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Notes on the Drum Language of the Ancient Mossi Kingdoms (Burkina Faso)

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Transmission systems of verbal messages by means of drum or slit gong sounds are highly developed in Sub-Saharan African societies, where tonal languages are widely spoken. In West Africa, where peoples of the Oti-Volta language group such as the Mossi and Gurmantche in Burkina Faso have developed a hierarchical political system, a "pot-type drum with one membrane" made from a large spherical gourd that is covered with goat skin and beaten with the fingers of both hands is used to "relate" the long dynastic history of the monarch. The author presents a hypothesis based on 40 years of research that this type of drummer "relates" by using the fingertips of both hands instead of the voice.

Key words: Talking drum, dynastic history, fingertips and language field of the brain.

Transmission of Verbal Messages by Means of Drum Sounds

Transmission systems of verbal messages by means of drum or slit gong sounds are highly elaborated in Sub-Saharan African societies, where other than West-Atlantic languages such as Serer-Sin, Serer-Non or Wolof of Senegal, or locally variable Fulani languages spoken in wide areas of the interior parts of West Africa—tonal languages are widely spoken. Among the so-called "talking drums", aside from slit gongs (which are not drums but are beaten with two straight sticks held in each hand, and which are especially common in forest areas), bifacial hour-glass type drums beaten with a hooked wooden stick are widely used among West African peoples. The player of this bifacial hourglass-type drum regulates the tension of the faces, like Yoruba iya-ilu (Figure 1).

The drummer can reproduce different language tones by grasping the strings linking the two faces (for middle tones), simultaneously pressing the inside of the forearm (for high tones), or not grasping (for low tones). Thus, "talking drums" of this type are suitable for sending verbal messages in a language with three tones which can be freely combined to express different meanings.

However, another type of talking drum called bendre in moore (Mossi language) is more appropriate (Figure 2) in order to send verbal messages in the moore, which has a "terraced level tone system" (Peterson 1968) in which there are two distinctive tones, high and low, but in which tones descend gradually. This type of drum, which may be classified as a "pot-type drum with one membrane", is made of a large spherical gourd covered with the skin of a young goat and is struck with the fingers of both hands. It is widely used among many peoples in West Africa to animate dances or songs. But it is used to express verbal messages, especially to "relate" the dynastic history of the monarch, only among some peoples of the Oti-Volta language group like the Mossi and Gurmantche in Burkina Faso, who have developed a centralized and hierarchical political system.

Mossi bendre is made of a spherical gourd of around 40 centimeters in diameter, the peduncle side of which is cut about 21 centimeters in diameter and covered with the skin of a young non-bred she-goat stretched by a wild animal’s skin belt. Another side of the gourd is pierced, and this small hole is encircled with an iron ring stretching the skin belt. Just under the goat’s skin, a wooden or an iron stick carrying numerous thin iron rings is fixed, so that when the surface of the drum skin is tapped by the fingertips of the player, this ring is struck by the stick, producing a sound.

For the transcription of moore, Mossi language, I follow the principles proposed by the Commission nationale des langues voltaïques, sous-commission du moore, "Comment transcrire correctement le moore", Ouagadougou, 1976, using however, an “accent circonflexe” ['] for nasalized vowels, and a “tréma” ['] for lax vowels. To describe long lax vowels, the same vowel is repeated, but only the first one is marked with a tréma.
these rings delicately resound. Drummers also put cowries in the drum. At the center of the surface, the player puts the tuning paste bend-südre in a disk form (among Gurmantche, as many points of paste) suit his taste. This paste, made with charcoal powder and the black resin of sâbga (Lannea oleosa), is occasionally replaced. The drum is made entirely by the player of the bendre himself (who is also called bendre, the plural form of which is benda). Before the drum “speaks” in public, the blood of a rooster is sacrificed in the name of the ancestors of the benda.

Different touches of the fingertips of both hands on different points on the surface of the bendre produce delicately different tones that reproduce (often in conventionally abridged or transformed manners) the tones of verbal messages. These are mostly composed of the many praise names (zab-yiyya = battle names) of the past chiefs of the dynasty, as well as those of the present chief, expressed in the form of maxims with abundant metaphors, often reflecting the background of the succession.
Social Background

The Mossi people, according to my research, built a centralized political system starting from around the 15th century (Kawada 2002). There were many dynastic splits caused by conflicts over the succession of chiefaincy and by conflicts among dynasties. By the time of the French military conquest at the end of the 19th century there were three major dynasties in existence: in the north Yaadĩnga (with Ouahigouya as its customary chief’s residence), in the center Wagôgo (with Ouagadougou as its customary chief’s residence), and Tanbudgado (with Tenkodogo as its customary chief’s residence). In addition, there were other minor but independent dynasties, such as Yako (the same actual local name), Sanumatenga (with Kaya as its customary chief’s residence), Busuma (the same actual local name) in the central area, or Wargê and Lalgê (actually transcribed as Ouargaye and Lalgaye) in the south-east area, among others.

Each dynasty has its own benda, in charge of drumming the dynastic history, whose (not endogamous) patri-clan occupies quarters near the royal palace. As the result of long training since childhood, members of a benda patri-clan become able to reproduce long chains of the zab-yiiya of royal ancestors quasi-automatically owing to the “bodily-engraved movements” of their fingers (Figure 3), which are attested by my research to be more stable than verbal memory.

The benda is called napaga, or the chief’s wife, first because of his appearance, with a large spheric drum at his frontal side, as if he has a pregnant belly, and second, because of his peaceful function as a beloved musician of the chief. The benda and the blacksmith are the only subjects of the chief who may enter the residence of their master without prior permission, even at night.

Figure 3: A Mossi child of a benda clan trains by imitating his grandfather.
Language and Drum Sounds

At Tάnkudgo, at the climax of important annual royal ceremonies, the bend'naaba, the chief court drummer, recapitulates by means of drum sounds the entire dynastic history of 917 phrases, one by one, up until the 30th Tάnkudgo naaba Tigre (1957-2001) while another court drummer of lower status but with a good voice “interprets” loudly, using some particular intonation, phrase by phrase in moore, to an audience of a hundred subjects inebriated on treated daam, sorghum beer. The dynasty of Tάnkudgo is considered by Mossi people the most ancient of all Mossi kingdoms and is where I have conducted research over long periods since 1963. As a researcher, I was privileged to observe this custom of reciting the dynastic genealogy phrase by phrase, using the sounds of the bendre accompanied by a verbal interpretation. As a result, I was able to decode the drum language. I was able to record and transcribe all phrases, which are filled with enigmatic metaphors described in outdated moore, owing to the precious assistance of the late Brother Jean-Baptiste Bunkungu, a reputed linguist of the Mossi language and a renowned interpreter of the presidential French radio broadcasts into moore (Kawada 1985).

The first issue to study was how to determine the drum sounds, from the point of view of their qualification as well as their quantification. Drum sounds, being explosives, cannot be measured by pitch like the sounds of the piano or flute. Consequently, I used the sound-spectrographic method to determine qualitative as well as quantitative characteristics of the sounds of bendre. In collaboration with specialists of sound analysis, I visualized the sounds of the bendre, but before I begin this analysis, I must quickly review the sound life of the peoples of this West African savannah, in order to place the drum language in its proper context.

Language in Sounds; Sounds in Language.

The transmission systems of language by means of sound instruments are also found in South East Asia, Oceania, and parts of Middle and South America, but they are particularly remarkable in Sub-Saharan Africa, where tonal languages are predominant. It must be noted that the Fulani peoples in West Africa, whose languages are not tonal, do not have transmission systems utilizing sound instruments.

An important characteristic of sound instrumental language is its capacity to transmit a verbal message far more widely and distantly than can the human voice. In a noiseless savannah, especially late at night or early in the morning when the cooled air reaches a high density, drum sounds can easily reach as far as 10 kilometers. By repeating relays, a drum message can reach a very distant receiver.

If not an encoded sign, in this kind of transmission of messages, based on the prosodic or suprasegmental features of a verbal sentence, the segmental features which are of
fundamental importance in ordinary verbal communication are eliminated. Consequently, this kind of instrumental communication inevitably involves incomprehensibility, which occasionally has a positive significance. For instance, take a solemn performance of a Mossi dynastic history by means of the grave sounds of a bendre at a ceremonial occasion, which does not usually accompany a vocal interpretation. Most of the audience will not be able to understand in detail what is being diffused by the drum sounds; nevertheless, this kind of incomprehensibility has its own significance, giving to this sound performance an authoritative and mysterious character. In contrast, in the case of the whistle language for mutual utilitarian communication in the bush well developed among the Kasena (Burkina Faso and Ghana), in which a small wooden whistle (nasena) with three holes is used, the whistler adds additional redundant words or sounds in order to reduce incomprehensibility or misunderstanding.

On the other hand, using a pair of a large drum (low tones) and a small drum (high tones), or employing a slit gong, also widely used in many societies of West Africa, an encrypted secret message can be sent very far by means of relaying. Before examining the different sounds of the Mossi bendre, however, let us look at the native concepts concerning the sound categories of a bendre.

A Mossi bendre player, also called bendre as previously mentioned, distinguishes two kinds of bendre sounds: koé raaga (= men’s voice) and koé yàanga (= mature women’s voice). The former is hard, dry and shrill, while the latter is blunt, resonant and subdued. Koé raaga is in principle mainly produced by the right hand (in the case of a left-handed person, the left hand) by grazing hard the peripheral part of the bendre’s surface, or tapping hard on the tuning paste, as if to stop the vibration, or by simultaneously lightly posing the fingertips of the left hand on the surface in order to diminish the vibration of the surface. Koé yàanga can be produced by either the right or left hand, by tapping the outer edge of the tuning paste without restraint.

In principle, tap with the right hand as if to ask, and reply with the left hand, that is the lesson of the master bendre.

**Analytical Classification of the Bendre Sounds**

Making reference to the native binary classification of bendre sounds into koé raaga and koé yàanga, and based on the results of sound-spectrographic analysis of all the bendre sounds of the 917 phrases used for recitation up to the 30th Tànkudgo naaba Tìgre, along with many other recording data of the bendre sounds in the Tenkodogo region, I have made the following analytical classification of bendre sounds:

Two subtypes of koé yàanga: Y1 and Y2
Four subtypes of koé raaga: R1, R2, R3, R4

The characteristics of these six subtypes are as follows:
Y1: The component around 200 hertz (Hz) is fairly large and remarkable; at the same time, around 500 Hz a subsidiary component is recognized.

Y2: The component under 200 Hz is large but weak: different from Y1, around 500 Hz, the component is not recognized. It is possible that Y2 is a weakened form of Y1.

R1: The component around 400 Hz is particularly remarkable, with a secondary remarkable component around 150 Hz, and around 250 Hz a vague component is recognizable.

R2: On the contrary, the component around 250 Hz is very strong, with a subsidiary, weak component at its upper and lower parts.

R3: Recognized accompanying Y1, perhaps to stop Y1 abruptly, by pushing hard on the disk of tuning paste with the fingertips of the right hand.

R4: Around 700 Hz, a remarkable component is recognized.

Regarding the sounds classified under Y, perhaps the distinction between Y1 and Y2 may not be of basic importance. But as for the sounds classified as R, together with the experiments described below, there are still several points that need to be clarified.

To describe the qualitative as well as the quantitative characteristics of the sounds of the bendre, making use of the cross-over between linguistic sounds and musical sounds found both in African and Japanese languages, it can be useful to employ "kuchishōga" (口唱歌), a method to describe Japanese traditional music based on the ideophonic character of phonemes of the Japanese language. For instance, R1 can be described as: chi, chin, chinn; R2 tsu, tsun, tsūn; R3 ta: Y1 te, ten, teen: Y2 to, ton, tōn. Thus, the bendre sounds for the frequently repeated moore linguistic phrase "tēng ne a tēn-kugri" (the earth and its holy stone) can be ideophonically expressed by "kuchishōga" as "tsun, chin, ten, chin-tsu, tōn".

Experiments with Artificially Modified Drum Sounds

In order to determine what elements of the sounds of bendre are key to deciphering meanings, I asked several experienced bendre players to tell me the meanings, using a cassette tape prepared while I was in Japan that contained artificially modified real bendre sounds, or completely synthesizer-composed phrases made on the basis of oscillographic and sound-spectrographic analysis of a real bendre performance. The bendre performance of artificially composed sounds was entirely rejected by the living Mossi bendre players. But, depending on the cognition of key sounds, responses were variable regarding the recorded real performance with modifications.

Local differences of the drum language are remarkable. In the Tenkodogo region, there is a repeated phrase before citing the name of the next king: Ti wend nā taas yiúmdé (God make the arrival of a new year [a prayer]). Listening to the recorded sound of the bendre, a well-trained bendre of Ouagadogou, some 200 kilometers northwest from Tenkodogo,

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2 I have published many studies (see, for example, Kawada 1986, 1988a, 1988b, 1998a, 1998b) on the sound symbolism of language and instrumental sounds, especially in Japanese and Mossi cultures.
could not understand the meaning. But on my insistence, he gave me his interpretation "(m) rãt n pius rimbiigá " (I want to worship the king's son), which has the same pattern of tones and a similar content. I then asked him to beat "Tī wénd na taas yīıumdē" using his own bendre, without telling him that this was the phrase that he had just listened to in the drum language of Tenkodogo. He tapped a phrase in which the tonal pattern was completely different from that of Tenkodogo. If I apply the Japanese "kuchishōga" mentioned above, what he tapped was "ton, chin, tsuton, tsun, tetōn, chin"; so this tonal sequence is quite different from that of Tenkodogo "tsu, tsun, ton, chin, ten, tsutōn". The former is more accurate than the stylized tonal sequence of Tenkodogo.

In spite of slight dialectal differences in moore, an inhabitant of Ouagadougou can communicate with an inhabitant of Tenkodogo without difficulty, but in the drum language of the bendre, they cannot communicate each other.

**Sound Blazon**

Let us try to consider in a more generalized manner this custom of reciting long proverbial names of dynastic ancestors by means of drum sounds as the original "text", occasionally interpreted in language, unique even in the sound cultures of praising that are well-elaborated in Africa.

This custom is a part of language communication by means of sound instruments, mainly whistles and drums, based in principle on more or less conventionalized reproduction of the prosodic features — pitch, stress and duration — of a language message in which, consequently, segmental features of the language message are eliminated. As we have seen, we cannot determine the pitch of drum sounds in the strict sense, but we can distinguish drum sounds by their tone, as acute and grave. Messages emitted by these sound instruments are characterized by the rapidity of their transmission and the distance of their reach, generally far greater than those of the human voice. At the same time, the communication, the means of which are transferred from the human voice to instrumental sounds, assumes a more or less esoteric character, the contents of a message being difficult to understand by the non-initiated or by the peoples of other languages.

If we take into consideration verbal communications as mediated by sound instruments as practiced in West Africa, we can set the following criteria:

1. The sender of the message can be anyone or a predetermined person.
2. The message to be sent is free or fixed beforehand.
3. Transmission of the message is bilateral or unilateral.

The case of the bendre corresponds to the second item of all of these three criteria.

In Burkina Faso the whistle language of Kasena always falls into the first category. The small wooden "nasena" whistle with three holes — its size is variable but always handy, around 12 centimeters, and it is suspended from the neck by a string — is ordinarily used among Kasena for mutual communication among individuals, hunters or shepherds in
particular, separated far in the bush. To send a message, the sender makes whistle sounds that imitate the tones in Kasena. In order to diminish the ambiguity of a message, or to make the message more comprehensible, often the sender adds some redundant words. Thus, the sender freely composes a message, which is fundamentally private in character. First, the whistler calls the receiver. Contents of the whistled message are determined by circumstances. One whistles a message such as “I saw elephants”, “bring me water”, “didn’t you see my lost sheep?” and so on. To use this kind of whistle, no special training is necessary. With a bit of practice, anyone can use it. So this type of communication is open to everybody and is essentially reciprocal.

Nevertheless, we must note that the whistle language of Kasena may occasionally be used to praise a person in public, like the Mossi drum language does with koob-yīure a name for farm work) to encourage an ordinary person at farming. It is possible that this custom was introduced into Kasena society under Mossi influence, but this cannot be verified. The Mossi koob-yīure, also named zab-yīure a name for a battle), like a name taken by a monarch at his enthronement, can be conceived, not obligatorily, by an individual person when he comes of age, to bestow in a proverbial style a name upon oneself other than one’s given birth name. It generally has an ostentatious meaning, for example, “If you boil a stone, you get only steam”, or “Small ants, you should give up carrying a big bone”.

In the case of a Mossi monarch, of the many zab-yīya (plural of zab-yīure) dedicated to him at his enthronement, a key word becomes the usual appellation used during his lifetime as well as after his death. For instance, in the Wagdgo (Ouagadougou) dynasty, two past kings, the 24th and 35th, are called Naab’a Saaga rain). However, the word saaga has an opposite meaning in the context of the two original zab-yīya when in full sentences. In the case of the 24th king, the full sentence is “Saag niid lagem koabga kōn pek wobgo” (A hundred assembled rains cannot wash away the elephant), so the metaphor of the elephant has a positive meaning of greatness and calm, but that of rain is weak and negative. On the contrary, in the case of the 35th king, “Saag niid, bēgō na man zōese la waōba” (The rain falls, and fertile mud gives the blessing to the blind and to the leprous), the rain brings a blessing to the unfortunate.

Thus, eulogies to the reigning dynasty, performed by means of the solemn sounds of the bendre, act as sound blazons, also in the sense of the incorporation of subjugated dynasties’ insignia to enlarge the entity of the blazon of the dominating dynasty (the idea of “sound blazon” was first formulated in Kawada 1983). Like composite blazons in Europe that may include many coats of arms of subjugated chieftains, the sound blazon of the present dynasty of Tānkudgo, with the names of 37 chiefs, consists of several incorporated elements from preceding local dynasties. This fact appeared only when I conducted detailed field research in the south of present Tenkodogo city (Kawada 1993a, 1993b) and as far as Gambaaga in the Mamprussi chieftom of Northern Ghana, the legendary place of origin of the Mossi dynasties (Kawada 2000a). A detailed analysis of the structure of the dynastic
history presented by drum sounds reveals this process (see Table 1, Table 2).

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<td>28</td>
<td>Tigre</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List of abridged indications:
GP = great paragraph; LR = locality of residence of the chief; PP = small paragraph; NR = name of the chief; NP = name of father; NM = name of mother; EV = occurrences; PP = number of phrases in a small paragraph; GP = number of phrases in a great paragraph

Table 1: The Structure of the Drum History of Tānkūdgo (Source: Kawada 1993a: 1096)
Notes on the Drum Language of the Ancient Mossi Kingdoms (Burkina Faso)

Table 2: Geography and Chronology of Tánkudgo Dynasty (Source: Kawada 1993a: 1097)

A: Geography
The drawing indicates the residence of chief.
The arrow indicates the direction of transfer.
1: Püsga (southern Burkina Faso); Gãmbaaga (northern Ghana)
2: Kinzim
3: Lalgê (southern Burkina Faso)

B: Chronology (cf. Table 1)
III Zend-Goode
IV Moaaga and Tînoăngê still exist as
independent chieftaincies, but they are
cited in Tánkudgo history.
Sounds and Writing in Historical Representations

Using a more generalized perspective, I would now like to compare the mediums of historical representations. From an analysis comparing drumming with the oral recitation of the same historical tradition, it has been confirmed that the drum sounds are the more stable and unvarying of the two. This can be understood by recalling two facts. Firstly, the chain reflex of the hands is more stable than is verbal memory. Secondly, the distinctive elements for sound communication in the drum language are far less numerous than those used orally. Of course, this fact is paired with greater ambiguity in the former.

Thus, we can qualify the Mossi drum language as a sort of “sound writing” from the viewpoint of two characteristics of writing as compared with the orality of verbal communication. We find (1) a greater capacity to transmit a message through space and across time by the transmission from generation to generation among the court drummers; and (2) the ability to refer repeatedly to the same message. The drum language also manifests four characteristics opposite to those of writing. These are (1) the drum language eliminates the segmental features of spoken language, whereas writing does not reproduce suprasegmentals; (2) writing, annihilating time, fixes the message in a two-dimensional visual world, which enables the receiver to have an active intellectual and individualized access to the message, whereas the drum language transmits the message in a one-dimensional acoustic world, which constrains the receiver to passive, emotive and collective reception of the message; (3) writing enables one to stop and reflect as one pleases in both sending and receiving a message, which is essential to deepen or to develop the content of the message, whereas in the case of drum language, this intellectual reflection is not possible; and (4) writing also enables communication beyond the dialectal differences of a language, while the drum language, due to differences in coding particular to different dynasties of different regions, makes mutual understanding impossible—though the inhabitants of these regions can communicate easily with each other in spite of some dialectal differences since the same Mossi language serves as the basis of the drum language. In this sense, I would like to qualify the drum language as consisting of “a language within a language”. It is “sound writing”, but it is “writing in reverse”.

Thus placing the drum language between writing and the voice as a means of verbal communication, we can understand that the opposition between the two is not absolute. Among vocal representations of the past, we can recognize different levels which are nearer to the written text based on their fixedness and durability, the extreme of which is that of the drum language. In societies where the use of writing is popular, there are always historical narratives of “epic” orientation, performed vocally, whereas in the societies without writing, like traditional sub-Saharan African societies, there are “chronicle”-oriented historical representations, like the above-mentioned Mossi royal genealogy.
Eliminating the absolute distinction between voice and writing, I would like to introduce the concept of “marking” in place of “writing,” which embraces only graphic signs. In Japanese the verb “kaku” (書き), or to write, means also to “carve”, as does the corresponding Greek verb “grapho”. The association of these two meanings is quite natural, because in its origin, to write scripts was to carve visual signs onto clay plates in ancient West Asia, and on tortoise carapaces or animal bones in ancient East Asia. In Japanese, “shirusu” (記す), or to “mark” in English, means “to make something distinguished” or “to illuminate something”, and at the same time “to record”. The act to “shirusu” or to mark can be done either by means of graphic, visual signs, or by means of sound-based, acoustic signs. In sub-Saharan African societies, the so-called “griots”, traditional epic singers of Mande origine by their voice, as well as Mossi drummers benda, praise or “mark” loudly in public the name of a great person and his exploits by their drum sounds. If griots or benda are treating persons and deeds of the past, they “mark” or “illuminate” by sounds the historical memory. And their act of “marking” by voice or drum sounds is transmitted from generation to generation within the group of griots or drummers, as I have shown in the preceding arguments.

Thus eliminating the absolute boundary between voice and writing, as well as the false dichotomy of societies with history because they have writing and societies without history because they have no writing, we may consider “epic”- and “chronicle”-oriented representations of the past as two strata of historical representation, interpenetrating each other even within a given society. Thus I would like to give to oral history its legitimate place in relation to written history, and to prepare the way to universalize the concept of “history”.

From the point of view of “sound culture”, or the integrated whole of all sound communication, vocal or instrumental, conceived within its socio-cultural context, the geographical variation of sound instruments’ distribution in the interior parts of West Africa becomes particularly interesting. For example, among the Mande various types of large cordophones with huge resonance cases of calabash and many strings (up to twenty-one), classified as harp-lutes by musicologists, like kora, donzongoni or simbi, or small four stringed pluck lutes, like ngori, are widely used to accompany the vocal performance of the epic by the “so-called” griots of Mande origine. These plucked string instruments produce fairly great volume and are suitable to provide rhythmic vigor to vocal recitations, as well as, by their occasional long interlude, to increase the musical attractiveness of epic performances.

In striking contrast to this aspect of the Mande sound culture, the plucked string instruments of the Hausa are extremely poor. At most, we can cite the group of garaya, a two-stringed lute with a small wooden body-resonator. The googe is a single-stringed bowed lute producing little volume and with no rhythmic sound, which must have been introduced from North Africa sometime after the advance of the Ottoman Empire to the
eastern part of Maghreb in the 16th century. It is widely used, particularly to evoke the spirit, *bori*, for the possession cult.

There are also two elaborated aerophones including the *kakaki*, an extremely long, brass-made trumpet, and the *alghaita*, a double-reed wooden pipe, also of North African origin, as well as various hour-glass drums with tuning thongs. However, these instruments are not designated to accompany vocal recitation or chants but instead are respectively designated in hierarchical order to accompany the coming out of the king and other high-ranking officials without verbal praising.

Performers in both societies use the techniques of transferring verbal messages by means of certain instrumental sounds, employing drums, whistles or a sort of stamping tube made from calabash. But this is not done in an elaborated and systematic way to recite a long dynastic history, as in Mossi kingdoms. Moreover, it is notable that among the Mossi neither large harp-lutes of the Mande type nor refined aerophones of Hausa type are found. Nevertheless in both societies the sound culture is closely related to a centralized political power that needs “history” and its vocal presentation in public in order to legitimatize its domination.

We should not try to explain these facts by simple cause-and-effect. Yet it is worth noting that among the Mande the use of Arabic letters to transcribe Mande historical oral traditions is absent, even though the penetration of Islamic civilization, from the 8th century, is older than among the Hausa. Was the fact the development of the art of vocal performance accompanied by large plucked cordophones a cause or an effect, or at least one of the conditions for the absence of writing? On the other hand, though their language does have certain affinities with Arabic, the Hausa tended to attach importance to writing. Formed by the later, and influenced by these two, the Mossi kingdom has elaborated its drum language system as a “sound writing” but “in reverse”, as I qualified it. (Kawada 2000b)

### Concluding Remarks

After approximately forty years of research, including sound spectrographic analysis and experimental tests with *benda*, accompanied by numerous interviews as well as personal training under Mossi masters of *bendre*, I can draw the following hypothesis: “For a well-trained *bendre*, a series of distinct verbal messages are reproduced, not vocally through the mouth, but by drum sounds produced by means of touching the fingertips on different points on the surface of the drum *bendre*.”

The connection between fingertips and the part of the brain in charge of language is a neurological reality. It is evidenced in various customs, for example, braille, the blind touch used on the key board of writing machines, and Ms. Helen Keller’s famous demonstration of the learning process of language through the sensation of fingertips. A set of simultaneous and consecutive reflexes of the human body, such as riding a bicycle,
swimming in a set manner, or playing a certain tune on the piano, may seem difficult at first, but once acquired can be executed quasi-automatically, even after fairly long intervals. A Mossi *bendre* drummer taps a distinct chain of ancestral monarchs' zab-yiyya or battle names by means of this reflex of the human body, using a gourd drum as material medium. This can be equated, as mentioned above, with the act of writing and reading and can be expressed using the Japanese verb "*shirusu*" which means "to mark." We should factor in the physical skill of the *bendre* when discussing the so-called "primitiveness" and "civilization" of human cultures. Research of the *bendre* is also important as a means to help overcome such naïve and false dichotomies.

This kind of physical skill is fundamental in learning to write the 2,000 characters--including such characters as 鬱 (depression), 戒 (capping) or 鱟 (mountain base)--that are considered by the Japanese Government as indispensable in the everyday life of the Japanese. For the Chinese, especially for the Chinese in Taiwan, the number of characters is far greater and include more complicated ones such as 鹽 (salt) or 龜 (turtle). How can Japanese and Chinese learn to write these characters? For each of these "*kanji*" (漢字) characters of ancient Chinese origin, there is a set stroke order when writing. In other words, the synchronic image presupposes a diachronic process, reducible to a certain number of principles. A Japanese person who forgets a complicated "*kanji*" tries to recall it by writing it with his forefinger on the palm of the other hand. Thus, we can say that a "*kanji*", a synchronic figure, presupposes a diachronic process.

This fact, together with the concept that we proposed above using "to mark" ("*shirusu*") in place of "to write", may open a new perspective for re-conceptualizing the entity of human cultures: the case of *bendre* in the acoustic realm, and that of "*kanji*" in the visual sphere. Needless to say, both concepts are directly connected to the above-mentioned "set of simultaneous and consecutive reflexes of the human body". In a wider sense, we must rethink the concept of "culture" within the context of "the techniques of the body", the importance of which I have underlined elsewhere (Kawada 1988c, 1988d, 1990, 1991, 2001). This point of view, together with the recognition of other sensorimotor systems, may bring us to a quite different perspective on human cultures (Kawada 2011).

Recently, through the rapid advance of schooling, especially in Ouagadougou, the contemporary capital of Burkina Faso as well as the most powerful ancient Mossi kingdom, young future successors of *bendre* clans do not want to be trained as future *benda*. Thus, this precious cultural heritage is in peril of disappearing. I have tried in vain to encourage local intellectuals to apply for the *bendre* performance to be recognized as an intangible cultural heritage of UNESCO. The necessary application forms are extremely complicated and require enormous effort, and official Burkina Faso governmental recognition is also needed. I have also been in close contact with the UNESCO offices in Paris. One of the important conditions to be recognized as an intangible cultural heritage is that the performing art in question has a living function in the society. However, this point is hard to demonstrate in our case. And, unfortunately, even if the drum-language of the ancient
Mossi kingdoms were to be recognized by UNESCO as a precious intangible cultural heritage, there is no guarantee that it could be preserved considering the rapid advance of schooling in Ouagadougou and in other ancient Mossi kingdoms.

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