

### 3 Performing in Turns

In this section I will outline the structure of interaction, and more specifically the participants' access and obligation to the role of performance at wedding celebrations in Bamako. The basic units and dynamics of joint performance consist in the alternation between one mode of action marked by song and stately formation dance, and a second marked by a swift succession of energetic encounters between the lead drummer and dancers coming forward individually or in pairs.

Typically, each piece starts with a song, which is a "call to dance," as the term *donkili* may be literally translated.<sup>7</sup> The drummers almost immediately take up the corresponding rhythm. Shortly thereafter, some participants start a slow-paced, dignified dance in single file that moves round concentrically within the circle of participants. Individuals who want to take part simply rise from their chairs or leave where they have been standing, one by one or in small groups, and graciously, with measured stride and gently swaying gait, walk towards the inner ground, and join the line. Some individuals or groups, as, for example, the honorary mothers, may be personally called upon by the singers and/or drummers (Fig. 7).

After perhaps 20 or 30 out of the roughly 200 participants have taken their places in the line and the tempo and atmosphere have picked up sufficiently, it dissolves into either a smaller semicircle close to the drummers or back into the larger circle. Then one or two women at a time break out from the semicircle or the larger circle in order to dance, vigorously now, directly interacting with the drummers. When a dancer, in dialogue with the lead drummer, has progressively performed a certain repertoire of movements and exhausted her physical endurance, she strives for a finale with the utmost energy (Fig. 3), sometimes communicating this to them with a short glance, looking for a moment of eye-to-eye contact, or by a whispered "ssssss," then she is cut off by a drum break and synchronically performs a concluding step, sometimes resembling the classic telemark position for a ski jumper's landing, and finally heads off sideways, bounds back to her place and joins the circle again. This kind of drum/dance encounter as a rule develops in about ten to twenty seconds; an average piece of one formation



Fig. 2: *Denba* (honorary mother) participates in a group dance performance at a wedding celebration; Bamako 1995 (R. Polak).

dance and five to ten individual encounters lasts three to four minutes, and is one stage of the sequence of celebrations, which usually lasts between two and four hours. In practice, though, timing is predominantly task-oriented: Each encounter lasts precisely as long as the dancer takes to carry out her turn, and each piece as long as it takes for everyone who wants to dance to have her turn.

The order of programs at a celebration, unlike, for example, the theatrically staged African ballets based on the same repertoire of performance elements, is prearranged neither in content (which song? which rhythm? which dance?) nor in the details of interaction sequences (who will perform which parts with whom for how long?). Rather it is worked out spontaneously in the course of interaction. It is essential to maintaining the ongoing flow of interaction that the access and allocation of the dancer's role to particular individuals is explicitly structured and made comprehensible. This is achieved, first, through the indexicality or expressivity generally characteristic of social action in face-to-face relation-

7 See Traoré (2000: 135–152) for a discussion of song/*donkili* as a Manding performance genre.