

## Drum languages in Europe: case-study of Sabar Sofiya Ros, Utrecht University

In some African cultures, drumming is used for expressing linguistic meanings. Our research focuses on the Sabar drumming tradition from Senegal, which involves the encoding of spoken phrases into drum music [1,2]. These drummers belong to the social class of *griots* [3], and their most common drum is a single-headed drum known as *sabar*. Playing the *sabar* involves at least 9 different drum strokes (hand strokes, stick strokes or their combination), that can be seen as the basic units of the Sabar language. These strokes compose different, longer strings of strokes which correspond to the spoken utterances in Wolof — the lingua- franca of Senegal. The main goal of the research is to find mapping between the drum language Sabar and the spoken language Wolof.

During fieldwork in Senegal an extensive Sabar dataset was collected (402 recordings, each starts with the phrase in Wolof, followed by the corresponding string of *sabar* strokes). Dataset included both *bakks* – classical phrases in Sabar, not improvised on the spot (1) and improvisations in Sabar (2) and their translations to Wolof. The first attempt to analyze the data and to present the mapping was undertaken in [4]. The analysis has shown that different drum strokes are more commonly associated with different types of vowels, where the association relies on the phonological properties of a vowel. In order to further address these questions, our study originally involved a field trip to Senegal. However, the pandemic ruled out this possibility and we had to shift our focus from the fieldwork in Senegal to finding Sabar drummers inside Europe. In summer 2021 we conducted field research with griots in Barcelona and in Lille (France). It's worth mentioning that all our informants came from the Senegalese drummers' families, were raised surrounded by the *sabar* drums and are great and experienced drummers, regularly travelling to Senegal.

Some differences were noticed between the praxis of previously recorded drummers in Senegal, and the ones living in the diaspora, which are briefly described below.

Drummers in Europe were playing only the *bakks*, both traditional (3) and modern (4), however, all learnt by heart beforehand. When they were asked to drum a specific phrase, different drummers used different strokes sequences to represent it, while the only consistency was the amount of strokes, coinciding with the number of syllables in a phrase. Moreover, some *bakks* contained only one repeating stroke (4), so perhaps the *gin* stroke here, being the most frequent stroke among other *bakks*, is just used to play the beat. What concerns the spheres where the *sabar* drumming is used, in Europe it became a part of European workshop culture, while in Senegal it appears in different sorts of events such as sport events, life-cycle ceremonies, political gatherings.

While still other differences of the research has to be taken into consideration (among others: researcher's positionality in fieldwork; drummers' personal differences such as age and experience) collected datasets already show some differences and therefore imply differences in the state of the *sabar* drumming in Senegal and in Europe. Most likely here we deal with the fossilization of Sabar as a language or rather it's turning from language to music.

- (1) <sup>WOLOF</sup> Mbëg geel  
<sup>SABAR</sup> gin gin
- Kaay nu bëg-gën-te tey wec-coo xa-laat  
 rwan gin tan tan gin rwan rwan gin pax tan
- Mooy jàm-mi bo-room waaw waaw  
 gin gin gin gin pax gin
- (<sup>ENGLISH</sup> Love  
 Let's love today and exchange thoughts  
 It's the peace of God yes yes)

- (2) Yo-ad pro-fes-seur  
 pax gin gin tan tan
- man nu-yu naa la  
 rwan tan turun pax ce
- (Professor Yoad  
 I greet him)

- (3) Se-ne-gal Se-ne-gal Se-ne-gal  
 tan wran wran tan wran wran tan wran wran
- Fi fi fi  
 gin gin gin
- Djam rekk  
 tan wran
- (Senegal Senegal Senegal  
 here here here  
 just peace)

- (4) Ña-mal ma si ba-laa sa yaay ñow  
 gin gin gin gin gin gin gir gin
- sa li sa li sa li  
 gin gin gin gin gin gin
- (Let me taste it before your mom is here  
 Your this your this your this your this)

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**References:** [1] Winter, Y. 2014. On the Grammar of a Senegalese Drum Language. *Language* 90.3. // [2] Tang, P. 2007. Masters of the sabar: Wolof griot percussionists of Senegal. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. // [3] Hale, T. A. 1998. Griots and griottes. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. // [4] Ros, S. 2021. Rhythm-Speech Correlations in a Corpus of Senegalese Drum Language. *Frontiers in Communication*.