

Singing with the Dogon Prophet

Walter E.A. van Beek,
Oumarou S. Ongoiba,
and Atimè D. Saye



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The Child of Heaven and the Child of Death

Just before the rainy season, a group of men were cultivating their fields when a youngster approached them and said:

‘I am thirsty, give me to drink.’

‘Who are you?’, the men asked.

‘I am the child of heaven’, the youngster answered.

The men looked at him, deliberated briefly among themselves, and then the oldest answered:

‘Heaven – that is where the rains come from. Water is life; rain makes our life possible here, and that is what we are waiting for right now. But when it rains, one never knows exactly where. Rain may fall on my neighbor’s field and not on mine, or it may fall on my field and not elsewhere. Heaven creates differences; heaven is not just; it is not right. We will not give you water to drink’.

Sometime later another youngster approached the men:

‘Give me some water to drink, I am thirsty’.

‘Who are you?’, the men asked.

‘I am the child of Death’, the young man answered.

Again the men deliberated and again the oldest among them answered to the youngster:

‘Death is terrible. Death is the end of everything, and we fear Death more than anything else. But Death comes everywhere: Death takes the rich people and the poor ones, men as well as women, the important figures as well as the small ones. Death takes each and every one the same way. Though horrible, Death acts justly; Death is right. We will give you water to drink’.¹

¹ Told by Dogolu Saye when he tried to explain the texts of the *baja ni*, Tireli, April 1980.

This book is dedicated to Dogolu Tigemu Saye, older brother, father, husband, grandfather, singer, performer and unforgettable host to countless seekers for Dogon culture.

Ama eji le keje, Ama lagara wo keene



Figure 0.1 Dogolu Tigemu Saye.

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Preface

ENCOUNTERING THE *BAJA NI*

This book zooms in on the *baja ni* (chants of farewell), a song cycle that is highly significant for the Dogon but has received very little attention in the voluminous ethnographic literature on their culture. In fact, the *baja ni* have been mentioned only in passing in some major publications¹ and never have been the focus of actual research. Why earlier anthropologists had left it aside, and thus why the *baja ni* never did gain prominence in Dogon ethnography, dawned upon me when I² began exploring the songs; the reasons for that ethnographic lacuna soon became clear when I really delved into the texts. As a crucial piece of Dogon heritage, these songs present serious challenges for an investigator, and this song cycle with its enigmatic phrases has haunted me for decades. What were these challenges?

In January 1980, I witnessed a funeral with *baja ni* singing in my research village of Tireli. When I wanted to tape it, my host and guide Dogolu³ told me that I should better wait. People had to get accustomed to me first, and ‘there will be enough funerals around’. That was wise counsel, for funerals are emotionally laden, and one should tread carefully. But the next funeral might be a year later, and I am not that patient by nature. To my relief a private performance could be arranged without any problem, for it was not the song itself that was charged with ‘specialness’, it was its setting inside the funeral. The *baja ni* as such could just as well be sung outside this

¹ The Dogon have been studied extensively, early in the French colonial history. In one of the earliest and major sources, *Masques Dogons* (Griaule 1938), a few mentions are made to this song cycle, without any details.

² The first person singular here and throughout the volume is the first author.

³ In Dogon kinship terms Dogolu is my *dere*, older brother. The book is dedicated to him.

ritual context, the only prerequisite being that it had to be sung at night. So, in April 1980, Dogolu and I invited the three most renowned singers of the village for a performance: Mëninyu Asegèrèm (see figure 1.3), Asama Ajuro (see figure 4.3) and Yèngulu Yangau. By then I had already worked with them on other aspects of Dogon religion, and they all happily accepted the invitation with its promise of ample beer and an unrestrained bout of singing. Dogolu joined as the chorus – he was in fact an apprentice singer at the time and also the son-in-law of Mëninyu – and our cook Domo Dolo played an improvised drum. It took them two nights to go through the whole program, the first from 20.00 to 04.00 hours, the second two days later from 22.00 to 01.00 hours. I kept busy checking the tapes, putting in new batteries and changing the tapes when needed, while just being more and more amazed. During the first evening, they saw me become sleepy and assured me that I could take a nap; they would keep singing anyway. I was sure they would, for their voices seemed to get even stronger, showing no sign of fatigue whatsoever; but, of course, I rubbed my eyes, shook my head and stuck to my tapes. When they went home after an interminable night of singing, they kept up the good work, repeating some songs at full strength while walking home, their voices ricocheting off the cliff: I could hear their progress through the sleeping village. Two days later they came back for the rest, which took a final three hours.

In the next weeks, Dogolu and I worked on the translation; I transcribed the text straight from the recording, and Dogolu translated it sentence by sentence, and after three weeks of intense work we had the complete text of the *baja ni*. At least, that is what I thought I had. When reading through my thick pack of notes, without the repetitions some seventy closely scribbled pages, I realized this might be an important text, but that I did not have the foggiest notion of what it really meant. That is, I more or less understood individual lines, but I saw no story, no coherence or no real meaning. What were they singing about? What kind of text did I have here?

Why was this so difficult? First, many of the phrases themselves were difficult to understand, since the language was highly elliptic, full of metaphors and cryptic images: What did that elephant mean that they had sung about, the one fallen into the well? What was the meaning of the hare and the chameleon, the locust and the hyena? Second, this was not even a text in Toro so, the Dogon language of my Tireli friends, for they sang in another Dogon language: Jamsay. For someone like me, struggling with Toro so, this complicated my understanding of the text considerably. Even Dogolu was sometimes at a loss over Jamsay expressions. Thirdly and most importantly, when we revisited the text, there was no storyline, and the various strophes made very little sense among them; in short, it seemed a text that went from null to nowhere.

So I knew that I was in deep water and now understood the reticence of earlier anthropologists to delve into this song. The Dogon themselves, however, saw things differently: at last I was doing something worthwhile, something they cared about and valued highly, instead of running around scribbling notes on everyday happenings and taking pictures of the most routine things in life. For to them, this was no less than the *baja ni*, an important cycle of songs performed at a crucial occasion in their existence, with texts stemming from a historical figure they held in high esteem. So much became clear.

The next year I had the opportunity to come to Tireli with a photography team from Time-Life,⁴ and we returned to the *baja ni*, collecting some new songs in another arranged session. Later years saw similar recordings during subsequent visits.⁵ One of them was with a BBC film team working for a project called ‘Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World’. During that field stay, we filmed a *yu yana* (funeral) in neighbouring Komakan, with a splendid harvest of visual material and professional recordings. One of its high points was a *baja ni* performance in that village with a host of Tireli singers participating. The filming captured beautiful shots, but the audio recording itself marked a new level: the sound technician had the whole dancing area lined with microphones and at the side handled a professional mixing panel. This was excellent for the sound, much better than a single anthropologist trying some inspired shuffling behind the singers with a hand-held microphone. In fact, it was a pity the crew did not want to stay up all night and keep recording and filming till sunrise. I still regret that, but they saw it differently; they still do. Anyway, we at least have an excellent technical recording of a partial performance. Two years later in 1985, my short stay at the cliffside ended in a nice going-away party, at which the singers were so kind as to perform a sizable part of the *baja ni*, to send me on my way to the ‘other country’.

In the second half of the 1980s, a serious drought scourged Sahel, but finally the crucial year of 1989 came along. Rains had arrived at long last, the harvest was good and, consequently, I was expecting the mask festival that was seriously overdue in Tireli. This long-delayed event occupied not just my own thoughts but also those of my Dogon friends. However, this *dama* did not take place – and would not take place for another two decades, for reasons that form another story.⁶ At the time, Dogolu explained to me: ‘There have been too many people whom we could only just bury, so we have

⁴ Resulting in a photobook in their series of *Peoples of the Wild*, Pern and Alexander (1982).

⁵ See Van Beek, Saye & Ongoiba 2020, Appendix 4 for a detailed overview.

⁶ See Van Beek (2012a) for the dynamics of this long delay which had everything to do with the intense tourism of that time.

to do the *yu yana* first. The *dama* maybe next year'. The *dama* is in fact the second funeral. I could relate to that, for among the many deaths during these difficult years were those of Yajagalu, the mother of Dogolu (and so also mine, by adoption) and of Yengulu, one of the three master singers of 1980, a good friend and a crucial informant. So there was a collective funeral for all those who had passed away in the previous few years, and it was a huge one. And that is where the *baja ni* came in again.

The night of 8–9 May 1989 for me meant a new phase in my 'Dogon life'. I have forgotten a lot from my many stays in Dogon country, but never this particular night. The setting of the *baja ni* performance was, as always, a funeral or *yu yana*, the five-day ritual spectacular in which the Dogon excel, an event I had already seen and participated in quite a few times. But this was the funeral of two people that I had known well and whose remembrance I cherished, so participating in this funeral was no longer just fieldwork; I was mourning too. When this *baja ni* was sung during the night of the second day, it became a highly charged event, and I realized that by being sad myself, by mourning the demise of people close to me, at long last I was emotionally doing justice to the whole *yu yana*. Of course, taping a session is not what mourners usually do, but even the technicalities of changing the tapes, taking care of the administration of the sound recordings and ensuring that I 'got everything' did not really hamper my participation-as-a-mourner: I was doing this for a good friend and for my 'mother', whom I would never see again, but whose funeral sounds would remain: existential participation enhanced participant observation. I also saw some younger Dogon tape the *baja ni* themselves, with the ghetto blasters that were becoming popular at the time, so taping-while-participating was not a strict European aberration. This is why chapter 1 starts with a description of this particular night.

I kept trying to get a better grip on the song texts by arranging focused bouts of the singing of specific songs, so the years 1990, 1992, 1996 and 1997 saw partial recordings, some of them in arranged sessions in which I tried to zoom in on particular parts of the *baja ni*. In fact, I got nowhere in my quest for meaning, until in 2000 I decided to focus on the author of the songs, the poet/prophet Abire, and with my wife visited the various villages on the plains where he had performed, collecting the various versions of his life's story. That focus on the author proved crucial and informs much of this book.

Then came 2005, when I was back at the cliffside for a short stay after a tour through Mali, and I chanced upon a full *baja ni* session for the funeral of another old friend, Atonyo Atime. It took place in June, rather late in the year, since it was a *baja lugo*, (counted *baja*) performed quite some time after the funeral itself. I was just in time for the sung announcement, which is already a piece of *baja ni* in itself. Around 6 p.m. the evening before, two singers, Monuire in Sodanga and Baire in Teri Ku, mounted a special rock in

their respective wards. By singing some strophes of what I would later learn to be the closing song, they announced the *baja ni* performance for the next evening.

The chief of the calabash has fallen;
 yes, the chief of the *baja ni* has fallen.
 Abirɛ said: ‘Indeed, yesterday evening’.
 The might of the calabash drum has fallen.
 Yesterday evening, the chief of the *baja ni* fell.
 When night fell, he drank at the pool of God.
 Late at night one saw him at Natinburo.⁷
 That morning, Abirɛ had eaten death.
 Yesterday evening, the *baja ni* lost their colleague.

Since they were alone there was no chorus, but many heard, so everybody knew; there was to be a *baja lugo* tomorrow night. Increasingly, such a ‘delayed *baja*’ is scheduled when the funeral concerns a deceased singer, so a colleague of them, and Atonyo was both a valued colleague and a renowned performer. This way the *baja unrun*, the children of the *baja* as the singers call themselves, have more time for proper, all-out performance, a chance to sing at ease for a dead comrade. This is the performance that informs most of chapter 5 of this book. Recording that session presented no problem at all; my host and elder brother Dogolu had become one of the established singers of the *baja ni*; I had already recorded many times either in arranged sessions or in performances of *baja ni* proper, and my continuing interest in Abirɛ was widely appreciated. Also, people knew me as a personal friend of the deceased; besides, in the modern times of 2005 many more Dogon had sound recording equipment than in 1989, including the now-ubiquitous ghetto blasters, and they also recorded. Moreover, many FM radio stations in the region played fragments of the *baja ni* at regular intervals on the radio, so the notion of recording-plus-listening-back was well established by now.

Viewing the level of acceptance, I decided – in consultation with Dogolu – to organize an additional feature. Since it would already be an elaborate performance, I opted to arrange a small session before the regular one, in order to make the whole experience and recording as complete as could be. So the bulk of this book stems from an extra-long night of singing with a more-complete-than-usual rendition of the *baja ni*, which we also supplement with earlier and later recordings, so chapter 5 houses more songs than can be sung at a regular *baja ni* performance.

⁷ Natinburo is a well-known pool, the conception spot of Abirɛ, according to some traditions.

One later funeral performance, in 2008, I also recorded, but will not be used here since it was a rather short version and had numerous disturbances. It took place during a *yu yana* right in the middle of preparations for a huge mask festival – the *dama* of Teri Ku – and people were very preoccupied with the masks, which also formed a bone of contention between the two village halves of Teri Ku and Sodanga (Van Beek 2012a). So the *baja ni* singers were not at full force, and tensions between the two village halves spilled over in the performance. After 2008, the waiting was for the mask dance in the Sodanga half, which was long overdue, but which never materialized, due to succession dynamics inside the clan responsible for the masks. In 2010, Dogolu passed away, leaving a large family behind to be run by his oldest son, Atimɛ Dogolu, one of our co-authors.

Not only did I wait in vain for the Sodanga mask dance to be held, but in 2012 disaster struck in Mali, with the revolt of the Tuareg spreading down from Libya after the demise of Moammar al-Qadhafi, and the ensuing jihadist unrest ever since. In 2016, I realized that it was now or never; if I ever wanted to ‘do something with’ the seventy-odd hours of *baja ni* recordings, and with the elusive Abirɛ, I had to do it now. Already, much earlier, I had arranged the transcription of the 2005 performance, which proved more difficult than envisaged. Paul Saye, who had been schooled in literacy projects, had started the transcription but lacked time, so Atimɛ Dogolu had taken over the baton, and he became co-author. In October 2016, my wife and I flew to Bamako, and we asked six singers, plus Atimɛ and our cook Mabudu, all from Tireli, to come join us in the capital. They heeded the call; for four consecutive weeks, we went through the texts, checking and finishing the translations and – above all – trying to fathom what these strange, seemingly incoherent texts meant. We also compared the 2005 recording with the earlier ones. It was this concentrated fieldwork that provided the clues and cues for the interpretation offered in this book. Well, it is now only some forty years after the first encounter . . .

There remained the problem of Jamsay – the language of the plains and the language Abirɛ sang in. Since the 1990s, I had been in contact with Ginna Dogon – a cultural organization run by the Dogon themselves for preserving and safekeeping their cultural heritage (Van Beek 2013). Throughout these years, I had kept them abreast of my work, and they were enthusiastic about my Abirɛ project. In 2016, they gave me the name of a Jamsay-speaking Dogon, Oumarou Ongoiba, a linguist who had defended a thesis on Jamsay phonology and for whom Jamsay was his mother tongue. He became the other co-author. In June 2017, he flew over from his base in Toronto, Canada, to Utrecht in the Netherlands, to work together on the Jamsay of the text – and he has been actively involved in the project ever since; during a recent field stay in November 2019, he and Atimɛ Saye met for the first time; the two of



Figure 0.2 The singers Baire and Éwelu at the National Museum in Bamako, 2016. They inspect a replica of a typical Africa bush taxi, overloaded with people and luggage.

them were central at the launch of the French language volume on Abire in February 2021.

When early 2018 the French manuscript attained its first version, I realized we had in our hands a foundational document for Dogon cultural heritage. Scouting around for a subvention for the publication of the book – cultural heritage is hot in scholarship these days – I came upon a European project for digitalization of cultural heritage: JPI-CH. Through the good services of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) that participated in this European Joint Program, notably Arnold Lubbers, we submitted and acquired a major grant for a project we dubbed DigiDogon as a cooperation between the African Studies Centre in Leiden, University College London, and the National Museum of Mali, with additional support from Turin University. This project aims at widening the empirical knowledge about Abire and his cultural legacy within the general Dogon performative culture, at publishing the results both in print and at establishing a website devoted to Dogon cultural heritage. Thus we could finalize the text with three of the singers in Bamako in August 2018, select the audio files for the website in November 2019 with the same singers and publish the French text which had initiated the project. Meanwhile, three junior researchers were engaged into the project, Amadou Guindo, Issa Sagara and Ibrahima Poudiougou, and they continue to collect information on Dogon performative culture, in order to publish them also as part of the DigiDogon endeavour, both in written form and on the website. Owing to the new security risks in Mali, their research has to be carried out with circumspection, and their projects have been broadened

to include all aspects of Dogon performative culture, plus history and linguistics, yet the core remains the enigmatic performances during the *yu yana*, the long, seemingly interminable ‘song in the night’.

LANGUAGE AND ORTHOGRAPHY

The *baja ni* is sung in Jamsay, the Dogon language of the plains and the one Abirè spoke. However, the singers themselves have another mother tongue: in the Tireli case this is Toro so, the language of many cliffside villages, while singers from the south-west speak Togo kan.⁸ So for the comprehension of text and performance, one has to bear in mind that the singers perform in a tongue that is not their own; it is a related one but, in fact, another language, and one that they do not hear or practice daily. Also, they sing for a predominantly Toro so-speaking audience. Though the *baja ni* may have originated on the plains, it is preserved best at the cliffside, in villages less touched by Islamization and Christianization; Tireli is one example. On the plains, other items of Abirè’s heritage are preserved better or differently, such as his genealogy, details of his life and many of his prophecies, on which we dwell in chapter 6. So we have both a Toro so and a Jamsay speaker on the team: Atime Saye and Oumarou Ongoiba, respectively.⁹

Our joint interpretation of the song texts – as provided in chapter 5 – which form the bulk of the book, stems mainly from the singers themselves; being an oral transmission, there is no other authority beyond the performers. So, in the end, what we present here are the songs such as Toro so-speaking singers performed in Jamsay, with as exegetic commentaries what they themselves thought they had been singing and what they thought it meant. Usually, they were quite aware of the meaning of texts, mastering Jamsay reasonably well – at least when a debate ensued during our 2016 deliberations, they easily reached a consensus. In some instances, they were at a loss, though, and offered suggestions rather than confident explanations. To their information and explanatory notes, we have added our own thoughts on the matter, offering parallels from Dogon performative culture and common discourse, mainly coming from the Dogon co-authors.

The Dogon singers and informants wanted their personal names to be clearly recognizable, and not too different from the spelling in their official documents, which usually follows French rules; so we followed this, with the exception of using the ϵ instead of the \grave{e} , and the ‘u’ instead of ‘ou’. All

⁸ For the linguistic situation of the Dogon area, see Blench and Dendo (2005) Moran et al. (2016) and Douyon (2010); for dictionaries, Calame-Griaule (1968) and Kervran (1982).

⁹ Resulting in first instance in Van Beek et al. (2020).

singers and informants agreed that using pseudonyms for reasons of privacy was out of the question: they had given their full support and were proud of what they had to say, or sing; for them, privacy is for those who have something to hide. And, they are proud of their culture anyway. So also in photo captions, their full names are given.

In the Dogon song texts, the names of some villages vary considerably, depending on the vernacular used, on the familiarity with the village in question, and even on the exigencies of singing. To arrive at consistency we consulted the official maps of the region in their various versions, the website Dogonlanguages.org, and then if needed chose between variants – names of small settlements have no standardized spelling yet. One choice in order to arrive at consistency has been to render all palatalized d's as 'di' instead of 'dy'; so we write 'Idieli' and not 'Idyeli' and 'Youdiou' instead of Youdyou or Yuju.

Dogon vernacular terms are italicized and remain so whenever they occur throughout the book to avoid confusion. The orthography of the Dogon languages has been standardized by AMALAN,¹⁰ the alphabetization program of Mali, and we will follow this. In this orthography no diacritics are used, so even if all Dogon languages are tonal, tones are not indicated. Also, nasalization of vowels is written by adding an 'n', as in French. Four signs of the International Phonetic Alphabet function in this orthography:

ɛ – the è in French, 'men' in English

ɔ – like 'offer' in English

ŋ – like *long* in English

ɲ – palatalized n, like the Spanish *mañana*¹¹

There is no schwa in Dogon. The absence of diacritics in the official orthography sometimes generates awkward spelling, such as when a nasalized vowel is followed by an 'n' (e.g. *atunwunnu*, spirits) or any kind of double nasalization (e.g. *unrun* – instead of a possible spelling such as *ûnú*). For instance, in the name Yannhire, the first 'n' nasalizes the 'a'; the second is a real 'n'.

¹⁰ Association Malienne des Langues, the successor of DNAFLA, Direction Nationale de l'Alphabetisation Fonctionnelle et de la Linguistique Appliquée du Mali. The original idea of this latter government agency was to take Toro so as standard Dogon language, but that would be impossible in this text. Also, Jamsay is very much a living language (Ongoiba 1988; Heath 2008), and there seems little reason to suppress its written form.

¹¹ We thank the anonymous reviewer for this notion and for his many other suggestions that we have gladly adopted.

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