



AFRICAN GIRLPOWER

EN Amazonas is made up of seven Guinean women, each playing a traditional African percussion instrument. This is a break with ancient taboos: percussion in Africa is strictly for men. On Belgium's national day they will start off with a basic dance class, so we'll have an idea how to move to their music.

Amazones were on every day at Couleur Café, firstly at the Solidarity Village, then as a percussion parade, and on Saturday in the Fiesta tent. I met *djembe*-player Damayé Soumah and *balafon*-player Fatoumata Kouyaté in their hotel in Brussels. Sadly, they had little to say: as they don't speak much French and have little experience of talking to the press, the interview was mainly with Mamoudou Condé, the group's manager and founder... and a man.

An all-female percussion group, that's rare in Africa.

CONDÉ: We're the first Guinean group to do it. In Guinean tradition, the *djembe* is only played by men, as is the *balafon*, which is sacred in our culture. The first *balafon* was made by the king of Soso (a former African empire - *bt*) in the 11th century. He gave it to the *griot* (story-

teller) Balafaseke Kouyaté. The Kouyatés have been an important family of storytellers ever since. Fatoumata Kouyaté is a direct descendant. She is one of the first African women to play the *balafon* internationally. That breaks an age-old taboo of the Manding Empire (once the empire of the King of Mali - *bt*). It was shocking at first, certainly for men. For the first time women were coming, not to dance, but to play instruments.

What instruments?

CONDÉ: This is a whole band of percussion instruments. There is the *krin*, a hollowed-out piece of wood that only produces high tones. In the past it was used to communicate with a nearby village, before the arrival of the telephone. Then there's the *sangba*, the *doundoun* that provides the bass, the *wasakuma* - several pieces of gourd attached to a beam and struck -

and the castanets, large gourds with a net of pearls attached, for shaking. There are various *djembes*, one of which takes the lead and the rest follow. The *daru* is the only typically female instrument: two pieces of metal, beaten against each other while dancing. Soon we're going to add a *kora* (African harp-lute).

How did it all start?

CONDÉ: I discovered these women by chance when I was managing the (male) percussionists of the

Ballet National de Percussions de Guinée. Thanks to my job, and as someone from that culture, it was easier for me to set up a female percussion group, despite the prejudices and negative reactions. In Guinea a woman has to stay at home and mind the kids. But we think it's important for women to play our traditional instruments, as our traditional music has its back against the wall with the influence of Western music and hip hop. By letting women play, we bring the instruments closer to children, who will be given an impetus to play. Fatoumata, for example, has eight children and they all now play the *balafon*. But it's not easy for a woman to take this step. We had a girl in the group, for example, who lost her betrothed because she played the same instrument. At the family level it's not easy for anyone; the families mostly disapprove.

On 21 July you'll start off with a dance class.

CONDÉ: Yes, in Guinea we have various traditional dances. Our country has four geographical zones: the rain forest, the hill region, the mountains, and the coast. We have eight languages and several ethnic groups, each with its own rhythms and dances. But we're not going to torment the public with our nearly 100 different dances. We'll probably teach two, from different zones. (*BT*)

•• **AMAZONES**

Dance class 20.00, concert 20.3 - gratis/gratuit/free
Sint-Rochusvoorplein/parvis Saint-Roch, Antwerpsesteenweg/chée d'Anvers, Brussel/Bruelles
www.amazoneswomandrumpers.com

FR Amazonas est un groupe formé par sept percussionnistes guinéennes qui brisent le tabou africain interdisant à la femme de toucher aux percussions. Le 21 juillet, elles commenceront par donner une initiation de danse pour nous permettre de ne pas avoir l'air idiot en nous dandinant pendant le concert!

NL Amazonas zijn zeven Guineese vrouwen die traditionele Afrikaanse percussie-instrumenten bespelen. Daarmee doorbreken ze een eeuwenoud taboe: percussie is in Afrika enkel bestemd voor mannen. Op onze nationale feestdag geven ze eerst een dansinitiatie zodat we niet als idioten op hun muziek staan te shaken. (Originele Nederlandse tekst: www.brusselnieuws.be/agenda)