

The Griots of West Africa: Agents of Social Change

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To understand urban African music we must formulate a conceptual framework in which changes and retentions of musical style and context can be understood within a synthesis of social and cultural change.¹

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Szwed's comments on the nature of African music are particularly germane to the *griots*² of West Africa, who have been the professional musicians of the Mandé³ for more than seven hundred years. Their ancestry can be traced to the era of Soundiata Keita, who founded the Malian empire in the thirteenth century. At its height, in the fifteenth century, this vast state extended from the Atlantic shores of Senegal to the forests of Guinea, then east into the savanna lands of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Its heartland was the Niger river, especially the area in upper Guinea between Kankan and Bamako.

The role of a *griot* within Mandé society is highly complex. Along with blacksmiths and leatherworkers, *griots* are members of the *nyamakala*, an endogamous artisan class. They fulfil a variety of social functions, including the roles of genealogist, praise-singer, and counsellor. At naming days, weddings, and other important ceremonies *griots* are called upon for their expert knowledge of the lineages of the families present. They may recount these in song and also perform praise-songs of the host's ancestors, describing, for example, their valour in battle, or their wisdom in affairs of state. The payments for such performances, when the host may be deeply moved, can be very generous. Wealthy patrons have been known to give gold, expensive

¹ J. Szwed, cited in David Coplan, 'The Urbanisation of African Music: Some Theoretical Observations,' *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 113–29.

² The term *griot* is of French origin, its precise etymology uncertain. There are numerous indigenous terms for the professional musicians of the Mandé. The Mandinka term is *jali*, the Malinké use *djely*, the Soninké *jesere*, etc. *Griot* is used in this text to denote these musicians, whilst not referring to any specific language group.

³ The term 'Mandé' is used here as a linguistic device that incorporates the Malinké, Mandinka, Bamana, Soninké, and Dyula, amongst other indigenous groups. It can be said to include those who trace their ancestry to the empire of Mali.

clothing, houses, and even aeroplanes, although gifts of cash or cloth are more usual.⁴ Commonly, a *griot* maintains a network of patrons, on whom they are reliant on for a large portion of their income.

In societies with no written language, such as those of the Mandé, story-telling and songs are important methods by which historical data is retained and passed down. The *griots'* role in this aspect is fundamental, for they are the designated custodians and chroniclers of Mandé history, and are often referred to as the 'singer-historians.' The *griots* maintain a large repertoire of epic narrative songs which describe major historical figures and events, commencing with the epic of Soundiata which describes the circumstances leading to the formation of the Malian empire. The *griots'* authority in these matters is highly regarded and respected, and their repertoire extends into tales of morality, romance, and kinship. Contemporary issues are also dealt with, their role as social commentators being of particular interest in the post-colonial era.

Traditionally, *griots* were the public voice of the Mandé kings and nobility, informing the subjects of royal decrees and speaking for the king himself at public meetings, as it was considered ignoble for the king to speak on these occasions.⁵ They were an integral part of the royal courts, where they not only acted as musicians, but also served as ambassadors and diplomats, and their counsel in matters of state was often sought.

The cultural role and social function of the *griot* has, however, undergone a significant transformation this century, particularly in the post-colonial period. As the retainers of their culture's history, the *griots* were regarded by the governments of many West African nations as the ideal vehicle for conveying new policies and initiatives. They acted as agents for social change, becoming, in effect, the voice of the government. This politicisation is but a part of the continuing evolution of the *griots'* role within Mandé society, and to fully appreciate this it is necessary to contextualise their contemporary functions via a brief examination of their historical role.

The tradition of the *griot* is an hereditary one: songs and stories are taught by elders to their children and grandchildren. A *griot* may also seek lessons from an older musician close to his/her immediate family, such as an uncle. The tradition is non-gender based, though the majority of musical instruments are played by men. The principal musical instruments of the *griot*, played by men only, are: the *kora*, a 21-stringed harp-lute; the *ngoni*,⁶ a plucked/strummed lute of Arabic origin; and the *balafon*, a wooden xylophone with gourd resonators, typically possessing nineteen slats. Women play a tubular iron bell, a *ne* (also known as a *karinyang* or *nege*), which they strike with a thin metal rod. These instruments are usually accompanied by a vocalist, and in the Senegambia region of West Africa male singers are the norm. Women's vocal accompaniment is common in most other regions, especially in Mali.

The music of the *griot* is strophic. Short ostinato patterns (*kumbengo*) are performed on the instruments and this melody is closely associated with each traditional epic narrative.

⁴ Lucy Duran, 'Savannah Sex Wars,' *The Wire* 114 (1993): 42–44.

⁵ Anny Wynchank, 'Transition from an Oral to a Written Literature in Francophone West Africa,' *African Studies* 44.2 (1985): 189–95.

⁶ This instrument is distributed widely throughout West Africa, even among non-Mandé groups, such as the Wolof, who call the instrument a *xalam*, and the Fula, who know it as a *hoddu*. Within the Mandé, the Bamana/Maninka term is *ngoni*, the Mandinka refer to it as the *kotingo*, while the Soninké term is *gambaré*.

were held in little regard, and were thought of as mere flatterers, pandering to the wealthy and the élite.⁹

Under colonial rule the tradition of the griot had undergone significant change; loss of traditional patronage, propensity of praise-singing, and urban migration, amongst several other factors, transformed the *griot's* role within Mandé society. In the post-colonial period, however, when the newly formed nations sought an independent political and artistic direction, the *griots* would once again become the voice of kings, albeit within a highly different context.

Guinea gained independence from France in 1958, with Senegal and Mali following two years later. All three nations were led by charismatic leaders, Guinea by Sekou Touré, Senegal by Léopold Senghor, and Mali by Modibo Keita. Each nation, in an attempt to remove the burden of over seventy years of colonial rule, embarked on ambitious campaigns aimed at revitalising their cultural and artistic traditions. Senghor was one of the major voices of the Négritude movement, a philosophy of affirmation whose aims were to re-establish a pride in the indigenous arts. He stated that 'since independence we have made every effort to create a new literature...a new dance form, and a new music.'¹⁰ In Guinea, Sekou Touré embarked on the *authenticité* campaign, which was aimed at reinvigorating the arts, particularly music and dance. Mali's cultural policy was intended to rehabilitate the traditional cultures in order to 'create and affirm a new national identity.'¹¹

With independence came a sense of nationalistic pride which found expression through a revitalisation of the indigenous arts. Rather than adopt an approach which would result in simply a celebration of their traditional culture, government policy actively promoted initiatives aimed at modernising the traditional music forms, creating a new musical style reflecting the aspirations of the independent nations. This was realised through the purchasing and distribution of electric instruments to musicians, through the establishment of national and regional orchestras and music festivals where they could compete, by placing musicians on a government wage, and by encouraging the writing and performance of new songs. In order to address the needs of a modern state, the governments sought to reinvigorate their traditional arts, especially music, by modernisation. The role of the *griot* in this period of cultural renaissance was pivotal.

In Mali, L'Orchestre National 'A' de la République du Mali was formed the day after independence in 1960. It was one of the first bands to play electric instruments in Mali, and the first electric ensemble to perform songs in an indigenous language. Whilst ensembles with electric instrumentation had existed in various West African states from the early 1950s, their repertoire consisted, typically, of Cuban songs or Western jazz/pop tunes. L'Orchestre National 'A', however, pioneered the use of traditional instruments alongside electric, as well as the inclusion of traditional melodies in the orchestra members' arrangements. It was led by Keletigui Diabaté, a *griot*, who was a virtuoso on the *balafon*. The other personnel, like those in the other orchestras, were *griots*, and they adopted traditional melodies and lyrics to a modern

⁹ Thomas A. Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1990) 41.

¹⁰ Cited in Stephen H. Grant, 'Léopold Sédar Senghor, Former President of Senegal,' *Africa Report* 28.6 (1983): 61–64.

¹¹ Charles H. Cutter, 'The Politics of Music in Mali,' *African Arts* 1.3 (1968): 38–39, 74–77.

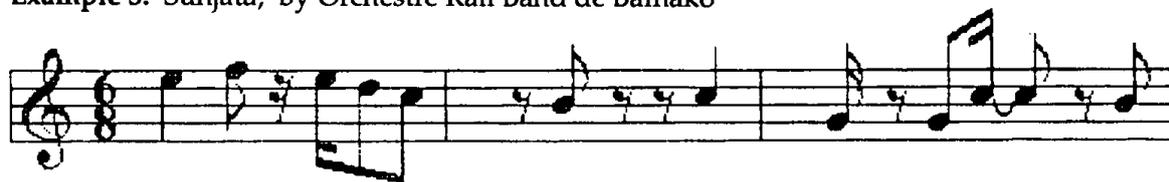
performance context. Their instrumentation included electric guitar, keyboard, a brass section, and a rock-style rhythm section. The lead guitar was responsible for reproducing the *kora* ostinato, the *kumbengo*, and it also played the improvisatory role. Malian music of this era is well known for its virtuosic guitar solos, and for its rich blend of Cuban and West African rhythms. The first state-sponsored album by L'Orchestre National 'A' included two versions of epic narratives, 'Duga' and 'Taara,' a praise song, 'Malamini,' and songs that dealt with topical issues. It was one of the first bands in West Africa to modernise traditional *griot* songs.¹²

When modernising the instrumentation of a performance of a traditional narrative only a slight change to the *kumbengo* occurs. To do otherwise would mean changing the 'theme' of the piece. From the transcriptions below it can be seen that the journey of a traditional acoustic song to the context of a modern electric ensemble is one that retains the character and meaning of the original. The first transcription is taken from a performance on the *ngoni*, a five-stringed lute, and the second represents an abstraction of the electric guitar motif as performed by a modern ensemble.

Example 2: 'Sunjata,' by Banzoumana Sissòko¹³



Example 3: 'Sunjata,' by Orchestre Rail Band de Bamako¹⁴



The Malian government created six regional and two national orchestras, as well as a national ensemble of over twenty musicians. Admittance to these groups was usually gained through a national or regional competition. The orchestras performed at venues owned by the state, such as the outdoor bar at the main train station in Bamako, Mali's capital, or at state functions, such as the annual and bi-annual artistic and cultural festivals. The government had in essence become the new patron of the *griots*, supplying them with venues, instruments and income.

In such a climate it is not surprising to find many examples of Malian songs that espouse official government policies and initiatives. The government of Modibo Keita utilised the *griots'* traditional role as respected historians and advisers by directing and influencing the content of their songs in order to further national campaigns. For example, 'Recoma,' by Super Biton de

¹² L'Orchestre National 'A' de la République du Mali, Bärenreiter-Musicaphon, BM 30 L 2605, 1970 (33.3 rpm disc).

¹³ Epic, Historical, Political and Propaganda Songs of the Socialist Government of Modibo Keita (1960–1968), Lyrichord, LLST 7325, [1969] (33.3 rpm disc).

¹⁴ Orchestre Rail Band de Bamako, Bärenreiter-Musicaphon, BM 30 L 2606, 1970 (33.3 rpm disc).

Ségou, is concerned with rice production,¹⁵ and 'Janfa,' by the L'Orchestre National 'A,' exhorted Malians not to betray their cultural heritage.¹⁶ The liner notes to the first album by L'Orchestre Rail Band de Bamako offer further evidence of government initiatives and policy:

At the moment when the independent countries of Black Africa incessantly co-ordinate their activities in search of appropriate ways and means to countenance the restoration of their own civilisation...it is important to reserve a choice position for traditional music which, in its transposition for modern instruments, will significantly answer to the legitimate aspirations of the peoples of Africa.¹⁷

L'Orchestre Rail Band recorded several albums which featured songs dedicated to the Malian army and Soundiata Keita, amongst others that dealt with a broader range of topical issues.¹⁸ An examination of the repertoire of Malian bands in the 1960s and 1970s reveals multiple recordings of epic narratives such as 'Soundiata,' 'Da Monzon,' and 'Tira Makang.' By modernising the repertoire of the *griot*—via new, electric arrangements—the Malian government sought to reinvigorate and rejuvenate traditional music and culture. These modern renditions formed part of a government initiative aimed at restoring and reviving Mali's cultural heritage.

Post-colonial cultural policies in Guinea bear remarkable similarities to those in Mali. In 1959, a year after independence, the government of President Sékou Touré sought to liberate Guinea from the Western influences that were considered to be undermining and corrupting traditional Guinean values and culture. One of the government's first acts was to forcibly disband dance orchestras and chamber-music ensembles, which played 'slavish renditions' of tangos and other 'imported' dance styles.¹⁹ In that same year, two important ensembles were formed—Les Ballets Africains and the Syli National Orchestra—the latter of which 'was composed of [the] best instrumentalists and led by dedicated musicologists who were prepared to research and advance [Guinea's] musical cultural heritage.'²⁰ The Syli National Orchestra was the first of many electric ensembles, which, at their height, numbered more than fifteen. As in Mali, the majority of these groups were composed of *griots*, who often gained admittance through a government sponsored competition. These orchestras utilised electric instruments and brass sections, and their role, like that of their Malian counterparts, was to modernise their traditional repertoire, write new songs for the new instrumentation, and to convey government policies.

In Guinea, a national record label (Syliphone) was created, which released eighty long-play albums and over seventy singles. Many renditions of Mandé epics were recorded by *griots* on the Syliphone label, as were traditional pieces and praise songs. There are also numerous recordings of propaganda songs describing the achievements of Guinea's sole political party—

¹⁵ Super Biton de Segou, *Afro Jazz du Mali*, Mélodie, 42013-2, 1986 (CD).

¹⁶ L'Orchestre National 'A,' BM 30 L 2605.

¹⁷ Orchestre Rail Band de Bamako, BM 30 L 2606.

¹⁸ Rail Band du Mali, 'Armee Malienne,' *Mélogias*, Malian, 7137, 1988 (Cassette).

¹⁹ Guinean National Commission for UNESCO, *Cultural Policy in The Revolutionary People's Republic of Guinea*, Studies and Documents on Cultural Policies 51 (Paris: UNESCO, 1979) 80.

²⁰ *Cultural Policy in Guinea* 80.

the Parti Démocratique de Guinée (PDG)—with most material being devoted to its leader, Sékou Touré. The President claimed direct lineage from Almami Samari Touré, a resistance fighter who led a prolonged insurgency against the French in the late nineteenth century, and who remains a hero to Guineans. The Syliphone label released many songs of praise to Almami Samari Touré, more so than to any other figure, except Sékou Touré himself. The album *Regard sur le Passé* (which was re-issued twice) is a modern homage to Almami Samari Touré, with the praise song lasting for both sides of the LP. The liner notes make clear reference to the relationship with the President:

...the conflict for national liberation...was won under the direction of Ahmed Sékou Touré, grandson of Samari. On the 29th of September 1958, the Revolution triumphed, our final revenge for that other 29th September, in 1898, the date of the arrest of the Emperor of Wassoulou, Almami Samari Touré.²¹

There are many examples of praise songs to Sékou Touré recorded by the Syliphone label, such as 'Mandjou' by Kélétiogui et ses Tambourinis: 'Sékou Touré you have the trust of all the people...thank you for what you have done and what you continue to do for us,'²² and 'Touré,' by Bembeya Jazz National: 'Ahmed Sékou Touré you are just, you are good, you are what the people of Guinea need.'²³

The Syliphone label was a medium for the distribution of government policy to the people, with the *griots* being the effective voice of the state. They adapted traditional epic narratives such as 'Duga,' which recounts the life of a warrior, and inserted in his place the role and exploits of the Guinean army.²⁴ Other songs dealt with literacy campaigns or celebrated the unity and liberty within the Guinean nation.²⁵ Syliphone was controlled by the Ministry for Arts and Culture and it reflected government policy accordingly. The label dominated all facets of the recording industry, in much the same way that Sékou Touré and the PDG dominated Guinean life. The *griots*, as the retainers of Mandé history, were the ideal medium for the distribution of new policies via the Syliphone label. They modernised the Mandé repertoire whilst asserting government ideology and popularising its leaders, thereby acting as the agents for social and cultural change.

Contemporary Mandé music has its roots in the music of the post-colonial era of the 1960s, when government initiatives sought to modernise Mandé music in order to revitalise the tradition and to proclaim the region's independence. This new style found broad success. In the 1970s, many of the orchestras that were formed by government policy toured neighbouring countries, and some of their singers and musicians found international fame (Salif Keita and Mory Kanté, for example). Orchestras such as Bembeya Jazz and Le Super Rail Band de Bamako

²¹ Bembeya Jazz National, *Regard sur le Passé*, Syliphone, SLP 10, [1970] (33.3 rpm disc).

²² Kélétiogui et ses Tambourinis, Syliphone, SLP 30, 1972 (33.3 rpm disc).

²³ Bembeya Jazz National, 'Touré', *La Défi*, Syliphone, SLP 59, [1979] (33.3 rpm disc).

²⁴ Bembeya Jazz National, 'Armée Guinéen', *Special Recueil: Souvenir du Bembeya Jazz National*, Syliphone, SLP 44, [1974] (33.3 rpm disc).

²⁵ Horoya Band, 'Alphabetisation', *Trio Federal du Point*, Syliphone, SLP 25, [1972] (33.3 rpm disc). Camayenne Sofa, 'Soukou', *A Grands Pas*, Syliphone, SLP 56, [1978] (33.3 rpm disc).

(later to evolve into Les Ambassadeurs) were amongst the most popular groups in all of West Africa. The costs of sustaining such large ensembles, however, eventually proved too high for the governments, and in Senegal, Guinea and Mali economic conditions forced most of the large orchestras to disband. The Syliphone label ceased production of records in the early 1980s, and Sekou Touré died in 1984, his policies abandoned by the new administration.

Smaller electric ensembles started to evolve, and as government policies began to focus more on economic concerns than on cultural development, so the modern music of the *griot*-led ensembles became freed of the ideological constraints that were placed on it, and was instead able to focus on a broader range of issues. Today in West Africa, praise songs to Sékou Touré and his regime are considered *passé* or worse, as for many Guineans they revive painful memories of his autocratic rule. The independence and nationalism that were so fervently celebrated in songs which pointed to a brighter future for West Africans has diminished in the harsh light of economic reality, which has seen the standard of living for most citizens in the region remain at the very bottom of the global scale.

Griots, however, are still part and parcel of daily political life in West Africa. In Senegal every political party has its *griots*, whose task is to bolster the party's image and elevate its leaders in the public domain. The Parti Socialiste of Senegal's President, Abdou Diouf, formed a national committee (CONAGRISPAD) composed entirely of *griots* whose sole aim is to support the leader and his faction.²⁶ *Griots* also continue to act as entertainers in the courts of the nobility, performing for the Presidents of many West African nations. National troupes of musicians are also maintained in The Gambia, Mali, Senegal, and Guinea.

Not all *griots*, however, seek participation in politics. Some consider it as mere opportunism, a way of making money through the praising of powerful individuals, who may well be undeserving of such acclamation. Banzoumana Sissòko, perhaps Mali's most revered *griot*, never sang the praises of a living person, and refused to align himself with any politician or rich patron.²⁷ Furthermore, as *griots* begin to address topics concerning social issues, the lyrics on some recordings challenge the authority of social mores and customs. In many of her songs, Ami Koita, one of Mali's most famous *griottes*, addresses issues concerning women's rights, a topic which is being explored by other Malian women singers (most notably Oumou Sangare, a singer born outside of the *griot* caste). This material has attracted criticism from conservative sections of Malian society, yet its overwhelming popularity indicates a much broader support base.

The instruments of the modern ensembles continue, too, to evolve. Synthesisers, drum machines, and electric guitars are all represented on the latest recordings from *griot*-led bands, often combined with the traditional instruments of the Mandé, particularly the *kora* and the *balafon*.

The development of popular music styles in West Africa offers a revealing insight into the processes of transition of a musical tradition. The modernisation of traditional Mandé songs

²⁶ Cornelia Panzacchi, 'The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal,' *Africa* [Journal of the International African Institute] 64.2 (1994): 190–210.

²⁷ Cheick Mahamadou Chérif Keita, 'Jaliya in the Modern World: A Tribute to Banzoumana Sissòko and Massa Makan Diabaté,' *Ufahamu: Journal of the African Activist Association* 17.1 (1988): 57–68.

resulted in a new musical style, a style which belies a complex series of socio-political and socio-economic factors which helped determine contemporary Mandé identity. The *griots* were the agents of a 'cultural revolution,' called upon to revitalise and reinvigorate the glories of the Malian empire via modern instrumentation and recording techniques. As respected oral historians and chroniclers of Mandé history, they were used, in the era shortly after independence, as vehicles for conveying the policies and projecting the personalities of the time. That their music expresses the desires and aspirations of a younger generation is indicative of their role as social commentators, and of their continuing influence in the formation of West African society.