It was winter, and the temperature had dropped to 68°F. The Senegalese were used to heat and now felt cold.

Brutal Lessons. On that trip, Carl and I knew Mamadou primarily as a teacher. We would show up at his room, and he would have us play a traditional Mandinka rhythm while he soloed. His solos flowed from him in an endlessly varying rhythmic stream of consciousness.

The lessons were so brutal, part of me dreaded them. Mamadou had us playing at professional tempos, which were uncomfortably fast and left no time to think. Also, we still weren't that familiar with the music. The parts he taught us were so syncopated, I would tend to hear



LESSON IN DAKAR

Village Pulse producer Carl Holm catches a lesson with Mamadou Ly at his room in Dakar.

the downbeat in the wrong place. Even if I heard the downbeat in the right place at first, it would want to flip back to the wrong spot.

As I struggled to keep up, I remembered the two drummers who accompanied Mamadou in Seattle. I was amused to find myself in their position. I would have laughed, but I couldn't spare the motor control.

From Villager to World Citizen. We often ate an African greasy spoon near his compound. Over meals, Mamadou told us of his life. He was born in 1937 in the village of Bansang, in The Gambia. His father was chief of the region and expected Mamadou to follow in his footsteps, but Mamadou was drawn to drumming and

never thought of pursuing anything else. Mamadou began touring Senegal and The Gambia at age thirteen and spent the next forty years on the road.

For the first sixteen years, Mamadou led a life typical for Mandinka drummers, staying a few days in one village, then moving on to the next. During this time, several of Mamadou's compositions became traditional. One, a variation of Lenjen — the best known Mandinka rhythm — is called Lenjen Kando, or "Lenjen with smarts."

In 1966, the Senegalese government asked Mamadou to help found the National Ballet of Senegal. Mamadou toured with the Ballet for the next twenty-five years, leading

the Ballet's Mandinka drum troupe. His travels took him to every country in the world but two (South Africa and North Korea) and had him playing with several generations of Senegal's best and brightest artists.

One of Mamadou's favorite stories of his time in the States starts at a Chinese restaurant in Chicago. The waiters were ignoring him, apparently because he is black. After waiting a long time, Mamadou called to one of the waiters in a southern drawl, "Hey, boy."

A white man at another table burst out laughing. He came up to Mamadou and said he had to introduce himself to someone who could joke like that. After dinner, the man and his two daughters showed Mamadou the town, bought him a denim outfit, and saying goodbye, stuffed \$200 in Mamadou's shirt pocket.

I was amazed that Mamadou appeared so comfortable in worlds so different. He had spent much of his life in hotels in developed countries, but at the restaurant near his compound, he would drink water from a publicly shared cup hanging on the wall above a large, clay water jug, and on the way out, he would wipe his mouth contentedly on a public hand towel nailed to the wall by the front door.

A Trip to Warang. Carl and I got to know Mamadou better the following year, when we returned to Senegal to produce our first recordings of traditional percussion. We had been frustrated by the lack of traditional West African percussion in record stores and had decided to try to fill some of the gap ourselves.

Our first priority was to record Mamadou. We taped him and his current troupe several times near Dakar. To get a more rural ambiance, we then traveled together to tape them in Warang (wARAHING), a Mandinka village to the south. Mamadou used to play there before joining the National Ballet. The head woman in the village remembered him well. It was an emotional moment seeing them reunited.

On the Road Again. Each trip, we became aware of more traditional styles of percussion that remained virtually unknown outside the region. We returned again to Senegal two years later, to make more recordings. This time, we hired Mamadou as a consultant. We figured he

would make good company and speed up our work.

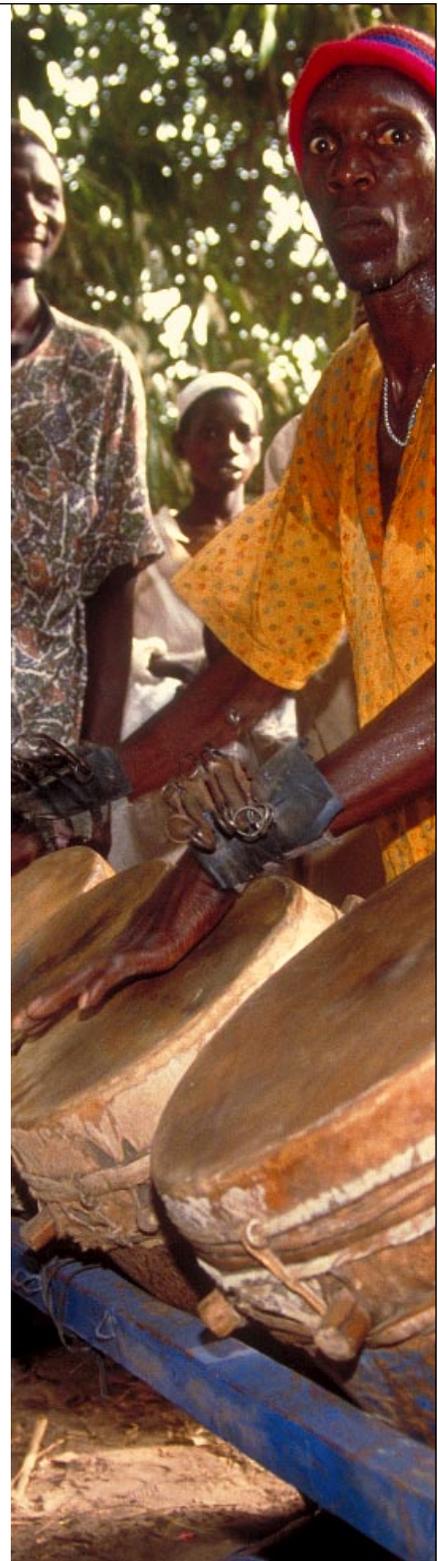
We traveled with Mamadou to the heart of Mandinka land, an area that includes parts of The Gambia and Senegal's southern province, Casamance. We had been to the region on our first trip, to study with a master Mandinka drummer in the village of Brikama.

Mamadou was a human passkey. Long-lost friends and relatives greeted him on the street. Even the drummer in Brikama turned out to have a connection: he had apprenticed with Mamadou.

Our first trip had been brutal from the moment we arrived in Dakar's airport terminal. We had slept on concrete floors and used outhouses I dreaded. We had argued endlessly with cab drivers. We had ridden for a day at a time wedged with six or seven people into a Peugeot 504 station wagon "bush taxi," over dusty roads that had more potholes than pavement, with exhaust pouring in through the rear door. We had ridden for hours in the back of a Mazda pickup, crammed in with 18 other people, all woozy from the carbon monoxide collected by the canvas top. (At one stop, Carl took a place that had opened up next to the driver. Hours later, at the next stop, I asked Carl how he was doing, and he wordlessly pointed to a mesh bag of mothballs hanging from the dashboard as an air freshener.)

Mamadou eased much of that. He knew to check the shocks before hiring a bush taxi. He knew we could buy extra seats to give ourselves some breathing room. At the two-acre bush-taxi stand in Dakar, he knew where to go, and when the usual crowd of frantic salesmen surrounded him, shouting at him and following him in a tight pack, he knew to ignore them, even when a stray arm struck his nose. However, I must say I was gratified that for him, too, it seemed every negotiation with a cab driver turned into a heated argument.

An African tower of Babel. One of Mamadou's greatest assets was his ability to help us understand the complex threads of traditional music that weave through the region. Senegal alone has twenty-seven languages, and each of these languages (or "nations," as Mamadou prefers to say) has its own musical traditions. Many of these traditions are apparently centuries old, but many of them, too, change as quickly as popular music in America and have re-



DRUMMER AT WORK

In a mango orchard near his village in The Gambia, master Saikouba Badjie (SAY-koo-ba BA-jee) performs bougarabou (boo-GA-ra-boo), the traditional solo drumming style of his people, the Jola.

portedly always done so. Little or nothing has been published about some of these traditions. We often had little else to go by.

At one recording session, we were disconcerted to see our contracted drum troupe arrive with a saxophone. Mamadou explained that in this particular culture, an African reed instrument has traditionally accompanied their drums, but now they often use a saxophone instead. Carl and I started to kid about it, but Mamadou got serious. He said we think the saxophone belongs to Europe and America, but in fact it now belongs to the world.

Mamadou's language skills came in handy, too. My French had gone only so far. Mamadou speaks the two most universal languages in the area — Wolof and Mandinka.

From his travels, Mamadou has also picked up conversational fluency in German, Japanese, Dutch, and several other languages. Once, when it seemed none of us had a language in common with a cab driver from Sierra Leone, Mamadou talked with him in Portuguese.

Looking for Kwaka Wo. Mamadou's English evoked a creole of colonial times. When he wanted to hear our tape of a style of drumming for older women, he would say "Let I hear the old women them." His phrases often took some decoding. A "yard master" was the head of a compound, "big pops" was Colonel Sanders, and when Mamadou said he was "hungry" with someone, he was angry with them.

Once, on the road, Mamadou asked us to find "kwaka wo." It was Ramadan, and he explained that he wanted it before dawn to prepare for his daily religious fast. Somehow we figured out he meant Quaker Oats. (We found some, but never found a working propane stove.)

Slave of God. Traveling makes fasting especially hard. The Koran says that those on the road can be excused from fasting, but Mamadou was particularly devout and always kept to the routine. From daybreak to sunset, he would go without eating, drinking, and smoking. He wouldn't even swallow his spit.

In Bakau, The Gambia, our daily route forced us to walk for blocks beside a tall cement wall. The heat and humidity were excruciating. I made a point of walking in the sliver of shade next to the wall. I invited Mamadou to join me in the shade,



EARLY LESSON

Mamadou Ly takes a moment to play the kutiriba at our first meeting in Dakar.

but he refused, saying in a southern drawl, "Don't worry about that, boy." The point of Ramadan, he explained, was to become a slave of God.

When evening came, Mamadou would break his fast on Marlboros and a cup of Chinese green tea with milk and sugar. After a day without food, the sugar, caffeine, and nicotine made him drunk and giddy.

Lanterns by the River. Like most West African adults, Mamadou conserved his energy. At our recording sessions, he usually sat stonefaced, despite the storm of drumming and dancing a few feet from him. The single exception occurred at one of the recording sessions for what would become *Drums of the Firdu Fula*.

We were taping in a sandy grove by the Gambia river. The sun had set and plunged

us into a dark, moonless night. We had lit two or three kerosene lanterns and placed them in front of the drummers, but their light petered out within a yard or two.

I noticed Mamadou standing just beyond the lantern light, in his sky-blue jogging suit. He had been fasting all day and was once again giddy from green tea and Marlboros.

At first I didn't realize he was dancing. He was alternately shaking his shoulders and abruptly throwing them in unexpected directions, while his feet remained fixed on the ground. For a second, I thought something was wrong.

Mamadou explained that he was dancing in the style danced by wrestlers. We had been to a couple wrestling matches near Banjul, but I'd never seen dancing quite like that.

This Must Be Secret. Our time together was not without misunderstandings. I used to tease Mamadou out of affection. One day, while we were walking in downtown Banjul, Mamadou reminded me that in Africa, you never disrespect your elders — you don't even kid them. As we passed a display case of chickens turning on spits over gas flames, Mamadou announced, "I think when they put Adams to the fire, this must to feel like ice."

We returned to Senegal again last year, to do more taping, and we again hired Mamadou as our consultant. While we were on the road, Carl would share a room with our photographer, Hall Anderson, and I would share a room with Mamadou. I slept like I always sleep — naked — but Mamadou didn't. I didn't think much about it until, late in the trip, Mamadou told me he thought the Wolof were too sexually explicit in their dance. He pointed to his crotch and said, "This must to be kept secret." I think I stopped sleeping naked for the rest of the trip.

This is not to say Mamadou lacked a sense of humor. He liked to joke about the two American assistants who had bailed out of our earlier trips. One of them had panicked and wouldn't leave the hotel the second day. We covered for him, telling Mamadou that our friend was sleeping. Mamadou said we should tell our friend that Mamadou said he was sleeping like a crocodile. The third day, when our friend had flown out of the country, Mamadou laughed and called him a "very foolish man."

The African Side of Things. Mamadou also helped introduce us to what he called "black magic." On one trip, we arrived in Dakar to find Mamadou suffering from terrible headaches. When we returned to his compound a few days later, we found him better. He said he had seen a man who had cured him by pulling "strings" from his eyes. Speaking in a surprised tone, he said, "I did not know you can do that."

The Mandinka say their drums were first played by devils, and that the devils still haunt the drums and occasionally cause the sabaro to play itself. Mamadou says he heard his sabaro play itself once, in 1958, while he was spending the night in Toubacouta, a Mandinka village not far from Warang.

To improve our playing, Mamadou



IN THE TRADITION

Saikouba Badjie's bougarabou drumming melds with the dancing in a rising cloud of dust.

once arranged for us each to buy a leather amulet, or gris-gris (GREE-gree). Carl's gris-gris seems to have done a lot for his playing, but then he practices a lot.

Mamadou also promised to treat our hands with fire. I am relieved that he seems to have forgotten about this.

Back to Bansang. Mamadou's beliefs surfaced once again toward the end of our last trip. We had returned to the village of Bansang, where Mamadou grew up. We hoped to record some of the royal court musicians brought to Bansang by his father, the chief.

Carl and I had become obsessed with recording Mamadou again. We had recorded several Mandinka drum troupes on the trip. Each time, we had asked Mamadou to sit in. But each time he had refused, giving us one reason or another.

We were staying at the far end of Bansang, in a hotel by the river. One night, we heard the sound of Mandinka drumming floating toward us from the far shore. The management told us a Mandinka drum troupe was playing at an outdoor nightclub set up in the forest by another hotel in Bansang. Mamadou said that if we arranged to record that troupe, he would play with them.

We visited the nightclub the next night. Through Mamadou, we learned the troupe was from Banne (ba-NEE), a village farther into the forest. Mamadou arranged for us to record the troupe, but he insisted

we record them at the nightclub, not in Banne. He refused to say why.

After a day of badgering, Mamadou revealed with some embarrassment that Banne was full of cannibal witches. He said they flew at night to kill and feed on people. Mamadou had traveled to every country in the world but two, yet he had never been to the village across the river from his home town.

On the Cross. On the flight home from one of our trips, I had a bad reaction to one of the medications I'd been taking. It felt like I was having a bad acid trip. My thoughts deteriorated into a kaleidoscope of turning gears, and I feared that my heart would stop or that my breathing would fail. I thought about causing a scene to get help, but I couldn't talk. Gripping the armrests and sweating, I tried to fight panic and prepared for a very long flight.

Then, out of the blue, I pictured myself as one of the thieves hanging from a cross next to Jesus. But hanging in the middle wasn't Jesus. It was Mamadou, and a peaceful feeling came over me when he turned his head to me and said in his southern drawl, "Don't worry about that, boy." ■

Adam Novick is a producer with Village Pulse, a record label that specializes in West African percussion. Mamadou Ly performs on the Village Pulse recording Mandinka Drum Master (VPU-1001, villagepulse.com).