

CHAPTER 8

WOLOF SABAR

This style of drumming is traditionally found in Gambia and Senegal only. It is, in my opinion, some of the most difficult drumming in the world. It is syncopated in ways that do not feel 'right' to us. Even to find the primary pulse can be very difficult to hear. It is much more rare than Djembe, I think mostly because it is so alien to our ear. To find Sabar drumming in this country you will need to go to a Gambian or Senegalese community, the closest being the Bronx and Harlem. Unlike the Djembe ensemble, Sabar drumming has different drums that have different sounds and roles/rhythms that they play. Possibly the 2 most visually noticeable differences between Sabar and Djembe are that Sabar drums are typically peg tuned, and Sabar drumming is played with one hand and one stick, where as Djembe requires only hands.

Like Djembe, Sabar drumming exists to support the


dance and the song. It is much more common in Gambia and Senegal to see Sabar than Djembe. Sabar groups are usually 6-10 in number. It is also very aggressive and loud drumming and extremely syncopated. When I first heard Wolof Sabar drumming I really didn't understand it at all. I saw that as a challenge, and I have found great joy in opening up some of the secrets in Wolof Sabar drumming. It's always fun to look into the box and see what's in there. But after you find out what's in the box, it's fun to look for another box to look into. If Djembe is a lifetime of work, Sabar drumming is 5 lifetimes. In Djembe we have mostly 2 drums to conquer, the Djembe and the Douns. But in Sabar drumming we have 5 different drums to learn which all have different roles/parts to play. I will say most Sabar drummers specialize in one particular drum. They will be able to play the other drums, but not as well as their usual drum.

Let's start by learning the Sabar notation. First of all, the Bass stroke, Tone stroke, and slap Stroke are the same as Djembe. We have 4 stick strokes.

Open stick stroke... strike drum with stick and let stick come off the drum. Closed stick stroke... strike drum with stick and leave stick buried into drum. Muffled stick stroke... strike drum with stick and let stick come off the drum, but leave your other hand down on drum. Rim Stick... strike edge of drum with stick.

Open Stick 

Closed stick 

Muffled stick 

Rim stick 

Now let's look at the drums in the Wolof Sabar ensemble.

M'BALAX

The M'balax drum is the main rhythm drum. It is high pitched and a bit smaller than a Djembe. It plays repetitive phrases, and is in my opinion the first drum to learn in the Sabar ensemble. When you understand the M'balax you will understand better where the beat is in this music. When learning M'balax first we typically learn some basic patterns and expand from there. There are about ten - twenty common patterns that are used depending on what the song is.

CHOLL

The Choll or Joll is the next drum I suggest to learn. Sabar drumming has 2 bass drums and the Choll is the deepest in pitch. It also has common patterns that are used in many songs. This drum is also a solo drum. One thing to remember about the Choll and Tahnbat... the slap is played differently than on the Djembe. The slap is played in the middle of the drum. Also the Tone stroke and Bass stroke

are both played in the Tone stroke position.

TAHNBAT

The Tahnbat is the other bass drum. It is higher in pitch than the Choll. It usually plays a 'counter rhythm' to the Choll.

TOONGANI

The Toongani I am told was not an original Wolof drum but actually taken from the Mandinka tribe because it adds another sound and rhythm to the

Sabar ensemble. It is the smallest of all the Sabar drums and has a role similar to the M'balax but has a penetrating mid range bass sound. It often plays the same line as the M'balax or plays a 'counter rhythm' to the M'balax.

N'DER

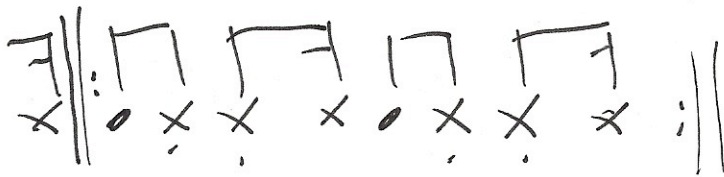
The N'der is the solo/lead drum and all the signals to the other drummers and dancers are played on this drum. It is the tallest and highest in pitch. A lot of times the leader of the group plays this drum. This drummer is typically not shy! They have to be very confident and they tend to be very charismatic and captivating.

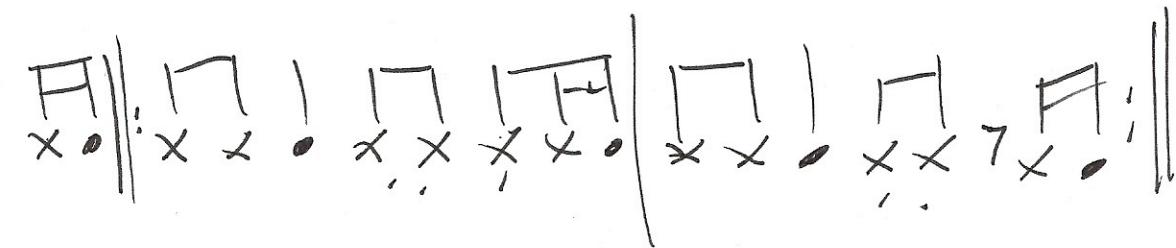
DOUDOU N'DIAYE ROSE

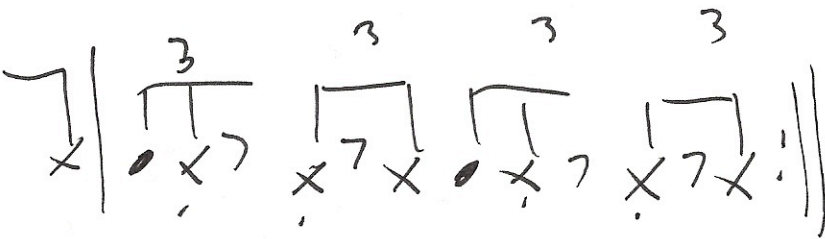
Doudou N'Diaye Rose is the 'Grandfather' of Sabar. He is from the Sere tribe in Senegal. As far as I know he is still alive, almost 90 years old. He has 5 wives and over 30 children, most of them excellent Sabar drummers. In Muslim culture a man is allowed as many as 4 wives. West African families are typically very big! It's very common for families to have 10 or more children. More on that later. Doudou has composed many famous Sabar songs and he has a group of more than 50 drummers.

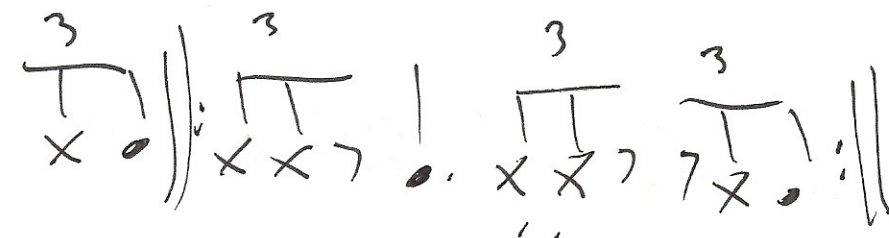
CHOLL RHYTHMS

Here are 4 common Choll rhythms.

1. $\frac{4}{4}$ 

2. $\frac{4}{4}$ 

3. $\frac{12}{8}$ 

4. $\frac{12}{8}$ 

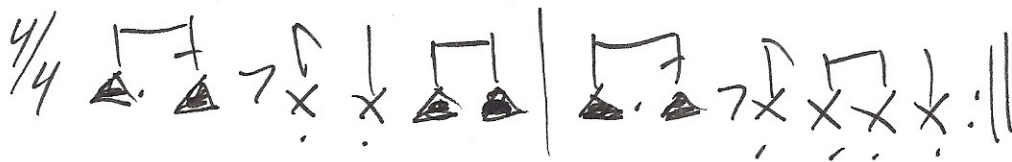
BROKEN TRIPLETS

Let's talk a little about groups of 3, commonly known as triplets. If we look at a measure of 12/8 and find the most common combinations that we would hear in American/European music. First, we can say the pulse, "one" "two" "three" "four" is our anchor. Another common combination is "one trip let two" "three trip let four". Another is "one let two, let three, let four"... which we know as 'swing eighths'. Now let's look at some common combinations in West African music. Here's one... "One trip, two trip, three trip, four trip. See the examples below to see many combinations you can hear in West African music. Some of these combinations can turn your ear around and make you think the beat is in a different place. Leaving out the pulse can always be challenging. Wait a minute. What did I just say? Well we never 'leave out' the pulse. But often in this music the rhythm avoids the pulse. Wolof Sabar drumming and Balanta Balafon are notorious for all these broken triplets and an elusive pulse. Practice these slowly and make sure you tap your foot!

CHAPTER 9

YAYA

One of the things that gives Wolof Sabar it's great power and excitement are what are known as 'Bakas'. Bakas are rhythmic phrases played in unison, and are often very syncopated. We will learn our first Baka in a rhythm named Yaya. But first here is the main rhythm.



Once we get this going in Unison, we can add the M'balax pattern and Choll pattern.

