

# LA MÚSICA ENTRE ÁFRICA Y AMÉRICA

A MÚSICA ENTRE ÁFRICA E AMÉRICA  
MUSIC BETWEEN AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS

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FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA TO AMERICAS,  
THE DRUM AS A "CULTURAL BEING" FOR A "MUSICAL WORD"

THE CASE OF THE CONGOS, OF CAMEROON AND FRENCH GUIANA

**Prelude**

The value and the sense of music in Sub-Saharan Africa as in the Americas do not need to be demonstrated anymore. Beyond a simple art of sounds, used to entertain or to cover a large number of manifestations, music is there a phenomenon with a strong symbolic value that is rich in representations. It participates and rules the very essence of the life of peoples. Its discourse and the underlying languages are acquired through the sung word as well as through the instruments, including the drum, that plays an undeniable role in the quite varied modes of communication that result from it. Its corporeal aesthetic, its playing techniques and its sounds, its place inside a musical group and the role that it plays inside the societies about which I am writing here give it also an aura that raises it to the rank of a "cultural being". It is a being endowed with a word, a musical speech, the essence and the meaning of which often go beyond the simple technical sphere and even the musical aesthetic.

The musical performance, as the repertoires, the genres, the underlying styles, and the instruments that make concrete its sound reality, are generally linked with quite specific concepts and symbols. These last ones are linked to ideologies with a physical and metaphysical essence, with strong interpenetrations.

So, what is the meaning given to music in Sub-Saharan Africa, and in the Americas? What is in the end the musical word? Are there specific rules and processes that would organize it? Why, in these territories, is the drum considered also as a "cultural being"? What is the nature of this

being? What language and what mode of expression does it use? When, why and how does it express itself? The questions about these problems are numerous. To try getting the meaning and to understand the sense of the musical word, but also the one of the drum as a “cultural being” in Sub-Saharan Africa and Americas, I will approach only some cases. They come from the use of drums in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the Republic of Congo, in Cameroon and in Guiana, cultures of which the musical art is more familiar to me.

### **Music?**

If music is indeed the art of organised sounds through an ensemble of specific codes to be so appreciated in a community or a given society, it still remains a complex phenomenon. This total social fact, to borrow the expression of Marcel Mauss (1950, 143-279), gathers an ensemble of values that, through its conceivers, make of it in particular the reflection of an identity, of a way of living and of a certain view of the world and all that it implies.

Beyond its technical concretisation, the ensemble of the sound schemes or events, but also of silences that make music, give birth to a rather peculiar way of thinking. It is adapted and moves through a system of correspondences and a global form, that system implying several musical and extra-musical components. These ones follow a well appropriated ordering that fits with the musical criteria adopted by the concerned community. Here, an individual or a group of individuals, keep, at the same time, registers of special games, and the sound parameters that are felt necessary to express their musical art. According to the place and the people who practice this art, it follows therefore multiple meanings and functions of music.

So, what is the meaning given to music in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the Americas, among the Creole and Bushinenge cultures of Guiana about which I am writing?

### **Nature and meaning of African musical thought**

The answer to the question of knowing what is music in African thought is fundamentally multiple. Conceived as a complex phenomenon

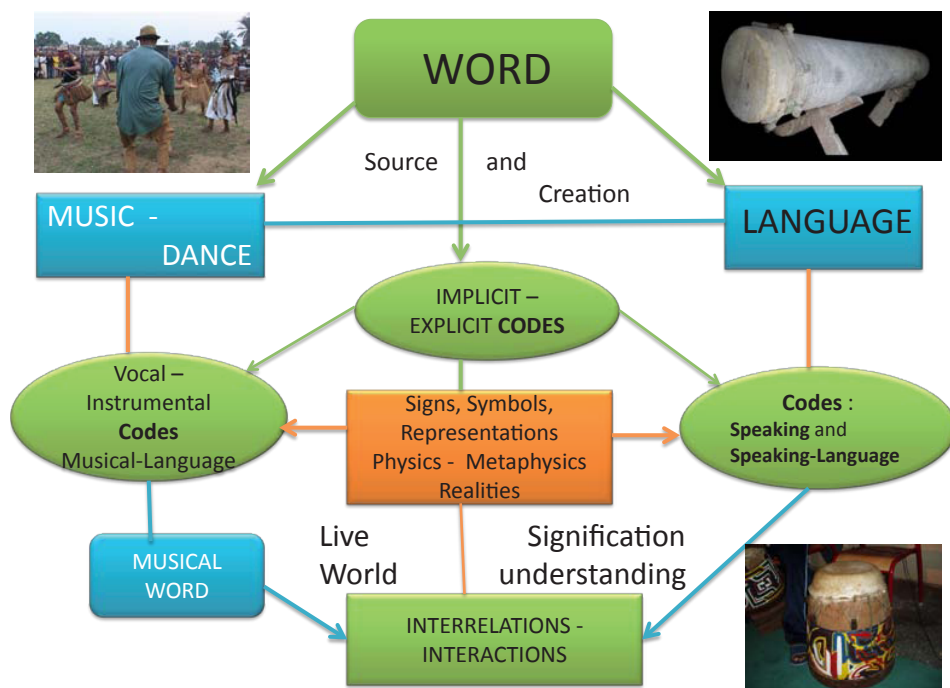
with varied strata, the art of sound includes here many factors of human life that form a whole that cannot be separated from social life. So, these existential factors cannot be resumed in a few words about acoustics. Indeed, beyond the technical or even aesthetical considerations and techniques, the Sub-Saharan traditionalists think about music as a culture of conception and perception of the being and of the world. It is also for them a culture of communication and of experimentation of sounds as an energizing flow that is necessary to the physical and metaphysical life of the individual. That is why, among them, the definition of music generally needs a group of words, and sometimes only one word, that offer several coherent possibilities of interpretation; that always expresses a choice between varied concepts, but also between several references and several values of use and appreciation.

As a corollary, verbs and a substantive like “let’s go dance the drums”, for instance, will design a plain entertainment through the music of the drum. Other expressions are used in association with the verbs to do, to say, to give, to recite, to speak about such or such activity or action, to mean the musical concept that is linked to it. And, when this definition is given through a simple word, this one is often translated by “to sing” or “to dance”, singing or dancing then signifying music. It is in such a way that in Black Africa a same word or a same expression may design, at the same time, music and dance as well as rhythm, repertory, style, instrument, performance and other underlying parameters, this in association with entertainment, a ceremony or a ritual; in short, with a specific musical practice where occurs a coherent whole interaction and a flow of mutual – ritual or ordinary – alliances, to translate, among other things, a pleasure, a grief, a joy, a prayer, praises, or to accompany entertainment, a ceremony, a ritual, a moment of solitude.

Through this, music stays adapted to all kinds of contexts, circumstances and situations. The ways of expression that are used (rhythms, sound scales, timbres, instruments, mode of playing and still other means) become then real codes. Through these codes, music can reassert at the same time the truth and the presence of myths in daily life. This is even a narrative of life, a place for training and transmission of all kinds of teachings. The “words” of the human voice or of a musical instrument then give life to resulting music; that becomes a “musical word”, and the instrument a “cultural being”.

## The musical word: nature, rules and process of concretisation

Diagram 1 – Language and music's word: Concept synthesis



Through the definition of African musical thought, I just noted the singular way of conceiving and organising the musical sound. It is realised through an ensemble of specific codes, the considerations of which go beyond the only physical nature of its sound material. The musical works that are so produced reflect at the same time a specific identity and a vision of the world or a typical mode of communication. This conception of the art of sound is created through a great variety of sound idioms and systems, with a coherent ensemble of significations and functions (either ritual or not), as well as through what they involve.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Technique and aesthetics, like style, language and underlying discourse, ask, of course, for appropriated ways of expression, even if, in a general way, the deep knowledge of musical reality stays anyway often very difficult to explore in an objective way.

So, here, sound, more than the note of written music, is an essential factor of high importance, and the notion of “musical sound” stays a very large concept. This last one involves, beyond acoustical properties, the functionality of a sound in its complexity and its variability. From this come at the same time a language and what I call the “musical word”.

This double reality, of language and concept, cannot be better defined that by understanding all its multi-factor nature, by clarifying at first the basic principles that rule word, music linked with the musical instrument, three factors that are overlapped at different levels of realisation of the linguistic and musical languages through the medium of sound.

In the restricted frame of this article, I will keep to the essence. First, I note that in Sub-Saharan Africa as in other parts of the world, mostly of oral tradition, the Word is an active principle and a source of creation, in the large meaning of the term. This principle creates and deploys life and various forms of communication; it is the mover of science and knowledge too. It offers an exceptional dimension of analogies, correspondences and intimate reciprocities that can be expressed in the way of varied words and actions, including the linguistic and musical ones.

Thanks to the word, the meaning of the facts is given through specific languages that, in Africa, are numerous. In their majority, they are tonal languages, that is to say, that the meaning of their words varies, in principle, according to the tone and even according to the tonal accent attributed to each syllable. So every phrase of the spoken speech becomes the sketch of a melody, up to the point when the transition from the spoken language to singing may seem almost imperceptible. Otherwise, in African social life, the speech of musical instrument is closely linked with the spoken word and the sung word.

As a rule, the ways of talking these languages have effectively an influence, in a very direct way, on vocal and instrumental music that are practiced, their codes allow ordinary events, ceremonies (be they lay or initiatory) or rituals to be celebrated. They are also used to evoke cosmogonies, myths and legends, to support the effort of work, to give a rhythm to dance or to embellish entertainment. In short, these codes are used to embody the art of living through music and to manifest the Word

through a “musical word”. The spoken word is then used as a fundamental help for the coded sung and instrumental expressions, and the musical sound materials of their structuring become, at the same time, semantic elements. These musical codes are associated with extra-musical factors (invocation of a deity, praise to a person, evocation of a social status, announcement of an important moment or event, and others as well).

What are then the specific rules and processes that guide the organisation of the “musical word”?

To answer this question, it is important to underline once more that the functioning of the musical word has as a foundation a particular organisation of the musical codes that are often put in association with the language codes. Coming to this subject, one will recall that African traditional music instruments are generally conceived and tuned in the tone of the language or the dialect of their conceivers, and played in a phonetic-tonal way. So, the melodies or the rhythms they produce are often resulting at the same time of the metric, the accents, the tonality and other parameters of the concerned language.

Like masks, these musical codes represent messages, and by extrapolation, human, animal and spiritual beings, at the same time as they evoke explicitly or implicitly their characters.

To do so, and according to the message to transmit, the musical codes that are used are numerous and varied, for instance, a sound, a sound colour, a rhythm, a tempo, a scale, a melody, a style formula or a peculiar technique, and even a characteristic musical genre and their different orderings.

One will remark also that among these codes, sound colour is one of the important sound parameters of the musical system that is ruled by the “musical word”. Beyond its aesthetic beauty, it is used as a representation and a symbol of identification, for instance of the “voice” and the “word” of a mythical animal or an evocation of every other figured “word”. That is why, in the instrumental field, all kinds of materials that offer complex sound colours are looked after. The buzzing, the chirping, and other kazoo like, nasal, deafened sounds that come from them, allow the



imitation of different noises or sounds of Nature with which Man often communicates. So, these sounds may evoke circumstances and situations or figure a quite specific voice, illustrating, for instance, the power of a person, an ancestor, a deity, an animal.

Incidentally, a name is often given to every sound of the instrumental sound scale. The so implied sound materials acquire then the value of a reference, that is linked for instance to the identity of a social system, of a particular being, a ritual or a ceremony, a dance, a typical musical genre or style. They can be also a form of formula that would be a precise melodic or rhythmic formula, to design a technical change of the musical discourse or of scenic events, to guide the steps of the dancer and other specific variations (linked to the choreography or the instrumental playing), to indicate the end of a piece. The examples are numerous and very varied.

In their technical organization, a structuring of a musical scale may be transposed in a subdivision of notes of which the values of sound colours, of accents or pulsations, of amplitude, of intensity and even of register will be put forward. So the notes will be played more or less loudly, in the low or high register, executed in a “soft or hard” way, in terms of dynamic. They can be amplified or not and the Dogon or the Fulani, for instance, call that “big or thin sonorities (respectively *mi po* and *mi usi*; *mawni holo* and *sevi holo*, in dogon and in fulani [languages])<sup>2</sup>”. Here the relation of the high and low register figures the male-female one.

On the vertical level, the combinations or the modification of the superposed sounds send back to the harmony and the relationship of the symbolic oppositions: male-female that come from it and are realised through a meticulous “proportioning” of “male” and “female” notes. There are some other technical expressions that I don’t mention here.

In this process, the living beauty of sounds that the musical instruments produce cannot be only translated by technical principles and formal

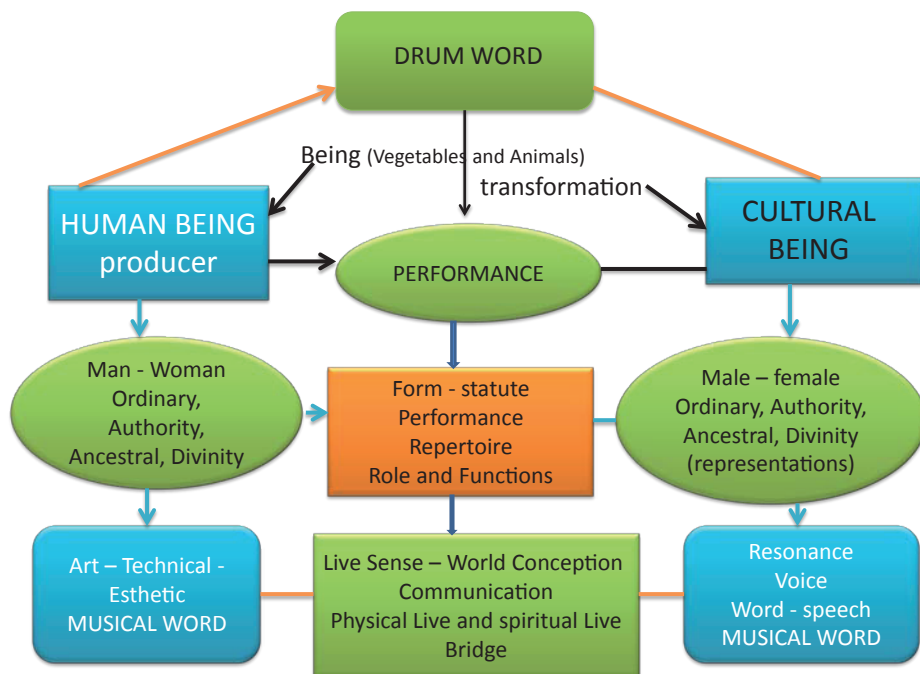
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2 Germaine Calame-Griaule et Blaise Calame, *Introduction à l'étude de la musique africaine*, *La Revue Musicale*, p 14. As It comes to the male-female principle in African music, read as well Sowande Fela, “Le rôle de la musique dans la société africaine traditionnelle” in *La musique africaine. Réunion de Yaoundé (Cameroun)* 23-27 février 1970, pp. 59-68, especially pp. 59-60.

compositional structure, even taking into account the thoughts and feelings of the musician. These sounds should also suggest the echo of the multiple sounds of the natural environment from which were drawn the materials that have been used in the manufacture of instruments. These sounds represent and transmit an invisible energy. They convey also the spiritual and physical forces that are so symbolized. In fact, the instruments that produce these sounds become almost “beings” of their own, the ones that I called “cultural beings”. It is the case of the drum.

### From Africa to the Americas: the drum as a “cultural being”

Diagram 2 – Drum word’s: Concept synthesis



In Sub-Saharan musical cultures, as in many of the American ones, the meaning of a musical instrument as well as its productions constitute a rather original factor of an atypical social phenomenon according to which musical instruments are often assimilated to deities, to symbolic or mythological animals, to individuals – male or female –, being at the same

time associated to different social classes, and with them, to specific ways of expressing oneself. The very shapes of these instruments (zoomorphic and anthropomorphic, especially widespread in Africa) or the images and symbols that wear, on their body, some of these instruments that do not have these human or animal look illustrate the importance that has that phenomenon in the cultures I am dealing with here.

In the ritual field, a musical instrument or even an orchestral group are often symbolised by “beings”: they may be physical (as a king or a hero) or spiritual (an ancestor or a deity) or also by a social organisation (institution, family, clan, community). They may even be linked to ritual or secret organisations.

So, some instruments will represent or have the rank of a deity, an ancestral spirit, of authority, of the father, of the mother, of the uncle, of the slave, of the male or the female, or will identify such a community, such a musical style... Every concerned instrument will represent, by itself, a unique and typical “being” that owns, in consequence, its “voice”, the value of which is linked with its rank. Thus, in the frame of the musical performance, the disposition of the instruments on stage will take place according to the respect of the rules that determine the social rank or the status they represent, but also the nature and the object of the given musical performance. The instruments that are devoted to rituals and solemnities are even welcomed as real living subjects, this means, with all the honours and the rituals that would be reserved to the person they represent. It is even possible to build for them a house in the middle of the village or in the middle of Nature.

In this system where the musical instruments which are used are directly linked to the social and cultural facts of each tradition, the drum occupies a central position. In terms of communication, the power of its sounds and the possibilities of coding the drummed messages it offers, are very appreciated to emit or to translate diverse forms of information.

This is why, among other reasons, the craft of the African traditional instrument maker is not only to make musical instruments as plain objects of sound production, but also and mostly to “give them a voice” as for human beings in particular, to enable them to produce an articulated

language, that nevertheless will be specific to the instrument in question. It is a personalised voice which, as it has been indicated before, makes of every implicated instrument a “cultural being”. It is a “being” which, in a general way, “speaks” not only either by rubbing or scraping its body, or by bowing its strings, or by blowing in its holes, or also by clapping of hands or by hitting drumsticks on its body, like for drums.

In addition, as we have seen before, the material itself used for the instrumental making comes from materials that, initially, are treated by African traditionalists as “living beings” (vegetal, animal or mineral). So, the musical instrument is only a metamorphosis of these beings of Nature in an object of culture through which some coded messages will pass, living with the strength of sounds. These messages are sent to the humans, to the spiritual beings and even to the “beings” of Nature, thanks to the intermediary of rituals and other specific ceremonies.

It is at this stage that an African drum, be it Creole or Bushinenge, is transformed, being at the same time assimilated to a new “living being”, this “cultural being” to whom is available a sound articulation near to the spoken word.

Then what link can be made between the “musical word” and the musical instrument as a “cultural being” in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the Americas, especially in French Guiana, among the Creoles and the Bushinenges?

### **Variation on the musical word in Sub-Saharan Africa and in French Guiana: a reading through examples of the Congolese, Cameroonian, Creole and Bushinenge musical cultures**

Before clarifying this subject in the indicated cultural contexts, it is important to describe some general elements that essentially describe the Creole and Bushinenge musical practices in French Guiana, in fact the only territory of France and of the European Union on the South American continent.

At the origin, the Creoles were members of the black population that were living with their masters in the plantations during the time of slavery.

This community then enlarged with mulattos, populations coming from the mixing of Whites and Blacks, but also, later, of other cross-breedings (like the mixing of Amerindian and Blacks). Their culture was cross-bred as well, with nevertheless a pre-eminence of European and African ancestry. The Bushinenge of Guiana form the community of African black slaves, called also “Noirs Marrons”, who had freed themselves since the eighteenth century from the slavery yoke by running away from the plantations mostly from Dutch Guyana (the actual Suriname), to find a refuge inside the forest of French Guiana. From the Maroon mixing of the individuals with an exclusive African origin appeared several ethnic groups, like the Saramaka, the Paramaka, the Boni or the Aluku, the Djuka or Boshe, the Matawai and the Kwinti, still present in French Guiana.

Creoles and Bushinenge built themselves identities, especially the musical ones, that are the historical consequence of the itineraries followed by the two communities. However each one built its own culture by preserving and giving a new birth to some fundamental references of their origins (exclusively African for the Bushinenge; mainly African and European for the Creoles).

Neither totally African nor entirely European, these two peoples of the Amazonian basin share nevertheless a double common point on the basis of which they structured their cultural identity. These are the first African roots and the dwelling society of the slavery times. The singularity of each one comes from the fact of their different historical courses: the Bushinenge had freed themselves from the plantation society thanks to waves of successive running away, when the Creoles chose to stay there at least until the abolition of slavery and then to take the ways of French assimilation. Today they all meet in the frame of French citizenship.

As it comes to the musical culture, being at the start African slaves, they were practicing music where the drum was occupying the main place. It was the musical instrument which at the same time was accompanying songs and dances and was used as a way of communication thanks to diverse drummed codes. Then, the Creoles will practice two major categories of music. The one called “musical” was leaning on the Western orchestra and practiced under the guidance of the master. The other one, called “local”, was organized from the undeniably African rhythms of drums.

Both of these musical categories were exploited in a purely mixed Creole style, inspired by African and European dances and rhythms. According to the nature of the dances that were accompanied by drums and judged “decent” or “savage” by the masters, some of them, that had gone through deep European influences, were accepted and played in the yards of the dwellings by slaves or coloured Creole emancipated slaves. This is the case of the *gragé*, the *lérol*, the *kaladja* and the *kanmougwé*. The “savage” ones (*belay*, and mainly the *kasékò*) are dances that were rather excluded and practiced by the slaves in the plantations for fun and liberation, as far as they could, before the master had given them the famous “Negro Saturdays” when the slaves could then work off their complexes to their own will <sup>3</sup>. One can remark also that *gragé*, *lérol*, *kaladja*, *kanmougwé*, *bélya* and *kasékò* denote at the same time specific combinations of rhythms, dances, songs and their repertoires as well as the musical instruments, and even the occasions when they are performed. In connection with this, the Creole *kanmougwé* constitutes concurrently the song, the rhythm and the dance that mime the *mayouri*: all kinds of crafts and works to which the slaves were submitted. It is also a kind of great Saturnalia of the entire housing in which slaves or emancipated slaves (men and women, young and elder) took part.

These dances and work songs were accompanied by two drums of the same name, called *tanbou kanmougwé*, the male and female status of which is equivalent to the one of the *agida* drums of the Bushinenge Saramaka (used in the same way in pairs, but rather called *father* and *mother*). The Boni often use only one unity of these *agida* drums. In a general way, among Bushinenge, these drums are sacred. They are kept in special houses either in the village, or in the forest on the banks of a river. They are “cultural beings” to which are made offerings. Their “voices” are only heard during special occasions and following rigorous conditions.

In the field of the drums, Creoles and Bushinenge share some other conceptions too, the basis of which is equally African. In these two communities, beyond the use of the drums by pairs, male and female or father and mother, the ones and the others exploit also these instruments in a group of three of different sizes (small, middle and big), played with bare

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3 It is with time that the oppositions between the salon shows and the ones of the plantations, rendered by the slaves, will lessen and finally shade off.

hands or with the help of drumsticks. It is notably the case of the Creole *kasékò* drums that are identified through their way of playing: *coupé* (the soloist), *foulé* (the accompanist) and *plombé* (marks the rhythmic pulsation and supports the accompanist). Moreover, its low register enriches the sound colour and brings depth to the ensemble sound. All are played with bare hands. The Bushinenge equivalents are more identified through the class of age: *pikin doon* (small and soloist), *tun* (middle and marker of the tempo and the rhythmic pulsation), *gaan doon* (big and soloist, it is the master drum). These three traditional drums are mostly used during ritual ceremonies. Technically, the improvisation (for the soloists) is made on the model of the coded language of the African musical word. All kinds of codes are used in the same way to order the steps of the dancers, for instance. Among the Bushinenge, a drummed language is even used, as prayers and praises for the deities and the ancestors.

Moreover, among the Creoles, as among the Bushinenge, some of their drums are covered with fabrics, for specific, often religious, reasons. Like in Africa, some words that evoke the musical word are used: to caress, to make cry, to make the drum speak, and still other expressions. A word is used also to indicate at the same time the instrument, the rhythm, the repertory, the dance and the circumstances of the musical production. There are many examples of this.

As an illustration of the matter relating to the thematic on the musical word and the musical instrument considered as a “cultural being”, I have proposed at the Colloquium to see an excerpt of a video about Congolese and Cameroonian music (for Africa) and Creole and Bushinenge of French Guiana (for the Americas) where the role of the drum is quite significant. The extracts show in particular the traditional rhythm *ngoma ntela* (this two words describing also the big footed drum) of the Bakongo people; about the music of the *kalangou* talking drum (Haoussa hourglass drum of Cameroon), the Creole *kasékò* and the Bushinenge *amasa* from French Guiana.



Congo *ngoma ntela* drums



Cameroon *kalangou* drums



French Guiana Creole *kasékò* drums



From Sub-Saharan Africa to Americas, the drum as a “cultural being” for a “musical word”



Bushinenge *aluku*  
traditional drums

## To conclude

The essential of this communication about African cultures in the way to define, to conceive and to live the art of sounds, but also about the conception of the “musical word” and of the musical instrument as a “cultural being”, endowed with a voice, a language and a Word, finds applications that are adapted to the geopolitical and historical conditions of the peoples, notably the Creoles and the Bushinenge, of French Guiana.

In Sub-Saharan Africa as in French Guiana, among the communities that I studied, the drum is a channel for all kinds of musical and extra-musical, physical and metaphysical expressions. Through its playing and its sonorities are spread at the same time with several feelings and emotions. So, here, the drum is one of the efficient ways to express the joys and sorrows, but also the life and way of being. It is also a traditional “word” that spread through the ages, across generations of Africans, of slaves and of their Creole and Bushinenge progeny, including those of French Guiana.

Up to the present, the drum is the “cultural being” who comport a special “word” with many codes that are filled with symbols and representations. It echoes the histories of French Guianese people and gives rhythm to episodes of their life.

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