

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: TRANSMITTING THE MANDE BALAFON:
PERFORMING AFRICA AT HOME AND
ABROAD

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This dissertation examines the role of balafon performances in the transmission of Mande traditional knowledge about music and culture and how this process affects the formation of identity. My study focuses specifically on the Susu and Malinké peoples of Guinea, two ethnic subgroups of the Mande of West Africa. The Mande balafon is a heptatonic traditional xylophone. Its origins are traceable to the Sosso Bala, an instrument believed to date back to the founding of the thirteenth-century Mande Empire of Mali. The Sosso Bala is still preserved in Guinea as a national treasure and symbol of the unity of the Mande peoples. Mande balafons are played by members of the *jeli* caste of hereditary musicians and oral historians, who have traditionally passed down knowledge of musical and cultural heritage among the Mande.

Today, balafon performance is an important aspect of identity formation among the Mande, both in Africa and in the diaspora. Drawing upon African

philosophy and performance studies, I examine how Mande *jeli* performance serves as a context for the creation of a contemporary African identity that balances the twin obligations of preservation of cultural heritage and maintenance of individual subjectivity. I also address issues of interconnectedness in African artistic performance and how they are reflected in the rhythmic structure of Mande music. Transcriptions of selected pieces from the *jeli* repertoire contribute to my analysis of how key elements of Mande society are revealed through their music.

Fieldwork I conducted in Guinea informs my research into the historical origins of the Mande balafon and the shift in emphasis on development of the instrument from the rural Mande heartland to Guinea's urban capital, Conakry. My field work in the United States focuses on the work of my teacher Abou Sylla and his preservation and dissemination of Mande musical culture through inherently African, interactive teaching methods. I also examine how Abou, by taking his students with him to Guinea, facilitates a cultural tourism experience that serves as a context for the transmission of identity from himself to his students, reinforcing a type of community he is building through his workshops.

TRANSMITTING THE BALAFON IN MANDE CULTURE:
PERFORMING AFRICA AT HOME AND ABROAD

By

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Dedication

For Abou Sylla – *n wali*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I'll never forget when I decided that someday, somehow, I was going to learn how to play the balafon. It was the last weekend in April of 1997, and I was on the New Orleans Fairgrounds attending the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. The Festival had recently started featuring music from a different country each year, and the country highlighted that year was Mali. It was a hot day, so in order to come in out of the sun and hear some music I wasn't likely to hear again anytime soon, I walked into the small tent where a group from the National dance ensemble of Mali was about to perform. As I sat down to watch the performers, a few dancers came onto the stage accompanied by a man carrying some sort of xylophone. When he sat down and started playing, I was transfixed. I watched him intently the whole time he was playing. At one point in the performance, he looked up at me and smiled, and I knew then and there that some day I would learn how to play that instrument. It is amazing to think that a chance encounter with a musical instrument led me to where I am today, writing my doctoral dissertation about my experiences studying the Mande balafon.

Purpose and Justifications

The purpose of this dissertation is twofold: (a) to study the role of balafon performances in the transmission of Mande¹ traditional knowledge about music and

¹ The people to whom I refer as the Mande can be defined as indigenous speakers of different languages within the Northern Mande language family, a sub-group of the Mande branch of the Niger-Congo language group, which accounts for most of the native languages spoken in West Africa. The ethnic groups subsumed under this family include Maninka, Mandinka, Susu, Bamana, Wasulu, Soninke, and Xasonka; the peoples who speak them reside primarily in Mali, Guinea, Senegal, and the Gambia (Charry 2000). The Mande have their historical origins as a unified people in the Medieval Empire of Mali, founded in the thirteenth century by Sunjata Keita.

culture and (b) to examine how this process affects the formation of identity among those involved. There are two primary reasons why I have conducted this research. The first is that I am documenting a multi-generational process of transmission that has survived colonialism, has devised strategies of relocation and re-examination, and has negotiated changing power structures. Members of the *jeli* caste of hereditary musicians and oral historians traditionally pass down knowledge of musical and cultural heritage among the Mande from generation to generation. With the advent of French colonial rule, traditional systems of patronage, whereby members of the Mande hereditary ruling caste supported *jelilu*, gave way to externally directed power structures. One branch of the Kouyaté family,² the original *jeli* family among the Mande, was faced with two choices: either to sing for their suppers by providing their services to the highest bidder, regardless of traditional prescriptions governing both inter-caste and inter-familial relationships, or to maintain musical and cultural traditions, even if it meant resorting to farming for subsistence. The Dökala Kouyatés chose to remain in the Mande heartland area, near the border of the present-day countries of Guinea and Mali.³ In this remote area, they have preserved the Sosso⁴ Bala, the single instrument from which all Mande balafons

² I am referring to the Dökala branch of the Kouyaté family. The term Dökala refers to Döka Mamu, the virtuous and talented grandson of Balafaséké Kouyaté. Döka Mamu was the son of Musa (Missa in Charry 2000: 143), who inherited the Sosso Bala from his father, Balafaséké, the *jeli* of Sunjata Keita, thirteenth-century founder of the Empire of Mali. Musa passed the Sosso Bala on to his son, Döka Mamu, and the family took its name from him because he was renowned both for his virtuosity on the balafon and his integrity in preserving the Mande griot tradition.

³ Information about the Dökala branch of the Kouyaté family and their efforts to preserve the Sosso Bala come from Charry (2000, 142-144) and personal conversations and interviews with Namankoumba Kouyaté, a retired history professor at the Université Gamal Abdel Nasser de Conakry in Guinea, a Mande griot, and third in line to replace his elder brother as *Balatigui* – both the caretaker of and only person allowed to play the Sosso Bala (11 & 13 April 2004, in Professor Kouyaté’s home in Conakry, Guinea).

⁴ I use this spelling instead of Susu, the most common current spelling of the name of this language and ethnic group, because Sosso is the spelling used in Namankoumba Kouyaté’s “*Échos d’une Veillee Culturelle*,” the brochure for the second biannual Sosso Bala Festival in Niagassola, Guinea, May 30 – June

originate, since the thirteenth century CE. As a strategy to preserve the continuity of Mande musical culture and demonstrate its importance to an international audience, the Dökala Kouyatés have, with the assistance of the Guinean government, created a biannual international festival that celebrates the significance of the cultural space of the Sosso Bala, which has been recognized by UNESCO as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.”⁵

When Guinea gained its independence from France, one of the first priorities of Sekou Toure, Guinea’s first president, was to use the traditional arts of Guinea to help create a national identity.⁶ Sekou Toure, along with the Dökala Kouyatés, established Niagassola as the home of the Sosso Bala.⁷ As time passed, however, the focus of the use of the balafon to preserve and transmit cultural traditions within a more modern context shifted from the traditional Mande heartland to the area surrounding and including Guinea’s capital city, Conakry.⁸ While performers and instrument-makers have made changes to the range and tuning of the balafon to make the instrument more adaptable to changing performance contexts, the role of the instrument as the foundation for the preservation of Mande heritage in Guinea has not changed. In this dissertation, I examine how the balafon has changed over time, the differing contexts to which it has

1, 2001. Bala is the Maninka word for balafon, as the instrument is more commonly known. Charry speculates that balafon comes from the Maninka *bala fo*, meaning “to play the bala” (Charry 2000, 138).

⁵ UNESCO PRESSE du 21 Mai 2001, communiqué N°2001-71.

⁶ See Charry (2000, 211-213) for a concise examination of Guinea’s use of Les Ballets Africains both to help create a national identity and to promote Guinean arts and culture abroad.

⁷ I address further in chapter three how the politics behind the establishment of Niagassola as the home of the Sosso Bala reflect the use of traditional arts as a basis to establish national identities for many newly independent West African nations immediately following the colonial era.

⁸ One of the reasons for this shift is due to the location of nationally-sponsored ensembles – such as Les Ballets Africains, Les Merveilles d’Afrique, and L’Ensemble Instrumentale Nationale de Guinée – in Conakry. As I will explain further in chapter three, these ensembles were established and supported by the newly independent nation of Guinea in an effort to create a national identity that was largely based on the traditional arts, especially music, of the different ethnic groups found throughout Guinea.

been adapted, and how the instrument has been, and is currently being, used to both preserve and transmit Mande culture. More specifically, I examine concepts such as the traditional/modern bifurcation within studies of African culture, the hybridized national identity that results in the necessary combination of the two in the context of African artistic performance, and the implications for creation of individual identity that result from perpetuating ancient musical traditions in ways that make them relevant and accessible to people living in modern contexts in twenty-first-century Africa.

The second reason why my research is important is that there has been a recent increase in musicians immigrating to the United States from different countries in western Africa to pursue increased economic opportunities. After establishing a network of students through individual lessons and workshops, these musicians often lead cultural excursions to their native countries so that their students will gain an appreciation of the native cultural contexts of African musical traditions. This phenomenon represents a conceptual shift in the transmission of cultural and musical understanding, as musical information is transferred cross-culturally in both native and diasporic contexts. By taking their students back with them to their native countries to reinforce the importance of learning about the cultural context of their musical traditions, African musicians are emphasizing multicultural communication to create an increasingly global awareness of what it means to comprehend a musical tradition. In other words, these pioneering African musicians are imparting to their students the necessity of physical participation in a musical tradition within its native context as a means of understanding how the musicians' diasporic teaching methods are grounded in their native cultural traditions. In an age of increased global interconnectedness through rapidly advancing

telecommunications technology, the emphasis on corporeal, as opposed to virtual, understanding of a musical tradition on multiple contextual levels creates in the student a more thorough, physical appreciation of how music can bring people together.

The interaction that results from cross-cultural artistic communication also has implications for the formation of identity, especially on a personal level. By being immersed in one's teacher's native environment, the student develops an appreciation for the deeper cultural significance of the musical tradition s/he is trying to understand. By interacting with the students on a daily basis, the teacher, and her/his family, learn about the culture of the students in a way that will impact, at the very least, the way the teacher and her/his family are viewed by their surrounding community, if not also their own self-conceptualization. When I traveled to Guinea with my teacher, staying with him and his family in their compound, my fellow students and I were considered by the surrounding community to be members of his family, not just out-of-town visitors. Thus, my teacher and his family felt personally responsible for our well-being, and took care of us as they would their blood relatives.⁹

I use a multidisciplinary approach to explore the importance of the balafon to the transmission and preservation of Mande musical culture, both in the United States and in Guinea. I believe in the importance of both musicological and anthropological approaches to musical understanding, for each necessarily compliments the other. By combining an analysis of the music as it is performed with an examination of the relationships between musical conceptualizations and broader perceptual categories, especially as this information is transmitted across cultural boundaries, I create a better

⁹ See Chapter Five, pages 149-150, below for an example of how seriously my teacher takes his obligation to look after his students when they are staying in his home.

awareness of the multi-layered interconnectedness of different manifestations of Mande culture, especially as they are revealed through musical transmission and artistic performance.

Personal Background

My experiences as a musician and trained observer of performance contribute to this study in myriad ways. My background as a jazz drummer and vibraphonist has helped me understand the importance of negotiating between composition and improvisation during the course of performance. As an entertainer, I also comprehend the necessity of involving the audience in an interactive manner that heightens the intensity of a musical event through shared participation in the realization of that experience. My two and a half years of study and performance with the late Djimo Kouyate, a Mande *jeli*, have helped me recognize the importance of music to the Mande people and some of the ways they use it to transmit their cultural values and collective wisdom. My three years of study with Guinean master balafonist Abou Sylla have helped me appreciate the significance of the balafon as a symbol of both Guinean and Mande¹⁰ identity and culture. Abou has also increased my appreciation for the rhythmic and harmonic potentiality of the balafon as both a solo and an accompaniment instrument. By encouraging me to participate in his workshops and other playing situations that encompass the simultaneous performance of several balafon players, Abou has also exposed me to the potential for achieving musical symbiosis through performance, a

¹⁰ The problem of delineating differences between various Mande ethnic groups and each group's individual contribution to Mande culture overall is difficult at best, but I address specific issues in Chapter Three regarding both Susu and Malinké (the French equivalent of Maninka) contributions to Mande musical traditions and performance in Guinea and how the two ethnic groups have influenced the development of Mande balafon performance in Guinea.

deeply moving experience whose ramifications for the transmission of cross-cultural understanding I will explore in chapters two and five.

Most of all, I bring to my research a comprehensive approach to understanding the role of the balafon in the transmission of Mande music and culture. While I have mentioned my background studying percussion in general and the balafon in particular, there is much more to understanding a music culture than gaining proficiency in musical performance. When I studied jazz as part of my M.A. degree, I moved to the birthplace of jazz, New Orleans, and immersed myself in the culture, performing in local venues, consuming the local cuisine, and exploring the connections between approaches to cooking and to creating music. I worked in a music store in the French Quarter and learned from local experts about the musics of New Orleans, their history, and how they are all directly tied to the customs, beliefs, and seasonal celebrations of a city that occupies a place at the crossroads of European, African, and Native American; oral and written; Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanic; North American, South American, and Caribbean; and many other diverse cultural traditions.

Just as there is more to understanding a musical culture than learning to perform the music, there is also more to conveying one's knowledge of a musical culture than performing the music. My academic background also informs both my approach to musical understanding and my efforts to convey that knowledge in writing. My scholarly influences, like my musical influences, are varied and reflect my fascination with two specific subjects I enjoyed studying as an undergraduate – philosophy and religion. I had two professors in particular who shaped my early understanding of the interrelationship between philosophy, religion, and the performing arts. The first is the late Jackson Ice, in

whose existentialism seminar I was exposed to the ideas of Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, and Paul Tillich, among others. The ideas of these three scholars on the interconnectedness of individuals to their environment and to each other, along with the moral implications of that interconnectedness, have guided me throughout my academic career. The second professor whose courses inspired me is William Swain. Under his tutelage I explored the philosophies and religions of East Asia, focusing primarily on Taoism and Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. These two religions and their accompanying philosophies have greatly influenced both my personal and scholarly development. When I began studying the music of Africa, I also started investigating the writings of African philosophers, particularly the works of V. Y. Mudimbe and Tsenay Serequeberhan. Their ability to apply the ideas and concepts of continental European phenomenologists such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Gadamer to the dilemmas of modern African existence has inspired me to look for connections between widely differing schools of thought. By seeking out the interpenetrations of my different intellectual influences, I can harness them to create new concepts that elucidate the multicultural interactions I participate in and observe as part of my research.

I thus bring a multidimensional approach to the study of the balafon and its role in the preservation and transmission of Mande music and culture, both in Guinea and in the U.S. I have studied the balafon in workshops and private lessons with Abou Sylla and other balafonists. I have studied Mande jembe drumming and Mande dance with different expert performers and teachers in Washington, DC. My experiences studying Mande dance have been particularly beneficial to me, as I have gleaned from them the importance of coming to a corporeal understanding of a musical tradition. Participation

in Mande dance classes provided me with an insight into the organization of Mande balafon music by literally allowing me to feel a parallel phenomenon between the music and dance traditions as I physically enacted the phenomenon through performance.¹¹ I have traveled to Guinea to study and perform in a traditional setting with Abou and some of his teachers and family members. While in Guinea, I lived and ate with Abou's family in their compound. I also interviewed, ate dinner with, and played balafon with Namankoumba Kouyaté, one of Guinea's foremost historians, who is also a Mande *jeli* and who helped to establish the Sosso Bala Festival as a way of promoting the importance of the balafon and Mande musical culture to all of humanity. My experiences learning about the balafon in Guinea even extended to befriending one of the Guinea's foremost balafon builders and gaining, in the process, an in-depth understanding of how the instrument is constructed. My multifaceted approach to understanding the transmission of Mande music enables me both to add new insight to current literature about the balafon and to discuss the importance of the instrument and its use by modern performers and teachers like Abou Sylla to help promote cross-cultural understanding of, and appreciation for, Mande musical culture.

Literature and Mande Oral History

The current literature focusing specifically on the balafon is surprisingly limited, especially considering the importance of the instrument to the history and culture of the Mande. Most articles have focused either on tuning systems (Knight 1991, Rouget and

¹¹ I am here referring to what I call "harmonic anticipation" in Mande balafon music and "anticipatory overlapping phrasing" in Mande dance and drumming. I explain both concepts and their connection to each other in Chapter Four.

Schwarz 1969) or the role of the balafon in contemporary griot¹² performance (Knight 1984). The only thesis I have found on the Mande balafon focuses specifically on Guinea-Bissau (Panneton 1987), though Julie Strand, a Ph. D. candidate at Wesleyan University who completed fieldwork in Burkina Faso, is writing her dissertation on the balafon tradition of the Sambla, a Mande ethnic group whose balafon tradition is related to that of the Susu/Malinké balafon, but has significant differences in both the size of the instrument and performance practice.¹³

Dissertations on xylophone traditions in other parts of western Africa focus primarily on different ethnic groups within the present day nation of Ghana (Godsey 1980, Saighoe 1987, Seavoy 1982). Though currently out of print, an introductory instruction manual for the balafon (Jessup 1983) also exists, though it focuses exclusively on Mandinka balafon players in the Gambia. While all of the above provide important insight into xylophone traditions in western Africa, each focuses specifically on the use of the balafon within native contexts in Africa. By expanding my focus to expatriate musicians such as my teacher, Abou Sylla, and his perpetuation and dissemination of Mande musical traditions through instruction in the U.S., I will be describing how balafon instruction and performance serve as a vehicle for the diffusion of cross-cultural understanding.

¹² The word “griot” is a French word originally synonymous with the Maninka *jeli* or Mandinka *jali* and is often used interchangeably with these indigenous terms in writings about the Mande. Currently, however, the term has acquired a much broader meaning and is often applied to or appropriated by people who perform similar roles in different cultures.

¹³ The Sambla balafons are larger than the Susu/Malinké balafons, and the same instrument is played simultaneously by three musicians, as opposed to the Susu/Malinké tradition, where each individual balafonist plays a different instrument. This information on the Sambla comes from Julie’s paper, “Adaptive Tradition: The Adoption of the Xylophone among the Sambla of Burkina Faso,” presented 19 November 2005 at *SEM at 50: The Society for Ethnomusicology 50th Annual Conference* in Atlanta, GA.

Literature on the history of the Mande that mentions the balafon is more common, largely due to the essential role of the instrument in the epic of Sunjata, which describes the life of the first emperor and founder of the thirteenth-century Empire of Mali. The Sosso Bala originally belonged to Soumaoro Kanté, the tyrannical sorcerer king of the Susu people, whom Sunjata Keita defeated to found his empire. Sunjata took the Sosso Bala as a war trophy after he defeated Soumaoro and gave the instrument to his griot, Balafaséké Kouyaté.¹⁴ Numerous translations and written versions of the Sunjata epic have been published (Cissé and Kamissoko 1988 and 1991, Conrad and Condé 2004, Johnson 1986, Niane 1965, et al.), and each provides insight into the way a similar epic is told by Mande griots both at various different times in history and in different locations inhabited by Mande peoples throughout western Africa. Significant scholarly work on performance of the Sunjata epic (Austen 1999, Hodge 1971) also exists, though none focuses specifically on the balafon or its role in the preservation of Mande cultural traditions. One important aspect of Mande culture highlighted by the aforementioned research on the Sunjata Epic is that in West Africa, the epic is transmitted primarily through live performance,¹⁵ not its transcription. Thus, the balafon, as the primary instrument used to accompany performances of the epic in Guinea, figures prominently in the preservation and perpetuation of Mande culture.

One work that should be mentioned in any discussion of literature on Mande music is Eric Charry's seminal work on the subject (Charry 2000). Charry devotes twelve pages of his text to the history of the Mande balafon and another seven to

¹⁴ See note 2, page 2, above.

¹⁵ See Jan Vansina (1985) for a thorough examination of both the difficulties and advantages of using oral traditions as a source of historical information.

transcriptions and playing techniques. While the sections focusing on the balafon are thorough and well researched, they nonetheless focus on the instrument's role in performances within a traditional African context. With my own work, I am expanding the information in Charry's text and updating it with my research into the extension of the role of the balafon into a transnational context.

Theoretical Background

Three areas I focus on in my theoretical analysis are conceptualizations of rhythmic structure and usage, issues of multidimensional artistic communication and transmission through performance, and the relationships between concepts of tradition and modernity that contribute toward contemporary identity formation among the Mande. The nature of African conceptualizations of rhythm is a contested area of scholarship. Earlier authors (Jones 1959, Merriam 1982) have hypothesized that African music is polymetric in nature, simultaneously superimposing contrasting rhythmic structures upon each other during the course of performance. Contemporary African scholars (Agawu 2003, Nzewi 1997), however, have countered such claims, proposing that the concurrent rhythmic manifestations present in the performance of African music are linked together by an underlying pulse.¹⁶ This pulse, whether implied or explicitly stated by the musicians, allows for the synchronization of bodily movement between dancers, musicians, and other participating observers who interact in a performance event. While the aforementioned authors have focused primarily on African drumming in their

¹⁶ See Richard Alan Waterman (1967) for a discussion of the necessity of developing a "metronome sense" in order to discern this pulse automatically when performing, dancing to, or listening to African music. This paper has influenced many exegeses of the use of rhythm in both African and African American musical traditions.

analyses, my research thus far has shown that the more recent conceptualizations of the rhythmic structure of African music also apply to Mande balafon workshops and performances I have both participated in and observed.

The importance of corporeal synchronization between musicians, dancers, and other participants in a Mande musical event also underscores the significant interrelatedness of different art forms among the Mande, especially as they are realized through performance. Communication is an essential aspect of artistic performance in many different African societies, and it is the shared conceptualization of underlying rhythmic structure internalized in the body of performers that facilitates this necessary interaction. Scholars have described the way musicians and dancers use gestural or sonic cues to signal each other when to make specific transitions or to inspire each other to further intensify their performance (Nketia 1974, Sunkett 1995). Others have investigated the interrelationship of the visual and performing arts in African societies, depicting how similar cultural concepts are conveyed through different artistic media (Thompson 1974). The multidimensional nature of artistic communication revealed in Mande balafon performance both allows for the achievement of symbiosis¹⁷ and reflects a traditional African communal approach to achievement and problem solving that many scholars have recognized in both African and African American musical contexts (Gilroy 1993, Monson 1996, Wilson 2001).

The use of the balafon as both a symbol of and a tool to aid in the preservation and transmission of Mande culture raises important questions regarding tradition and

¹⁷ I explain this concept further in chapter two, but I will define the term as I am using it here to indicate a mutually dependent relationship that develops between performers during the act of performance and allows them to create a synergistic musical experience that would not be possible without the necessary interconnectedness of all the participants in the performance.

modernity, their interrelationship, and their affect on identity formation among both the Mande and those attempting to understand Mande musical culture. I will be drawing on recent scholarship that investigates such issues as they are related to musical performance among different Mande peoples (Charry 2000, Reed 2003) and other non-Mande African peoples (Gyekye 1997, C. Waterman 1990a, 1990b). By both exporting Mande musical culture through balafon players who teach and perform overseas in diverse contexts and inviting an international audience into Guinea to observe traditional balafon performance within a modern festival context, contemporary Mande balafon players are blurring the lines between tradition and modernity and creating hybrid sites of musical actualization that call into question the accuracy of dualistic conceptualizations that would polarize ideas of the traditional and the modern as exclusive opposites.

Research Methodology

My methodology for gathering and analyzing research data is based on an anthropological model of participant observation, but also consists of analysis of transcriptions from private lessons, workshops, and performances. In terms of my fieldwork, I examine data collected over two years of intermittent study of the balafon with master balafonist Abou Sylla, both in the United States and in Guinea, and other master balafonists, historians, and balafon builders in Guinea. I also draw upon information gleaned from studying and performance with the University of Maryland West African Drum Ensemble, under the direction of *jalolu*¹⁸ Djimo and Amadou Kouyate and master drummer Mahiri Fadjimba Keita-Edwards, as well as African dance classes taken with Sylvia Soumah at Dance Place in Washington, DC. The first phase of

¹⁸ *Jalolu* is the plural of *jali*, which is the Mandinka spelling of the Maninka *jeli*.

my fieldwork in Guinea consists of lessons with Abou Sylla, his older brother and teacher Bangali Sylla, and his younger adopted brother Lansana Sylla, along with interviews, conversations, and observations recorded between 28 April and 16 May of 2004. The most significant of these interviews and conversations took place over a two-day period at the home of Namankoumba Kouyaté, a retired history professor at the Université Gamal Abdel Nasser de Conakry in Guinea, a Mande griot, and third in line to replace his elder brother as *Balatigui* – both the caretaker of and only person allowed to play the Sosso Bala.¹⁹

I returned to Guinea to conduct additional research from 3 April to 30 May 2005. During this time, I undertook further balafon study with Abou and members of his family and conducted additional interviews regarding the role of the balafon in the preservation and transmission of Mande music and culture, including an interview with Guinean master balafonist El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté. Along with these studies, I was also supposed to travel to Niagassola with Abou to attend the fourth biannual Sosso Bala Festival. Due to issues that arose between the Guinean government and the organizers of the festival, however, the festival was postponed until after I needed to return home to the U.S. From this episode in my research, I learned important lessons about the role of the Guinean government in both the development and establishment of Mande musical traditions in Guinea, which I will address further in Chapter Three. I recorded most of the interviews and lessons during both trips to Guinea with a minidisc recorder for later transcription and analysis, and whenever possible, I also made video recordings, especially of performances.

¹⁹ See note 3, page 2 above.

In terms of musical transcriptions, I am using Western, five-line staff notation to transcribe both my lessons and my performance and instruction videos. Traditional tuning for the Mande balafon is heptatonic, and though it does not correspond exactly to a diatonic Western tempered scale, there is enough similarity that Abou is able to transfer traditional Mande accompaniment patterns to balafons tuned to a diatonic C major scale, for ease of teaching purposes within a U.S. context. I have transcribed the accompaniment patterns Abou and my other teachers have taught me, and I compare some of those transcriptions with earlier transcriptions made by other scholars of balafon accompaniments to the same pieces. I have also transcribed ornamentations that Abou has shown me to demonstrate how a balafonist might embellish an accompaniment part during the course of a performance.

My analysis of the transcriptions focuses on three specific aspects of Mande balafon performance. The first element I demonstrate is how rhythmic ostinatos are used in different accompaniments to provide both continuity and a musical frame of reference for performers. The second feature I explore is one way that ornamentations can be developed and integrated into accompaniments to provide variety, exhibit technical skill, and signal a transition from one accompaniment pattern to another. The third facet I examine is the concept of harmonic anticipation, which I have developed to explain the way harmonic transitions in Mande balafon music reflect rhythmic emphases in Mande drumming and movement transitions in Mande dance.

Theoretical Concerns

While I have already discussed some of the theoretical issues I address in this dissertation, my analysis of the data I collect focuses on ways the Mande have maintained

their cultural traditions while adapting them to the demands of twenty-first-century existence. I examine how the balafon has been adapted to accommodate different performance contexts, along with physical changes made to the instrument to facilitate new uses. I also focus on how the instrument has been used in both traditional and modern contexts to blend elements of the two in a way that facilitates the creation of hybridized sites for complex identity formation, sites that are becoming increasingly common as African musicians expand awareness of their cultural traditions to foster increased appreciation by performing those traditions in diverse contexts and collaborative manners.

I also approach the development of my own understanding of Mande musical traditions through the framework of phenomenological hermeneutic analysis. My desire to use this method of investigation is influenced by the work of ethnomusicologist Tim Rice and his conceptualization of the ethnographic fieldworker as personifying the Heideggerian ontological condition of “being-in-the-world,” where the individual participates in a cognizant, cultural interconnectedness with her/his surroundings (Rice 1997). It is through the process of learning to perform within a musical tradition that we directly and kinesthetically achieve understandings about the tradition that cannot be described solely through language. My ongoing efforts to understand Mande music through participating in performance events, whether at dance classes, balafon workshops, traditional wedding ceremonies in Guinea, or lectures to undergraduate ethnomusicology classes, have helped me experience, over time, my own role in the transmission and preservation of Mande musical culture and how my ever-increasing comprehension has affected both my own identity formation and my awareness of the

complexities of approaching music from differing cultural viewpoints. Ultimately, I hope to convey an understanding of my gradual musical re-awakening in a manner accessible to the readers of my dissertation.

By employing a phenomenological framework to analyze my experiences with Mande musical performance, I am also committing myself to a means of understanding the balafon itself as a phenomenon, not just an inanimate object occasionally used as a tool for conveying cultural information. Within Mande culture, there is a spiritual life force, known as *nyama*, that is released through the process of artistic creation. This spiritual force resides in the balafon to be awakened by the musician who releases the *nyama* during the course of a performance, manipulating the force through his skillfulness so that it affects beneficially those who witness and participate in the performance. The balafon thus exists as a living entity, awakened to its full potential through the process of performance.

I also examine the balafon phenomenologically as a collective cultural concept, changed over time, both physically and functionally, to adapt to fluctuating contexts that reflect the needs of Mande societies. While each individual instrument plays specific roles in the lives of the people who come into contact with it, the balafon as a unifying cultural construct of the Mande people reflects the resiliency of Mande cultural traditions. The balafon has served as a symbol of the strength and unity of the Mande for over eight hundred years, withstanding the threats brought by colonial occupation and contemporary globalization. In this dissertation, I show the role the balafon has played in helping the Mande in Guinea to retain a strong sense of cultural identity through its malleable adaptation to a variety of changing contexts without losing its essential character.

Overview

The dissertation is divided into six different chapters, this introduction being the first. Chapter Two consists of an introduction to the Mande balafon, an examination of who plays the instrument, and a review of research that has informed my own investigation into the role of the balafon in the transmission and preservation of Mande culture in Guinea. I begin broadly with an examination of issues related to African musical performance, connections between African art forms, and issues surrounding conceptualizations of rhythm in African musics. From there, I narrow my focus to the performance of music within Mande contexts. The chapter concludes with an exploration of issues regarding subjectivity in contemporary Africa and how they relate to Mande griot performance.

Chapter Three consists of an inquiry into the locational issues that relate to the development of the Mande balafon and its adaptation to different contexts, both geographical and musical. I first examine the stories of the origin of the Sosso Bala and important concepts within them that relate to broader issues within Mande culture. I then examine the role of the Mande balafon in the formation of national identity in postcolonial Guinea, focusing on the shift in emphasis on the balafon from rural to urban settings and the underlying causes for such a transformation. In this chapter, I also examine the role played by certain individuals who have influenced the instrument's overall trajectory, including pertinent issues of lineage, both physical and musical.

Chapter Four elucidates the repertoire of the Mande balafon in Guinea, including a musical analysis of selected works. My analysis focuses on transcriptions of Mande balafon accompaniments to select pieces from the *jeli* repertoire, describing melodic,

rhythmic, and harmonic elements that both propel the music and create the musical variation needed in order to sustain the interest of both observers and performers of the music over an extended period of time. It is in this chapter that I also examine important issues related to the transcription of Mande balafon music and what we can learn from musical analysis that we cannot learn from other types of analysis.

In Chapter Five, I focus mainly on the efforts of my primary teacher, Abou Sylla, to spread knowledge of the balafon, and its importance to Mande culture, outside of Africa. I address his creation of a pedagogy that makes learning the balafon more accessible to U.S.-based students while still incorporating inherently African contextual elements into his teaching process. Abou's teaching methods give the student a feel for performing in an African context while still allowing players of all skill levels to participate in a workshop setting, thus enhancing the musical experience for all parties involved. He further reinforces the contextual element of his teaching methods by bringing students with him back to Guinea as cultural tourists to give them an opportunity to witness firsthand the role of the balafon in Mande culture within an indigenous environment. I also explore in Chapter Five the ramifications such cultural tourism experiences have for issues of identity formation among the participants.

Chapter Six is my summary of the arguments I have presented throughout the dissertation and the conclusions I have reached as a result of those arguments. I discuss the implications of my research and how it addresses contemporary issues in the field of ethnography. Lastly, I examine my own role in the fieldwork and analytic processes that have affected this dissertation. I hope that my own study will, like all important research, create as many interesting questions as it answers, thus promoting additional inquiries

into the complexity of humanity's passion for music and perpetual search for cross-cultural understanding.

CHAPTER TWO

GROUNDING AND LOCATION

The Mande balafon is a heptatonic African xylophone with wooden bars affixed with twine to a wooden and bamboo frame. The frame is anchored on each corner by a round, wooden post, which runs through each end of the four rails of bamboo that run the length of the frame and the four wooden spans that maintain the width of the frame. The holes for the wooden dowels to pass through are burned into the bamboo rails and the wooden spans using iron rods that come to a point on the end and are heated in an open charcoal fire until they are hot enough to pierce the wood and bamboo. The posts, spans, and bamboo rails are attached to each other by tightly wound and tied strips of leather cord that are moistened for flexibility, and then allowed to dry before attaching the bars. Thin wooden dowels are attached at regular intervals across the two top bamboo rails with leather cord by the same method. The wooden bars of the instrument are attached to the dowels with a synthetic twine that is wound tightly around each bar and then tied to the dowel on either side of the bar at both ends of the bar. The bars are made of a wood known in Susu as *hari*, a type of rosewood indigenous to Guinea. The bars are carved from raw wood and then dried over smoldering sawdust in a smoking oven, which has been constructed specifically for that purpose, before being tuned to their final pitch. The undersides of the bars are shaved, using a traditional hand adze, to adjust the pitch – in the middle to lower it or on the ends to raise it. Under each bar is a gourd resonator, each resonator being carefully tuned to the bar directly above it. The gourds are tuned by either widening the opening of the gourd to raise the pitch or closing the opening of the gourd, using a waxy paste that hardens to retain its shape, to lower the pitch. The gourds,

like the bars, are attached to the dowels that traverse the frame, held in place by two pieces of twine attached to either side of the top of the gourd. There is a membrane, originally made of the egg covering of a spider but now usually consisting of very thin plastic, attached to two holes carved out of the side of each gourd resonator. This membrane gives the Mande balafon its characteristic buzzing sound and helps to amplify the sound of the instrument.

All current Mande balafons are alleged to be traceable to a single instrument, the Sosso Bala.¹ One of my primary sources on the history of the Mande balafon and the instrument's role in the transmission and preservation of Mande culture is Namankoumba Kouyaté,² who is a retired history professor at the Université Gamal Abdel Nasser de Conakry in Guinea as well as a Mande griot. He is also third in line to replace his elder brother as *Balatigui* – both the caretaker of and only person allowed to play the Sosso Bala. According to Namankoumba Kouyaté, the original instrument has been preserved by the Dökala³ branch of the Kouyaté family since Sunjata Keita, founder and first ruler of the Mande Empire of Mali, gave the instrument to his griot, Balafaséké Kouyaté, who

¹ I use this spelling instead of Susu, the most common current spelling of the name of this language and ethnic group, because Sosso is the spelling used in Namankoumba Kouyaté's "*Échos d'une Veillée Culturelle*," the brochure for the second biannual Sosso Bala Festival in Niagassola, Guinea, May 30 – June 1, 2001. *Bala* is the Maninka word for balafon (*balanyi* in Susu), as the instrument is more commonly known. Charry speculates that balafon comes from the Maninka *bala fo*, meaning "to play the bala" (Charry 2000, 138). The idea that all Mande balafons are traceable back to the Sosso Bala appears to be generally accepted both by Mande oral historians and academic scholars who study Mande music. My own conversations with different Mande balafonists and historians (specifically Abou Sylla, Namankoumba Kouyaté, and El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté) and examination of print sources (Charry 2000, Knight 1991, Jessup 1983, et al.) have corroborated this belief.

² Most of the information I present in this chapter on the role of the Kouyaté family in the preservation of the Sosso Bala and the Mande griot tradition comes from personal interviews and visits with Namankoumba Kouyaté at his home in Conakry, Guinea, on 11 & 13 April 2004. See Charry (2000, 143-145) for similar information regarding the guardianship of the Sosso Bala by the Kouyaté family.

³ See note 2, page 2 above.

is the ancestor of the Dökala Kouyatés, in 1236 CE.⁴ The Sosso Bala originally belonged to Soumaoro Kanté, the tyrannical sorcerer king of the Susu⁵ people, the base of whose kingdom lay within the boundaries of the modern nation of Guinea⁶ and whom Sunjata Keita defeated to found his empire.⁷ Sunjata took the Sosso Bala as a war trophy after he defeated Soumaoro and subsequently burned Soumaoro's palace and all of his other possessions. As the primary relic and sole symbol of Soumaoro's defeat at the hands of Sunjata and his united army of different Mande clans, the Sosso Bala, to this day, is a symbol of the unity and freedom of the Mande people. This instrument is considered a national treasure in Guinea and was proclaimed by UNESCO in 2001 to be a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," thus providing international recognition of the importance of the Sosso Bala as a Mande cultural icon and signifier of Guinean culture.⁸

The story of the origin of the Sosso Bala is contained within the Mande epic of Sunjata. While the specific details of the instrument's origin differ, largely based upon how the story has been passed down to the particular griot telling the story at any given moment, certain elements of the origin of the Sosso Bala are common to the different

⁴ While this date is not universally accepted, it is the one given to me by Professor Kouyaté during our conversations in April 2004

⁵ I will use the more current spelling of Susu when referring to this ethnic group, but the two spellings, Sosso and Susu, are for purposes of this paper, interchangeable.

⁶ See Stephen Bühnen (1994) for an examination of why the ancient Susu kingdom was most likely based in the Futa Jallon region of present-day Guinea and not in the Sahel region of Northwestern Mali, where many scholars have placed the ancient kingdom of Susu.

⁷ The epic of Sunjata, which recounts the life of the founder of the Mande Empire of Mali, has been translated into English by different authors, but the classic version is still Niane (1965). This version contains the Sosso spelling, as well as the spelling Sundiata, which is an older variant of Sunjata, the Romanization currently preferred by scholars of Mande studies. Soumaoro's name has also been spelled many different ways, most commonly as Sumanguru or Sumaworo. See Conrad and Condé (2004, xxxii – xxxvi) for explanatory information on Mande language dialect relationships and variations in the names of prominent individuals in the Sunjata epic.

⁸ UNESCO PRESSE du 21 Mai 2001, communiqué N°2001-71.

versions. The different accounts generally agree that the Sosso Bala was given to Soumaoro Kanté by a jinn, or supernatural spirit.⁹ The accounts also agree that the first person to play the Sosso Bala, after Soumaoro, was Balafaséké Kouyaté, the griot of Sunjata. Balafaséké's skillfulness at playing and praising the tyrannical king led to his being the only individual allowed by Soumaoro to play the Sosso Bala. This interaction between the leader of the Susu and the man who would become chief griot among the Malinké, and indeed all the Mande peoples, under Sunjata, foreshadows the extensive and complex Susu/Malinké relationship that has influenced the development of the balafon.¹⁰

While scholarly examinations of the Sunjata epic are numerous, and the extent to which the epic can be relied upon as an accurate rendition of historical events is debatable, the near unanimity of the accounts of griots that trace the origin of the Mande balafon to the Sosso Bala lends credence to the belief that the Sosso Bala is the original Mande balafon and that the tradition commences with Balafaséké's performances for Soumaoro and Sunjata.¹¹ Charry cites examples¹² reinforcing the idea that the Mande balafon originates with the balafon of the Susu king Soumaoro, as well as general acceptance of the status of the Sosso Bala guarded by the Dökala Kouyatés in Niagassola

⁹ An account by Gambian jali Bamba Suso, related in Jessup (1983, 23-25), differs slightly, but as Charry warns, "caution should be taken with Gambian sources for bala history ... since the instrument is not a major part of Gambian traditions" (Charry 2000, 143). According to El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté, a grand master of the balafon generally regarded as the father of modern balafon playing, jinns of the bush offered the Sosso Bala to Soumaoro because he was a great hunter and in contact with them (personal interview, 19 May 2005).

¹⁰ See Chapter three below for further exploration of accounts of the origin of the Sosso Bala, its preservation, and its role in the preservation and transmission of Mande culture.

¹¹ See note 1, page 23 above.

¹² Specifically, in footnote 72 on page 143, S.J. Kouyaté (1990-personal interview with Charry), Fa-Digi Sisòkò (in Johnson 1986, 151), Kele Monson Diabate (in Moser 1974, 279-282), Cissé and Kamissoko (1988, 165), Niane (1965, 38-40), and L. Camara (1980, 173-176).

(Charry 2000, 142-145) . My own sources in Guinea also corroborate this story and state that there was no Mande balafon before the Sosso Bala.¹³

Who Plays the Mande Balafon?

In Mande society, social divisions are usually marked by hereditary membership in one of two categories: *horon* or *nyamakala*.¹⁴ *Horon* is usually translated as “freeborn” and refers to those whose family lineages are associated with farming, ruling, and defending. *Nyamakala* is the term used to describe people whose family lineages are associated with artisanal craftsmanship, such as blacksmiths, leatherworkers, potters, oral historians, and musicians. Relationships between the two groups are complex, characterized by mutual co-dependence and suspicion. The *nyamakalalu* have historically depended on the *horonnu* for food, protection, and governance, while the *horonnu* have depended on the *nyamakalalu* for guidance, inspiration, decorative items, tools for war and agriculture, cooking vessels, and preservation of the society’s cultural traditions and heritage. Although each group’s need for the other can be a cause of resentment, the two largely coexist in a benevolent symbiosis that helps Mande society thrive while still maintaining its traditions.

The complexity of the interactions between *nyamkala* and *horon* individuals can be seen clearly in dealings between *jelilu* (sing. *jeli*) and their *horon* patrons. The *jelilu* are the *nyamakala* group who are the musicians and oral historians of the Mande. They are charged with the task of maintaining and perpetuating the society’s cultural history and wisdom, recounting the noble deeds of Mande heroes, past and present, during the

¹³ Personal conversations and interviews with Namankoumba Kouyaté in April 2004 and El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyate in May 2005.

¹⁴ *Horon* (pl. *horonnu*) and *nyamakala* (pl. *nyamakalalu*) are both Maninka terms.

course of musical performance. The *jelilu* also have the hereditary right to play specific *jeli* instruments, such as the Mande balafon, and, like other *nyamakala* groups, guard that right through both endogamy and extensive apprenticeships. Charry describes how the *jelilu*, like members of other *nyamakala* groups, are understood to have “special spiritual powers, called *dalilu*,¹⁵ which enable them to work with the dangerous forces, called *nyama*, of their raw materials” (Charry 2000, 49-50). This ability to control the *nyama* released as a result of performing one’s art gives the *jeli* a form of power unavailable to the *horon*. Nonetheless, the *jeli* is still dependent upon his *horon* patron for subsistence and physical protection. While the *jeli* uses his skills to entertain, counsel, inspire, and negotiate on behalf of, his patron, he must still rely on the gifts of his patron as reward for his actions. The patron, however, is also beholden to the *jeli*. As the keepers of the oral history of Mande society, it is the *jelilu* who decide who will be remembered well, as they sing of the deeds of both the just and the unjust, the benevolent and the stingy, the brave and the cowardly. The *horon* must be fair and generous to the *jeli* to avoid being branded as one who is unable to fulfill his obligations, and thus fails to live up to the noble deeds of his ancestors, bringing disgrace to his entire family. Charry further describes how the giving of gifts from patron to *jeli* should not be considered as payment for a service rendered, stating that “whatever is given to a *jeli* ... is seen as cementing an ancient historical interdependence” (Charry 2000, 98). Thus the two groups are

¹⁵ See McNaughton (1988, 42-46) for a more thorough explanation of this concept in relation to Mande blacksmiths, another important *nyamakala* group. He defines *dalilu* as “concise, goal-oriented clusters of information and instruction, recipes for the successful completion of an endless array of activities. Simultaneously they are the power behind human acts, the right to perform them, and their cause” (1988, 42-43).

interlocked in a relationship that continually perpetuates their societal ties and encourages both to preserve and to extend their societal traditions.

Issues of Gender in *Jeli* Performance

In traditional Mande culture, only men are allowed to become instrumentalists and oral historians.¹⁶ The sole musical role reserved for women is as singers, and for this they are highly regarded.¹⁷ Some of them have achieved legendary status for their vocal prowess, and their skill and power as extraordinary vocalists has been well documented by scholars (Duran 1995, Hoffman 1995). Women are starting to take a more active role as instrumentalists. Les Sœurs Diabaté, a trio of women from the Farannah region of Guinea, all sing and accompany themselves on balafon, though they have a male balafon soloist performing with them on their CD.¹⁸ There was also an all-female, state-sponsored popular music orchestra, Les Amazones de Guinée, made up of women who initially worked in the police force. Currently, there is an all-female percussion group from Guinea, Amazones: The Women Master Drummers of Guinea,¹⁹ which was formed by Mamoudou Conde of Les Percussions de Guinée. In spite of these pioneering performers, however, there is still, especially among traditional Mande griots, a strong cultural taboo against women as instrumentalists. For this reason, when I refer to the role of *jelilu* in general, and especially *jeli* singers, I will use the combined pronoun s/he,

¹⁶ In the Gambia, there is a small bell called the *neo* that is played by women to accompany Mandinka jali performances. Though this is a localized phenomenon and thus not common outside of the Gambia, I have seen at least one video recording of a traditional balafon performance in Guinea (*Niagassola, Site Historique* RTG 2001) that includes females playing a similar iron bell to accompany the balafonists. I never saw women playing instruments in any of the traditional Mande balafon performances I observed in the coastal region of Guinea during my fieldwork.

¹⁷ See Charry (2000, 94-96) for an elaboration of gender roles among Mande *jelilu*.

¹⁸ Les Sœurs Diabaté, *Donkili Diarabi (Guinean Lovesongs)*, Popular African Music 406.

¹⁹ See the group's bio on their website, <http://www.amazoneswomandrummers.com/html/bio.html>, for details of the resistance faced by Mamoudou Conde, especially by male master jembe drummers, during the process of forming this group.

meaning she or he. When I am referring specifically to roles reserved for men in Mande traditional culture, I will use the pronoun he.

Interaction in African Musical Performance

The link between *jelilu* and their patrons is not the only form of cultural symbiosis that results from Mande balafon performance. Equally important is the relationship between performers and audience, two groups not always easily distinguished in African musical performance. While I have thus far focused specifically on Mande musical culture and balafon performance, I want to now expand the breadth of my examination and address participatory aspects of African musical performance that relate directly to Mande balafon performance. Performance of African music is at its heart a participatory experience shared by all who engage in it – whether as musicians; dancers; part of an involved, responsive audience; or some combination thereof. One of the most common ways that those who are not playing instruments participate in a musical performance in Africa is through dancing. It is important to understand that music and dance are inseparable elements of multidimensional artistic performance. Noted Ghanaian ethnomusicologist Kwabena Nketia describes the intertwining of music and dance eloquently when he states,

Although purely contemplative music, which is not designed for dance or drama, is practiced in African societies in restricted contexts, the cultivation of music that is integrated with dance, or music that stimulates affective motor response, is much more prevalent. For the African, the musical experience is by and large an emotional one: sounds, however beautiful, are meaningless if they do not offer this experience or contribute to the expressive quality of a performance. (1974, 206)

Knowledge of the interconnectedness of music and dance is an essential component to understanding the necessity of physical participation for anyone who seeks to comprehend traditional African music.

Learning to dance to African music aids in the development of what ethnomusicologist Richard Waterman refers to as “metronome sense” (1967, 211). By developing a metronome sense, Waterman is referring to the ability of either the participant or the listener to understand exactly where the regular pulse of the music lies, despite the polyrhythmic complexity of the parts being played by the different musicians. It is especially important for the dancers to understand where the pulse of the music lies and how the drum rhythms interact with that pulse, as the dancers’ movements are directly linked to the drum rhythms. This interconnectedness of music and dance is particularly evident in Mande traditional dance. Ethnomusicologist Mark Sunkett, in describing the way dance moves in Mandiani, a Mande traditional dance, are directly related to their corresponding drum rhythms, explains:

The grand gestures in Mandiani conform to the primary rhythm patterns played by the drums. On this level, the overall flow of music and motion is perceived in much the same way by both musicians and dancers. There are rhythmic subdivisions which present a multi-layered series of timing points. With this rhythmic stratification, most, if not all, of the points of articulation in the dance movement can be directly related to drumming patterns. (1995, 109)

As the dance movements and drum rhythms are inextricably linked, an inability to feel and physically articulate the pulse of the drum rhythms would necessarily preclude one from being able to perform the corresponding dance movements correctly. The inability to understand the pulse as an underlying rhythmic framework for the entire performance

can also lead to transcription errors and perhaps even a complete misunderstanding of the rhythmic structure and interaction within a performance.

Ethnomusicologists seeking to understand African musical traditions must realize that dancing allows for a corporeal internalization of the rhythms used in African musical performance that can help demystify what appear at first to be simultaneously competing or “cross rhythms.”²⁰ A failure to do so results in reinforcing inaccurate ideas of difference between Western and African musics. Ghanaian ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu points out that “many West and Central African dances feature a prominently articulated, recurring rhythmic pattern that serves as an identifying feature or signature of the particular dance/drumming.” He prefers to use the term *topos* (*topoi*, pl.),²¹ which he defines as a “short, distinct, and often memorable rhythmic figure of modest duration ... [that] serves as a point of temporal reference,” to describe these recurring rhythmic patterns. Agawu further states that the sound of the *topos* and the movement of the feet are so inherently interconnected that the music and dance of any specific *topos* occupy the same conceptual plane, one no more prominent than the other. Understanding the relationship between African music and dance is so vital that, according to Agawu, “many misinterpretations of African rhythm and meter stem from a failure to observe the dance” (Agawu 2003, 73). Thus, knowing how to move to African music is an important step toward understanding it in a meaningful way.

²⁰ See Agawu (2003, 91-93) and page 35 below for further discussion of this misleading term.

²¹ This term comes from Western classical rhetoric. According to *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, “in classical rhetoric, arguments are obtained from various sources of information, or *topoi* (from the Greek for “places”; i.e. “places to find something”). *Topoi* are a set of categories that help delineate the relationships among ideas” <<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Inventio&oldid=41655367>> (accessed March 14, 2006).

Agawu's musical appropriation of the concept of *topos* can easily be applied to balafon performance in a traditional setting in Guinea. While many African dance ensemble performances bear witness to the interaction of drum rhythms and dance movements, the dance movements in traditional Mande celebrations in Guinea are also linked to the interlocking accompaniment and solo parts played by the balafonists.²² The solo balafonist interacts directly with the dancer, each both reacting to and inspiring the other's movements. The accompanying players, however, maintain the *topoi*, to use Agawu's reconfigured terminology, that provide both the steady, recurrent, rhythmic underpinning of the performance and the rhythmic vocabulary that the dancer has at her/his disposal, using those rhythmic building blocks as a corporeal lexicon from which to create bodily movements. The dancer thus interacts with the music on multiple levels, mirroring the rhythmic complexity of the music through her/his movements.

African Artistic Interconnectedness and Rhythmic Cooperation

While dance and music are thoroughly integrated art forms in West Africa, there are also correlations between visual art forms, such as sculpture and cloth-making, and performative art forms, e.g. music and dance. In his catalogue for the 1974 exhibit *African Art in Motion*, Robert Farris Thompson examines many of the correlations between the visual and the performing arts in different West and Central African ethnic groups (1974). This important study of connections between different art forms in Africa describes how many West African societies apply similar aesthetic criteria to multiple forms of cultural expression. Thompson discusses how sculpture from such groups as the

²² See chapter four for a musical analysis of Mande balafon repertoire and how the different parts interlock in a performance context. See chapter three for a more complete description of Mande balafon performance in a traditional Guinean context.

Yoruba and Ibibio of Nigeria and the Senufo of Ivory Coast both reflect postures and imply movements common to dance performance in their cultures (1974, 13-17). He also explores how concepts that are drawn from music and dance performance relate to aesthetic criteria for the evaluation and creation of visual works of art, such as the importance of exhibiting youthful vitality among dancers, maintaining a balance between melodic and rhythmic relationships in musical performance, and appreciating the multidimensionality of artistic performance in West Africa. A specific case in point is when Thompson describes how a “young African,” when observing a sculpture of a Nigerian Yoruba mother and child, taught him “to recognize an implied combination of five discrete actions in one: sitting nobly, giving generously with both hands, joyously supporting a new-born child upon the back, and supporting fire from heaven upon the head (a pair of thunderstones), while disciplining the face so that pleasure does not reveal itself” (1974, 16). Thompson relates this anecdote to the performance of West African dance, which requires the dancer to move simultaneously to different rhythms with different parts of the body.

While this depiction of the multiple levels of possible action revealed in a traditional African sculpture relates directly to the multifaceted nature of African musical and dance performance, Thompson also uses it to represent an enduring myth, especially according to Agawu, that pervades Euro-American scholarly writings about African music – the myth of polymeter (Thompson 1974, 16-17).²³ Agawu goes to great lengths

²³ Thompson here uses the term polymetric instead of polyrhythmic, based on two different ethnographies – Laura Bohannon (1964) and Charles Keil, *Tiv Song* (mimeographed, 21 May, 1973) – of the Tiv people of Northern Nigeria, as well as his personal correspondence with Joann Wheeler Kealiinohomoku (Thompson 1974, 230, note 56). This misunderstanding of the nature of rhythm in African music was commonplace at the time Thompson’s book was written, but it is now highly contested.

to differentiate between the notions of polyrhythm and polymeter (2003, 71-96). His transcriptions of different *topoi* depict how signature rhythms of specific dances can emphasize or accentuate upbeats or elements of the *topos* that do not coincide directly with the main beat shared as a common rhythmic referent by the dancers and musicians. Yet, unlike Thompson and others, Agawu does not have to resort to asymmetric rhythmic groupings or multiple meters to depict the relationship between the various *topoi* and the main beats that ground them in a consistent, dance-enabling pulse (2003, 71-96).

The use of multiple meters to depict the way African music fits together in an ensemble context represents an effort to impose an alien scheme of organization upon African dance music in order to mystify and distance it from the Western musical tradition most familiar to the readership of ethnomusicologists such as A.M. Jones and Alan Merriam, two of the most prominent proponents of the existence of polymeter in African music.²⁴ As Agawu rightly points out, using different meters to depict the parts played by the various musicians in an ensemble ignores two important aspects of their relationship to each other. The first is the fact that they are all linked together by a common pulse that allows both the musicians to play together coherently and the dancers to move to the simultaneously interacting rhythms in an organized manner. The second is that “polymeter fails to convey the true accentual structure of African music insofar as it erases the essential tension between a firm and stable background and a fluid foreground” (2003, 84-85). What is actually happening, instead of different parts being played in contrasting meters, is that complimentary rhythms, linked by a unifying pulse, combine to create a multidimensional layer of rhythmic stratification that allows soloists

²⁴ See Jones (1959) and Merriam (1982).

performing with the ensemble, be they instrumentalists, singers, or dancers, the freedom to explore multiple rhythmic schemes within a single solo while still maintaining a smoothly flowing performance. This view is supported by African musician Meki Nzewi, who describes why concepts such as polymeter, two-against-three rhythmic groupings, and cross rhythms go against traditional African beliefs when he states that such concepts are “antithetical to African social and, therefore, ensemble philosophy. A community/family/team does not work together at cross purposes. This musical structure, which has depth essence, derives from the African philosophy of interdependence in human relationships” (1997, 39).²⁵ What Nzewi is really pointing out is that conceptualizations of how music is organized need to reflect guiding principles of the society in which the musicians who play the music live.

I prefer to conceptualize the rhythmic interconnectedness inherent in African musical performance that Agawu and Nzewi describe above as rhythmic symbiosis. Instead of contrasting or cross rhythms that compete for the attention of the listener, the rhythms complement one another to form an interpenetrating network that allows performers to maintain relatively brief, repetitive figures over an extended period of time while still maintaining the interest of all involved participants in the experience. I choose the term symbiosis because, like a biological symbiotic relationship, where two organisms need each other in order to survive, the multiple interacting rhythms inherent in African musical performance need each other’s coexistence for the performative musical tradition to survive. The different musical ostinatos maintained by the performers react to and feed off of each other to create the rhythmic lexicon the soloist

²⁵Quoted in Agawu (2003, 92).

uses to enhance the total artistic experience. The soloist and accompanists need each other as well, for one's rhythmic excursions are grounded in the stability of the others' – albeit a stability marked by the cohesion of complexly interlocking patterns that can appear rhythmically unrelated to the individual not accustomed to their necessary relationship.

Griot Performance as a Means of Cultural Preservation

Within Mande society, the role of the griot can be stated simply as a professional musician and oral historian, but the Mande griots can be better characterized as “artisans and shapers of sound (words and music) much as *numus* [blacksmiths] are artisans and shapers of metal, wood, and clay” (Charry 2000, 90).²⁶ The griot's obligation is to convey the collective memory and history of her/his people in a way that both brings it to life and imbues it with a significance directly perceived by the people to whom it is conveyed. This is done through the recitation of narratives that relate the history of specific events, with a focus on the people who figure most prominently in those events, in a performance that brings the history to life and inspires the descendants of those prominent individuals by filling them with pride in the noble deeds of their ancestors and inspiring them to carry on the same tradition of illustriousness through their own actions. In this way, the griot creates a connection between individuals in her/his society and their past, thus forging a link between the memory and history of a society.

Pierre Nora has argued that in modern French society, memory and history are no longer equivalent, and “history's goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what

²⁶ I am using the more commonly known French term, *griot*, instead of the Maninka *jeli* or Mandinka *jali*, both of which refer to people who fulfill the same roles within Mande society. For a more detailed explanation of the griot's role in Mande society, see Charry (2000, 90-192).

has in reality taken place,” the reason for this being that “history is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (1989, 9). To make up for this separation between history and memory, Nora argues that *lieux de mémoire*, or “sites of memory,” have been created as physical reminders of, and connections to, a collective memory that is no longer accessible otherwise, as it is not part of people’s lived existence. Nora states that these *lieux de mémoire* exist because “there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory” (1989, 7). But for the Mande people, these *milieux de mémoire* do still exist, even in the post-colonial context of modern nations whose cultural heritage has suffered from the disruptions of colonial rule. It is precisely the accessible resurrection of collective memory by the griot through her/his performance that *milieux de mémoire* are maintained within Mande culture, allowing people to interact directly with the remembrance of their ancestors as a source of inspiration to live up to, and ideally to surpass, the accomplishments of their forebears. This perpetuation of *milieux de mémoire* is manifest even more specifically within Mande society because the traditional Mande epics that are recited by griots commemorate specific acts by specific members of different families. Thus, one would only sing songs that venerate members of a specific family at an event either hosted by or celebrating individuals from that same family, consequently using genetic affiliations to biologically link the individual to ancient recollections of her/his progenitors.

Lieux de mémoire also exist in contemporary Guinea. I interpret *lieux de mémoire* here as being official, state-sanctioned sites, such as museums, libraries, and monuments. While Mande griots can serve as official representatives of the government,²⁷ it is

²⁷ See pages 79 and 87 below.

nevertheless the *milieux de mémoire* that griots create through their performances that keep Mande cultural heritage continuously present in and relevant to their people's everyday lives.

Phenomenology of Mande Griot Performance

While I have referred to griot performance and its capabilities to interactively preserve and transmit the collected wisdom and knowledge of Mande culture as creating *milieux de mémoire*, as described by Pierre Nora, I must point out, in concurrence with Diana Taylor, that there are aspects of contemporary griot performance that defy the concept of *milieux de mémoire* and more rightly belong to Taylor's concept of the "repertoire."²⁸ Taylor points out that Nora posits the *lieux de mémoire* and the *milieux de mémoire* as polar opposites within a bifurcated construction of the realization of societal memory through time. The *milieux* represent a lost, inaccessible, idealized past that is no longer recoverable in the modern context of contemporary Europe, which relies on fragmented reifications of its past, and the *lieux de mémoire* connect the individuals within the contemporary society to their forgotten collective memories. In my attempts to show that Mande griot performances can represent a modern example of *milieux de mémoire* in a society that engages in a perpetual dialogue with its traditions and modernities, looking simultaneously to its future and its past, I have articulated a concept akin to Taylor's repertoire, which "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing ... [and] allows for individual agency.... The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being a part of the transmission" (Taylor, 2003, 20).

²⁸ See Taylor (2003, 21-22) for a discussion of how Nora's categories of *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire* correspond to her categories of the archive and the repertoire.

This idea of the necessity of being there invokes Heidegger's *Dasein*, with its inherent ontological existence as *Befindlichkeit*, or "the state in which one may be found," which Heidegger equates to the state of *Gestimmtsein*, or "being attuned" (1962, 172). The Heideggerian sense of *Befindlichkeit* is definitely applicable to the griot performance as interactive repertoire, as it is through performance that the griot locates him/herself within the Mande tradition of musical-cultural history by evoking the collective memory of her/his society. Thus the griot is literally "found" in the re-creation of her/his historico-performative narrative. So too, however, is the listener/participant found in the griot performance, as the recalling of the deeds of one's family both locate one within the familiar-cultural-historical continuum of one's ancestry and inspire one to carry that legacy forward and make one's own contribution to the master narrative that will be sung by future griots to inspire one's progeny in the same manner. By being found in this manner, the individual actualizes her/his inherent existential state of "being-in-the-culture," as it were, and is "attuned"²⁹ to her/his direct, participatory connection to the collective memory of the society.

This understanding of one's place in one's cultural history and collective memory, however, is not suddenly revealed later in one's life when one is being praised by a traditional griot. One is taught from an early age, whether by one's parents or other relatives, through cultural education classes, through formal school education,³⁰ or attending – as well as undergoing one's own – ceremonies that mark traditional rites of

²⁹ Ironically, *Stimmung*, the German root of *Gestimmstein*, refers to the tuning of a musical instrument, subtly underscoring the importance of music to the connection between individuals and their culture.

³⁰ While in Guinea, I also attended a concert put on at one of the local high schools, the Lycée Aviation, on April 1, 2004, and in between two of the music acts was a recitation of part of the Sunjata epic, in French, by students at the Lycée, dressed in traditional costumes.

passage³¹ within Mande society. This ongoing cultural education occurs both in urban and rural environments. When I traveled to Guinea in 2004, the first week I was there³² I stayed with the family of Ousmane Sylla, *Chef-de-centre* of Cité de l'air, a suburb of Conakry near the Conakry-Gbessia International Airport. As *Chef-de-centre*, Msr. Sylla is in charge of cultural instruction of all the boys of the *centre*, helping to prepare them for their passage from childhood to adulthood. In the home of Namankoumba Kouyaté,³³ all his children, both male and female, learn to play the balafon as part of their everyday experience. Professor Kouyaté explained to me that at first the children are taught to play the instrument. Then, over time, as they become older, they are taught the words of the different songs they have learned to play on the balafon. Eventually, as the child grows to adulthood, he/she learns the stories behind all of the songs and the skills needed to improvise, both vocally and instrumentally, to create a fully effective, and affective, performance of the Mande griot repertoire (personal conversation, 11 April 2004).

Professor Kouyaté explained to me that the purpose of the balafon is to keep the songs alive that preserve the knowledge and history of the Mande people, and this is why Sunjata gave the Sosso Bala to his griot Balafaséké Kouyaté (personal interview, 13 April 2004). The balafon has served throughout history to supply musical accompaniment to the songs that recount the deeds of the different heroes of the Mande and episodes from different periods of Mande history. Unlike reading about this information in a book, witnessing a griot performance brings the material to life in a way that makes it

³¹ Mande individuals encounter griot performances at various different ceremonies – such as baby namings, coming of age ceremonies for boys and girls, weddings, and funerals – throughout their lives, and there is almost always at least one bala player performing at these ceremonies.

³² March 27 – April 5, 2004.

³³ See pages 9 and 15 above.

immediately accessible and engaging to the listener/participant. The balafon not only provides the musical accompaniment but also helps with the fixation of the songs within the memory of both the griot and her/his audience. Furthermore, the balafon serves as a constant reminder of its musical ancestor, the Sosso Bala, a physical symbol of the cohesion, strength, unity, and freedom of the Mande people and their culture, so that each time one hears the balafon, one is reminded of this sacred icon of Mande culture. Thus the balafon serves, in all the aforementioned ways, as the supportive undergirding for the preservation and dissemination of Mande collective memory, history, and cultural identity.

Performing Africa in Various Contexts

While traditional Mande griot performances help to preserve and perpetuate Mande culture, and balafon performance plays an instrumental role in reinforcing awareness of Mande culture, especially in Guinea, one must also examine the performance of what anthropologist Paulla Ebron refers to as “the Africa,”³⁴ especially as music and dance is presented to audiences outside of the continent. In her book *Performing Africa*, Ebron examines how Gambian *jalolu*³⁵ performance defines, reinterprets, and reinforces notions of Africa, addressing the sociocultural and political implications of African performance and the various forces that shape its consumption. Particularly important is her analysis of the concept of “African music” and how this homogenizing musical category has largely been created in opposition to the equally assimilative concept of “Western art music.” Ebron points out two elements most

³⁴ She initially defines “the Africa” as “a term that collectivizes Africa and marks the importance of representations that fix the continent as a homogeneous object.” (Ebron 2002, 1)

³⁵ This term is the Mandinka equivalent of the Maninka *jelilu*. The Mandinka are a Mande group who live predominantly in present-day Gambia and southern Senegal in a region known as the Casamance.

commonly attributed to African music: “rhythmic repetition” and “community feeling” (Ebron 2002, 33-34). While she acknowledges that these two traits may be common to many different musical traditions throughout Africa, she also believes that these characterizations have become stereotypes, through their constant repetition in both scholarly and popular literature, and thus “constrain the range of possibilities found in music across the continent” (Ebron 2002, 34). Ebron focuses on two influential books³⁶ written by ethnomusicologists on the subject of African music and how these works have used the technique of setting up African music and Western art music as opposites to both help create and reinforce the emphasis on rhythmic repetition and community feeling as the most salient aspects of African music.

While Ebron makes a valid point about how such categorizations can be, and have been, used to present Africa as an exotic, essentialized “other” to the academically- and societally-privileged concept of Western art music in Europe and North America, these two aspects of musical performance in many parts of Africa are still useful as analytical concepts, especially as they reflect elements of processes of musical performance in Africa that are also reflected in African American musical practices.

African American composer Olly Wilson has proposed that the relationship between African and African American musics is best understood not in a direct comparison of certain specific rhythmic patterns or other “quantitative” aspects of musical practice, but instead in a “common sharing of a core of conceptual approaches to the process of music-making ... The common core of this Africanness [in African American musics] consists of a way of doing something, not simply something that is

³⁶ Specifically, Bebey (1975) and Chernoff (1979).

done” (2001, 154).³⁷ Wilson refers to these core conceptual approaches to the process of music-making as “cultural predispositions” that “also reflect basic values in the culture” (2001, 156). One of these cultural predispositions that Wilson lists is the practice of music as a “communal activity,” where “the basic conception of music entails the notion of inclusion, of participatory, integrative engagement of the entire community” (2001, 161). The concept of music performance as communal activity is particularly relevant to group interaction in Mande balafon performance. Each player has his own role within the group, yet the solo/accompaniment, background/foreground, and other musical relationships in the group are negotiated through performance so that the ensemble performs as a cohesive whole, creating excitement and variety while sounding like a single, interconnected unit.

This notion of African musical performance as a communal experience, however, also extends to the audience. Wilson describes how performance in both African and African American musical traditions is specifically designed to encourage participation by everyone involved, no matter how peripherally (2001, 161), and this is no less true of Mande balafon performance, whether that participation manifests itself in the excited audience members who are moved to dance before the musicians, the individuals whose heritage is praised by the *jeli* singer being accompanied by the balafonists, those inspired to give money to either the musicians or the people being honored by the *jeli* singer, or those merely clapping their hands and moving their bodies along with the beat while they

³⁷ Wilson is referring here to the difference between his methodology and the one used by Gunther Schuller (1968), where scholars attempt to pinpoint an evolutionary relationship between West African traditional music and early jazz by comparing transcriptions of both and pointing to specific rhythmic and structural similarities between the two styles of music. For further criticism of Schuller’s evolutionist approach to understanding jazz history, see Monson (1996, 133-137).

remain on the periphery watching and listening. By drawing the audience into the performance, the musicians create a sense of community between themselves and the audience that can be beneficial to both parties, as the audience members have the satisfaction of having participated in a inspiring, shared, aesthetic experience, and the musicians have expanded their audience in a way that may benefit them financially – through an increase in invitations to perform at family events, official ceremonies, or even public concerts.

Another African cultural predisposition that Wilson attributes to African American music is the use of what he calls “rhythmic contrast.” Rhythmic contrast is achieved by juxtaposing two different layers of rhythmic activity – one that maintains a repetitive pattern and another that improvises and varies its rhythmic patterns. Wilson states that the “interaction between fixed and variable rhythmic strata that exists within an interlocked rhythmic-metrical framework is a means of establishing rhythmic contrast” (2001,164). While I agree in principle with Wilson’s observation that an interaction between fixed and variable rhythmic strata is an important characteristic of both African music and jazz, I have a problem with his term rhythmic contrast. He bases this term upon analysis and transcriptions from famous Africanist ethnomusicologists³⁸ who prefer to use contentious terminology³⁹ to describe the use of rhythm in African music. The use of antagonistic terminology to describe African music runs counter to African principles of inclusion and creating community through music making.

³⁸ See Jones (1959), Merriam (1982), and Nketia (1974).

³⁹ I refer specifically to such terms as “polymeter,” “cross-rhythms,” and “two-against-three.” See Agawu (2003, 71-96) for a thorough critique of the accuracy of Jones’s use of concepts such as “polymeter” and “additive rhythm” to describe the conceptualization of rhythm in African music.

I propose an alternate term to describe the same phenomena in African and African American musics, and that is “multidimensional complementarity.” This term indicates that while multiple layers of rhythm can be occurring simultaneously, they also relate to an underlying regular pulse or groove that binds the music together, complimenting the underlying groove by weaving in and out of it to create interest, excitement, and propulsion in the music. Nevertheless, the use of multiple layers of rhythm still adheres to the African principle of inclusion by using rhythmic improvisation to reinforce, not counteract, the groove. Wilson himself, in the same article, refers to Kofi Agawu’s conclusion, based on his study of Northern Ewe music in Ghana, that “the concept of rhythm is *multidimensional*” (Wilson 2001, 165).⁴⁰ He further quotes Agawu’s statement that “rhythm refers to a binding together of different dimensional processes, *a joining rather than a separating*” (Agawu 1995, 7).⁴¹ This use of interacting rhythms as a force to unify multiple layers of musical interaction thus allows the performance to coalesce without sacrificing the ability of the individual musicians to experiment with creative methods of rhythmic interpretation.⁴²

Perhaps ironically, Ebron herself describes how both communal aesthetics and community relations are reinforced through Mande musical performance in the Gambia. While the following passage is particularly long, I choose to quote it in its entirety, as Ebron encapsulates well the many levels of interaction between participants in a contemporary performance of traditional music in Africa. As she states,

⁴⁰ Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Quoted in Wilson, 165, emphasis mine.

⁴² I will explore this idea further, providing supporting musical examples from my transcriptions of Mande balafon accompaniments, in Chapter Four.

The performance site was not restricted to what was formally happening on stage; rather, the stage extended to include audience members as well. The performance generated a variety of distinctions. Performers differed in status from their patrons; jali⁴³ marked their distinctions in manner, speech, and dress. The play of praises, donations, and self-presentations contrasted rank, individual power, and prestige. Social networks were displayed when associates of an honored guest made public donations to further praise the important person and, by extension, his jali. Gender distinctions within the performance event further framed personal displays of control, sometimes at the borders of appropriate self-display and restraint. Gender lines were affirmed and manipulated as elite men displayed their status by gathering jali praises, as wives showed off their finery and honored their husbands by donations to the jali who praised them, or as unmarried elite girls displayed their modesty and coy reserve. (Ebron 2002, 65)

From this description, we can see many ways in which differentiations between performer and audience are reinforced. Nevertheless, the performance creates a communal atmosphere wherein the aforementioned social relationships may be acted out, perpetuating self-reinforcing behaviors that are memorialized in the stories recounted by jalolu during the course of the event. Ebron uses this description of a jali performance in the Gambia to support her application of Pierre Bordieu's concept of *habitus* to jali performance as a means of showing how social interactions among Mande are embodied, negotiated, and sustained by the participants in a specific occasion. She does so convincingly, but her explication also reinforces the importance of the communal nature of African musical performance and how specific examples can be used to support such a conceptual framework.

Understandings of African musical performance, and the aesthetics thereof, exist on many levels, especially once such a performance is removed from an African context

⁴³ Ebron uses the singular Mandinka term "jali" in place of the Mandinka plural "jalolu" or Anglicised plural "jalis" throughout *Performing Africa*.

and transplanted overseas. Ebron also describes how different conceptualizations of “the Africa” are negotiated through communal performer-audience interaction during African musical performances in the United States. She relates her impressions of a performance given by a group of musicians from Guinea at a small coffee house in Santa Cruz, California. Ebron contrasts this performance with one she described earlier in *Performing Africa* – a concert at a large New England performing hall where the distinctions between the Africa, portrayed in the music and costuming of the Gambian musicians on the stage, and Western, Euro-American concert aesthetics, reflected in the separation between audience and performers and audience behavior (Ebron 2002, 57-61). She describes how, immediately prior to its inception, the Santa Cruz performance displayed many of the same oppositional conceptualizations as the New England performance, but then prepares her readers for the description of the actual event by stating that “rather than simply being a performance for tourists that reproduced binary distinctions between the West and Africa, this performance realized more flexibility and allowed for the display of the cultural knowledge of audience members” (Ebron 2002, 62). Ebron recounts how different audience members rewarded a particularly impressive jembe soloist in a manner that reflected their knowledge of West African aesthetics. She also depicts the results of the lead drummer’s actions at the end of the concert, when he invited audience members to participate in the performance, first by clapping along and then by joining the musicians and dancing next to them onstage. Ebron explains that one of the women who joined the musicians onstage danced in a manner that revealed that she had studied African dance at some point, thus displaying more than just a cursory knowledge of the cultural background of the performers and their musical tradition.

Through her description of this performance, Ebron points out that the barriers of separation between socially constructed oppositional categories can be transgressed in the process of performance, stating that “the mingling of audience and performers disassembled, if only momentarily, ‘The Africa’ and the ‘West’ as homogeneous entities” (Ebron 2002, 63). What Ebron does not point out here, however, is that it is the communal nature of this performance of African music that provides the environment for the dissolution of boundaries between the two artificial constructions of “The Africa” and the “West.”⁴⁴ It is the lead drummer’s act of inviting the audience to participate that creates the performative possibility to overcome preconceived notions of societal boundaries.

The lead drummer’s action of incorporating the audience into the performance helps to contextualize the music in a way that gives the audience participants a taste of the interactive nature of Mande musical performance within an African context. Also importantly, however, it exemplifies the importance of agency to the performance of Mande music and the ability of the leader of the group, whether that leader is a drummer or a *jeli*, to determine the nature of the performance and how it will reflect, or deflect, notions about Africa, Africans, and African music. The agency of the performer of Mande music, and how s/he negotiates between the conceptual boundaries of tradition and modernity, the West and Africa, performer and audience, subject and object, orality and literacy, is a complex topic that extends beyond musical performance and into other realms of expressive culture. In order to further illuminate contemporary scholarship on

⁴⁴ In Chapter Five I will elucidate one of the ways my primary balafon teacher, Abou Sylla, helps break down barriers of misapprehension about African music by creating a cultural context of understanding in his balafon workshops in the United States.

the agency of identity construction through performance in Francophone Africa, I will next examine some of the key ideas addressed in *Singular Performances: Reinscribing the Subject in Francophone African Writing* (2002), Michael Syrotinski's examination of contemporary African literature and the way different Francophone African authors have used literature as a means of recreating post-colonial African identity in ways that reflect their own experiences as Africans and challenge many of the stereotypical constructions of Africa as the primitive "Other" of Western subjectivity.

Ideas about Contemporary African Subjectivity

Syrotinski begins his exploration of subjectivity and narrative agency in Francophone African literature by examining the works of a Congolese native who is a renowned philosopher, author, and educator, and who has written extensively on issues of identity in post-colonial Africa – Valentin Y. Mudimbe. Mudimbe's writings are grounded in both the continental philosophical tradition of Europe, relying heavily on French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault, and the structuralist thought of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Nevertheless, Mudimbe seeks to overcome their Western biases and apply the most salient aspects of their thought to issues of identity in post-colonial Africa. Syrotinski examines a philosophical rumination by Mudimbe, included in the preface to Mudimbe's *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa* (1991), in which Mudimbe explores the links between the *cogito* of Rene Descartes and the theories of subjectivity expounded by Sartre and Lévi-Strauss. Mudimbe aligns the Cartesian *cogito* with Sartre's existential subject and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss with the anti-Cartesian ideas of Rousseau,

such as the identification of the self with “the most humble of ‘others’.” As Syrotinski explains,

Structuralist anthropology’s “I as an other” is a fundamental rejection of the self-sufficiency or self-reflexivity of the *cogito*, but for Mudimbe this opens up a new dialectic in which self and other come to be engaged in a subtle play of identity and alterity, of self-recognition and self-difference: Lévi-Strauss’s journeys are equally those of his own subjectivity, just as Sartre’s philosophy of the subject is at the same time a necessary integration of the other in an existential determination of the self. ... Mudimbe’s ... strategy in pitting these apparently incompatible thinkers against each other is to seek some way of bridging and moving beyond the opposition between agency and structure. (Syrotinski 2002, 3-4)

Thus the individual seeking to depict the subjectivity of contemporary Africans in relation to their current situation must account for both the intentionality of the individual trying to forge her/his own path and the reconciliation of the structural duality of native, pre-colonial influences and the colonial disruption of these strategies, a disruption with its own lingering affects, not the least of which is the language writers use in their attempts to “reinscribe” the contemporary African subject.

Syrotinski also examines other ways in which the subject, especially the contemporary African subject, must struggle against those who would define her/him. He examines different ideas in contemporary French philosophy⁴⁵ that seek to recast the “unified, fully intentional subject” as the product of discourse and thus subject to other power/s. Syrotinski explains that while such an approach can “be mapped onto the scene of the philosophically sanctioned colonialist subjugation of the African other,” it still does not resolve the agency/structure dilemma faced by the African artist seeking to evoke her/his own distinctly African subjectivity. In order to explain how specific

⁴⁵ Specifically, those of Lacan, Althusser, and Foucault. See Syrotinski (2002, 5).

Francophone African writers negotiate this dilemma through their works, he discusses Judith Butler's idea that "the subject is the locus of a radical and *irreducible* ambivalence"⁴⁶ (Syrotinski 2002, 5-6). He explains this idea further by quoting Butler, who states that "the subject is the site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency" (Butler 1997, 15).⁴⁷ Syrotinski states that such an ambivalence accurately depicts the predicament of the Francophone African subject, and that the writers whose work he analyzes in *Singular Performances* embrace this ambivalence, using it as a launching pad from which they can explore, through individualistic narrative exegesis, their existential situation (Syrotinski 2002, 6).

Syrotinski investigates further the ways Mudimbe explores the play between issues of agency and structure, and how they can be manipulated to create a new form of subjective narrative that reflects the issues faced by contemporary Francophone Africans as they seek to determine their own identity, through an examination of Mudimbe's novel *L'ecart* (1979). Syrotinski uses the term "performative reinscription" (2002, 13, 38) to describe the way Mudimbe plays with narrative form and technique in *L'ecart* to portray the difficulties faced by an African man "whose life is consumed by the struggle to affirm an African subjectivity in the face of the apparently overwhelming forces of history, anthropology, and psychoanalysis," (Syrotinski 2002, 7). The novel is written in the form of a diary, with entries depicting the final weeks before the death of its author, an African student who has returned home from Paris to finish his history dissertation. The narrative technique Mudimbe employs in *L'ecart* allows him both to depict the

⁴⁶ Emphasis Syrotinski's. He refers to and cites ideas set forth in Butler (1997).

⁴⁷ Quoted in Syrotinski (2002, 5).

impressions of the main character, Nara, in his encounters with the many people who have influenced him – his friends in Africa; Aminata, an African woman with whom he develops a relationship; Isabelle, a Parisian woman with whom he had an affair, and a psychiatrist whom he visits – and to shift back and forth between the present of the novel and Nara’s childhood, his time in Paris, and scenes he has reconstructed of life in precolonial Africa. According to Syrotinski, “the effect of the fragmentary and notational nature of his [Mudimbe’s] text ... is to blur the distinctions between his past and his present, between his own life and the life of the precolonial Kuba, between Isabelle and Aminata, and so on, thereby drawing attention to the fabric of the text itself, ... [so] the novel can at this level be read ... as a struggle for narrative agency” (Syrotinski 2002, 33). This narrative style reflects the “irreducible ambivalence” of the lived experience of the modern Francophone African subject. In this case, we have an individual, Nara, who must reconcile the demands of his desire to “decolonize” previous Western ethnographic accounts of the people whose history he seeks to reconstruct, but he must do it in a form and in a language that directly reflects the influence of the colonial power that, by educating him in one of its universities, has both enabled him to attempt such a task and drastically disrupted, during the era of colonialism, the way of life Nara seeks to reconstruct. Such a situation reflects the complexity of the situation in which the contemporary Francophone African finds her/himself as s/he struggles to construct her/his own identity within the confines of her/his lived situation.

Syrotinski’s analysis of Mudimbe’s writing and how it reflects the ability of the contemporary Francophone African author to navigate the discursive chasm between subjective agency and structural determination of an individual’s identity is directly

applicable to the dilemma facing contemporary francophone African artists who work in other media, also. The Mande *jeli*, especially, must face a similar dilemma in her/his efforts to create for her/himself a current identity that reflects both her/his adherence to ancient traditions governing the practice of her/his art and her/his need to fulfill both her/his own needs as a modern artist and the needs of her/his patron, who is also faced with the task of living up to her/his hereditary obligations while simultaneously forging a distinctive, contemporary persona. Being an artist concerned primarily with the spoken, as opposed to the written, word, the *jeli* must engage in a different kind of narrative technique to reflect the paradoxical ambivalence of her/his existence. The *jeli* does this in the context of performance by manipulating the textual formulas that govern the specific songs s/he sings to recount the deeds of her/his patron's ancestors. Each of the praise songs in a *jeli*'s repertoire are designated to a specific lineage group, recounting the deeds of heroic ancestors within that lineage, but the *jeli* decides which of the constituent stories contained within any given song are to be recited, and thus receive the most emphasis during the course of any given performance. By manipulating the narrative in such a manner, the *jeli* literally sings the identity of both her/himself and her/his patron into being during the course of performance, controlling which aspects of a patron's ancestry are emphasized, elaborating on how the patron both fits into and contributes to the propagation of that lineage, and elucidating the role of the *jeli* and her/his ancestors in documenting and encouraging the noble deeds performed by the patron and her/his ancestors. As Ebron accurately states:

For jali,⁴⁸ performance is not just a medium of transmission for history. History is made in performance, as one can see in the telling of the story of Sunjata; a jali's words move the patron to action. Words themselves have the charisma to make history, and jali performance is the enactment of the mastery of words. Jali⁴⁹ are responsible for ceremonies in which the name of a child is announced to the community; the name makes the child part of an ongoing social narrative, stretching from the past to the future. Jali⁵⁰ goad their patrons into making history that can be told. ... Jali performance is an active process of appropriating and linking the past to the present in a way that can chart the direction for future action. (2002, 100).

Extending Syrotinski's concept of a "performative reinscription of subjectivity" to *jeliya*,⁵¹ I submit that what the *jeli* engages in is a performative *re-enchantment* of subjectivity, whereby s/he forges anew the identities of her/himself and her/his patron by using the traditional art of *jeliya* to recount the heritage passed down over generations and applying it to a contemporary context. This context allows for a subjective musical performance, a form of agency that is enacted not through a mere verbatim repetition of lifeless facts, but instead through the creative re-imagination of the cultural elements that link the individual to her/his past, present, and future within Mande society.

It is not only the choice of narratives related in any given *jeli* performance, however, that contribute to its efficaciousness. There is a specific style of speech, known as *jelikan*, that *jelilu* exercise during performance. In her article "Power, Structure, and Mande *Jeliw*"⁵² (1995), Barbara Hoffman analyzes the characteristics of *jelikan* that make it such a powerfully affective aspect of *jeli* performance. She states that "griot language (*jelikan*) ... derives power from a simple syntactic structure whose meaning is

⁴⁸ See note 43, page 46 above.

⁴⁹ See note 43, page 46, above.

⁵⁰ See note 43, page 46, above.

⁵¹ Maninka term for "the art of the *jeli*."

⁵² The Bamana equivalent of the Maninka *jelilu*.

made obscure. I agree ... that of all the verbal performance genres the griot masters, *jelikan* is the most laden with dangerous force (*nyama*), the most powerful in its impact upon the hearer, and the most empowering for its speaker” (Hoffman 1995, 41). She describes how, syntactically, *jelikan* consists of strings of noun phrases that are uttered, usually in a rapid, vociferous manner during climactic moments, though they can take place at any point during a performance. What makes *jelikan* so particularly powerful is the ambiguity of its meaning. Hoffman states that for both *jeli* and patron, the “referential content” is largely unknown for most *jelikan* phrases, but the meaning of each individual phrase lies in “its membership in the class of phrases that can be sung for a person of a specific clan” (Hoffman 1995, 41). It is precisely this ambiguity of *jelikan*, however, that makes it so powerful. As Hoffman explains, “the obscurity of its referential content in the performance context is an important aspect of the *nyama* of *jelikan*” (Hoffman 1995, 41). The reason why the referential obscurity of *jelikan* makes it so powerful is that it reflects “the Mande aesthetic principle that equates clarity of form and meaning with truth, purity, and straightforwardness while the obscurity of form and meaning is associated with secrecy, darkness, and tremendous power (*nyama*)” (Hoffman 1995, 39).⁵³ This Mande aesthetic that equates power with ambiguity only underscores the importance of the *jeli*’s use of obscure verbal formulas to infuse her/his performances with a specific type of power that has primary relevance to the *jeli* and her/his patron. By utilizing such a radically creative form of agency that nonetheless reinforces core Mande aesthetic traditions, the *jeli* negotiates her/his “irreducible ambivalence” through

⁵³ Hoffman is here describing a principle of Mande aesthetics discussed by Patrick McNaughton (1979) in reference to the reasons why the sculptures of the Komo secret society are considered to be so powerful among the Mande.

performance, thus actualizing her/his creative potentiality to forge an identity that reflects the ostensibly competing demands of agency and structure, yet s/he does this in a complementary way that blends agency and structure, harmoniously actualizing the existential possibility of contemporary African artistic being.

I do not, however, want to give readers the impression that it is only through speech and lyrical content that the *jeli* wields her/his power to transform relationships of identity through performance. In order to bring the discussion of identity formation through *jeli* performance back to the Mande balafon tradition and illustrate the way a masterful performer can instrumentally control a social situation, I will relate an account in which my primary teacher, Abou Sylla, used his instrumental prowess and presence as a respected musician to take command of a celebration, reinforcing social relationships and respect for tradition while reaffirming his own status as a revered member of the Mande *jeli* community in the coastal region of Guinea.

It was the night of April 18, 2005, and my friend Olushola, Abou, and I had traveled to Coyah, a small town approximately 55 km northeast of Conakry, to attend a *dununba* being held for the coastal Mande griots association of Guinea. The celebration had already started by the time we arrived. The crowd was assembled in a large semicircle, and the musicians were seated next to each other, performing at the open end. The ensemble was typical for this type of gathering, with three balafonists – two accompanists and one soloist – one *jembe* player, two *boté* players, an electric guitarist, and two singers who alternated as the sole vocalist, switching every two or three songs. In the open center of the circle, people from the audience would take turns dancing to instrumental interludes between the songs. During the vocal performances, the patron to

whom the *jeli* was singing would start at the opposite end of the circle, parading slowly forward while the *jelimuso*⁵⁴ sang her/his praises. The whole time the patron slowly half-walked/half-danced to the other end of the semi-circle in front of the musicians, the patron was surrounded by a crowd of people, some swaying in time with the music, others showering the patron with small-denomination Guinea Franc bills, the local paper currency. When the patron arrived directly in front of the *jelimuso*, s/he would begin showering the *jelimuso* with bills, while an assistant with the musicians would hold up a tray next to the *jelimuso* for donations for the musicians. If the patron or a member of her/his entourage was particularly moved by one of the instrumentalists' playing, s/he would place bills directly in front of that musician, sometimes even putting them directly onto the musician's forehead, where they adhered due to his perspiration.

When we arrived, Abou announced to Olushola and me his displeasure at the chaotic nature of the performance and the disrespectful nature of the participants. He told us how there was no structure to the performance and no one was taking charge, guiding the event through its proper sequence and scolding those who were not observing traditional performance customs and etiquette. Eventually, Abou literally took matters into his own hands, taking over as balafon soloist and directing the performance. As lead musician, he controlled the tempo of the pieces played, made sure the correct pieces were played for the appropriate patrons, took the microphone between songs and either reprimanded those who were not behaving properly or praised those who were, and used his virtuoso talents as a musician to inject the performance with a spirit and intensity that was lacking before his participation. By taking command of the performance at a high-

⁵⁴ *Jelimuso* is the Maninka term for a female *jeli* singer. At this particular performance, both singers were women, though I have seen traditional Mande performances in Guinea where the vocalist was a male *jeli*.

profile gathering of his peers, some of the most highly respected *jelilu* in Guinea, Abou showed the assembled crowd that in spite of the amount of time he has spent in the U.S., neither his skills as a musician nor his knowledge of and respect for Mande *jeliya* and customs have diminished.

Summary

The Mande balafon clearly holds an important place in the collective consciousness of Mande culture. As one of the defining symbols of the thirteenth-century founding of the Mande Empire of Mali, the Sosso Bala, from which all other Mande balafons are derived, embodies the spiritual power, strength, and unity of Mande peoples everywhere. The balafons currently being played today by Mande *jelilu* serve as ever-present reminders of the resiliency of Mande traditional culture and the significance of their history as part of their everyday, contemporary existence. The *jelilu* who use the Mande balafon to help them preserve and transmit Mande traditional knowledge and culture also play a crucial role in reinforcing the relevance of this knowledge to the lives of their people. As negotiators of social relations in Mande society, they reaffirm and recontextualize important social networks that bind the Mande together and ensure the preservation of their core beliefs and values that facilitate communal interaction.

The *jelilu* interact with their patrons in a way that I describe as a “benevolent symbiosis”⁵⁵ because of the way the two social groups rely on each other to perpetuate their mutual existence. The concept of symbiosis in Mande musical, artistic, and social relationships is important because it reflects the interconnectedness and communal values inherent in Mande society and artistic performance. This concept applies to the

⁵⁵ See page 26 above.

relationship between music and dance especially, and is embodied in the complex rhythmic interaction found in Mande musical performance, both between musicians and dancers and among the musicians themselves. This rhythmic interaction, which I conceptualize as “rhythmic symbiosis,”⁵⁶ characterizes not only Mande musical performance in particular but also many other types of African musical performance in general.

Interaction between performers and audience within the context of Mande griot performance is also significant for the perpetuation of Mande cultural traditions. This type of interaction helps create an environment wherein individuals within Mande societies can directly access the collective memory of their culture, as this memory is reaffirmed and brought to life for them through the medium of griot performance. The interactive “environment of memory”⁵⁷ that is created through the context of Mande griot performance creates a *milieu de mémoire*⁵⁸ that over time serves as a “repertoire”⁵⁹ through which the Mande individual engages in the participatory embodiment of her/his role in the perpetuation of Mande cultural heritage. The shared communal understanding of the inclusive role of the individual within Mande society, with its concomitant responsibility to help preserve and perpetuate that society, is nurtured from an early age. As the primary instrument used during Mande griot performances in Guinea, the balafon accompanies the individual throughout her/his life, its sound thus serving as a constant reminder of the ever-present past that helps shape the future of Mande society.

⁵⁶ See page 35 above.

⁵⁷ See page 37 above.

⁵⁸ See page 37 above.

⁵⁹ See page 38 above.

Scholars of Africa need to be wary, however, of overemphasizing the important of communal organization within individual African cultures, lest they create essentialized notions of an inherently rural, egalitarian, unsophisticated Africa that is diametrically opposed to the complex, urban, compartmentalized, alienating West. Characterizations of African music as based primarily on rhythm and reflecting communal organizing principles are rampant in academic writing, but if refined and adapted to specific circumstances, they can actually be used to show continuities between Africa and the West. The communal nature of some types of African musical performance can actually bring together African musicians and their Western audience, breaking down cultural barriers through participatory interaction.

As inhabitants of a modern, postcolonial Africa, contemporary *jelilu* must struggle in many ways to balance the demands placed upon them by various forces, using their artistry to reconcile all their various influences, whether African or Western, traditional or modern, urban or rural, individual or societal, into a carefully crafted identity that gives them the autonomy to perpetually renegotiate their existence while maintaining the continuity of their cultural heritage. The *jeli* resolves the competing demands of agency and structure by engaging in a “performative re-enchantment of subjectivity,”⁶⁰ using all the means at her/his disposal to fulfill her/his role in society while still maintaining the individuality that congeals her/his disparate influences into a unified, independent existence. The examination of the *jeli*’s ability to use her/his art to create a contemporary, individual identity that reinforces her/his cultural heritage leads us now to an exploration of the role of the balafon in Guinea specifically, and how the

⁶⁰ See page 54 above.

instrument and its performance have developed since the beginnings of the Mande balafon tradition.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ORIGIN OF THE MANDE BALAFON AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN GUINEA

In this chapter, I will explore how the Mande balafon, generally believed to be originating from a single instrument of divine origin, has traveled through time and space both to symbolize the solidarity and strength of a large transnational ethnic group, the Mande, and to serve as an identifying link between the modern African nation of Guinea and its traditional past. Having provided basic background information on the Mande balafon and its role in the preservation and transformation of Mande identity, I will now examine the origins of the Mande balafon and its development in Guinea. This process is an ongoing one that has thus far spanned approximately eight hundred years and continues to this day with no sign of diminishment. I will also describe the role of important individuals who have contributed to the advancement of the Mande balafon. It is important to understand how each has aided both in the extension the balafon itself and in the expansion of the instrument into new contexts. I will describe how the balafon has traversed the distance, both physically and symbolically, between the rural, traditional Mande heartland in northeastern Guinea and the nation's urban capital, Conakry, on Guinea's southwest Atlantic coast. The Mande balafon thus links the two realms in a way that reminds us that no matter how modern a contemporary African nation such as Guinea may become, its cultural heritage will play an integral part in that nation's identity, serving as a reminder of the necessary link between a people's past and their future.

Origins of the Mande Balafon I: Importance of Secrecy

One cannot examine the origins of the Mande balafon without making some reference to the Mande epic of Sunjata. As I stated in the previous chapter, the story of the Sosso Bala is part of the Sunjata epic. Different versions of the Sunjata epic have been translated into English and published,¹ providing examples of stories of the origin of the Mande balafon recounted by *jelilu* from different modern nations – specifically Guinea, Mali, and the Gambia – that were once part of the Mali Empire. As I stated in the previous chapter, most of the accounts agree that the original Mande balafon, the Sosso Bala, was given to Soumaoro Kanté by jinns, or supernatural spirits. These accounts also relate how Balafaséké Kouyaté came to be the only person allowed by Soumaoro Kanté to play his sacred balafon. In my examination of various origin stories of the Sosso Bala, I want to focus specifically on two aspects of these stories that both reveal important aspects of Mande culture and emphasize the importance of the Mande balafon to the preservation of Mande culture.

The first aspect I will examine is the element of secrecy, and the importance of maintaining a balance between preservation and transmission of Mande traditional knowledge. In his French verse transcription² of the Sunjata epic, *L'Aigle et l'épervier ou la geste du Sunjata* (1975), Massa Makan Diabaté, considered by many to be “the founder of Malian literature” (Keita 1995, 183), and of griot ancestry himself, defines the

¹ See Conrad and Condé (2004), Camara (1984), Niane (1965), Johnson and Sisòkò (2003), and Suso and Kanute (1999). Two versions of the origin of the Sosso Bala may also be found in Jessup (1983).

² In Diabaté’s (1975) version of the epic, the story is organized verse by verse, as the griot Kele Manson told it. See Miller (1990, 90, note 52). Conrad and Condé (2004), Johnson and Sisòkò (2003), and Suso and Kanute (1999) are also written in verse form, transcribed and translated directly into English by the authors from oral performances by Mande griots, though with varying amounts of edits and editorial comments by each author. Camara (1984) and Niane (1965) are novelizations of the epic, each author having transcribed the epic as told to him by a Mande griot and edited his transcription into the form of a novel, with minimal, explanatory footnotes, to make the story more accessible to readers.

etymology of Balafaséké Kouyaté's name. He states that *Bala* means "balafon"; *Faseke*, derived from *fasere*, means "witness"; and *Kuyate*, coming from *kuyante*, means "there is a secret between you and me" (Diabaté 1975, 60n.).³ Though this etymology is not part of the two best-known novelizations of the Sunjata epic (Niane 1965, Camara 1984), both of which have been translated into English from the original French, the etymology of Kouyaté as coming from *kou*, meaning "there," + *yé*, meaning "is," + *an*, meaning "something now," + *té*, meaning "between us" was corroborated by El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté in a personal interview (19 May 2005). Both of these etymologies refer to an episode in different versions of the Sunjata epic where Balafaséké makes his way into Soumaoro Kanté's secret chamber, where he keeps all his magical items, weapons, and trophies of war. When Balafaséké enters Soumaoro's reliquary, he is immediately drawn to the Sosso Bala and begins playing it, even though he is warned that Soumaoro has a supernatural connection to the instrument and will know immediately if someone else so much as touches the instrument. When Soumaoro returns to his chamber, knowing that someone is playing his sacred balafon that no one else is allowed to touch, Balafaséké immediately improvises a praise song to Soumaoro, who spares Balafaséké's life because he is so pleased by Balafaséké's singing and playing. Thus, the secret between Balafaséké and Soumaoro is that Soumaoro has allowed Balafaséké to play the Sosso Bala and, instead of immediately killing Balafaséké for his insolence, keeps Balafaséké in his service as his personal griot. Even more importantly, the establishment of Balafaséké as the first Mande griot to become caretaker of the Sosso Bala is shrouded, at least

³ Quoted in Miller (1990, 95). In this case the "you" is Balafaséké Kouyaté, and the "me" is Soumaoro Kanté.

initially, in secrecy, underscoring the importance to the griot of maintaining confidentiality.

In *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (1990), Christopher Miller examines the element of secrecy as it pertains to Mande griots and their obligations both to preserve and to protect their cultural knowledge. In his analysis of Niane's novelization⁴ of the Sunjata epic (1965), Miller relates the importance of secrecy for the Mande griot to the supremacy of orality as a means for preserving and transmitting knowledge, using the following passage to support his argument:

Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past any more, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice. With them everyone thinks he knows; but *knowledge must be a secret*. The prophets did not write and their words have been all the more vivid as a result. What paltry knowledge is contained in dumb books. (Niane 1965, 41)⁵

The griot is faced with a serious dilemma, however, as he must resolve the paradox of the need to represent truthfully his knowledge of Mande history and traditions and the need to use his oral artistry to manipulate his knowledge to address the conditions that have necessitated his performance. This dilemma is borne by the Mande griot, who must be born into his occupation, undergo years of rigorous apprenticeships, guard his traditional knowledge carefully, and be very careful to whom and how much he reveals his knowledge. The griot thus claims to pass along truthfully that which has been transmitted to him by his ancestors through the same exacting process.

In order to understand how the Mande griot's concept of a faithfully rendered tradition shrouded in secrecy still leaves room for the possibility of individual

⁴ See note 2, page 63, above.

⁵ Quoted in Miller (1990, 94). Emphasis Miller's.

interpretation through performance, we must reconsider the definition of the term tradition. As Zairian philosopher Okonda Okolo reminds us, tradition is more than merely “the matter that is delivered over and transmitted from generation to generation”; it is also “the action of delivery and of transmission” (1991, 202).⁶ Thus, “tradition finds itself fundamentally linked to the act of interpretation, which preserves and continues it” (Okolo 1991, 202-203). The griot therefore undergoes his extensive training not only to memorize and preserve his traditional knowledge but also to learn how to transmit it properly, so that only what is necessary for any given purpose need be revealed. Herein lies the secret of interpretation and the necessary connection between interpretation and tradition. This connection is similar to the Buddhist concept of *upaya*, or “skillful means,” where the Buddhist teacher reveals to his disciple only that which his disciple is capable of learning at any given moment, using only the means that the disciple is most likely to understand. Hence, for some of the Buddha’s disciples, enlightenment came only after years of prolonged study and meditation over the Buddha’s teachings, whereas Mahakashyapa, the first Zen patriarch, became enlightened at the instant that the Buddha, at the beginning of one of his lectures, briefly held up a flower and twirled it before saying anything. With a mere smile, Mahakashyapa conveyed back to the Buddha that he understood.⁷ My point here is that the griot, in order to maintain Mande traditional knowledge in a manner that preserves the integrity of his heritage while keeping it relevant to the needs of his contemporary society, must necessarily keep secret certain elements of that tradition in order to retain his power to reveal only that which is efficacious for meeting the necessary requirements of any given performance context.

⁶ Okolo cites Lanlande (1972, 1140) as the source of this expanded definition of tradition.

⁷ See Deiner (1989, 245) for a succinct recounting of this story.

The Mande *jeli* thus has an obligation both to maintain his cultural heritage as it has been transmitted to him and to interpret that tradition in a way that is useful to his patrons, himself, and his society. This obligation supersedes any desire on the part of Western researchers for an “objective” version of historical events. While many scholars have examined the reliability of oral history as a source for information about historical events (Goody 1987, Vansina 1985, et al.), the more important concern regarding the accuracy of historical information recounted in Mande griot performances is how that information is used to resolve cultural trauma through storytelling. Whether the context may be reinforcing social relationships between individuals, helping to create national identities for newly-independent countries in the wake of colonial disruption, or mediating conflicts between modern nations, the griot must use both the information and the means at his disposal as skillfully as possible to ameliorate the situation. Thus, the griot’s skills as a negotiator and manipulator of information are as important as the “objective” truth of any narrative he may present in the course of a performance.

Nevertheless, the balance between truthfulness and secrecy is still important to the griot, for a griot’s trustworthiness is a major factor in his success as a mediator in Mande society. If the griot cannot be trusted to maintain secrets, then his value as a confidant and advisor is compromised. The emphasis on trustworthiness as an important character trait for the *jeli* to possess also reflects the following important aspect of Mande society: “Silence and secrecy have an ontological status ... that is far superior to speech and knowledge. Speech must be controlled and contained if silence is to exercise its powers of truth, authenticity, seriousness, and healing” (Miller 1990, 95). It is the transition from silence to speech in which the potentially dangerous spiritual force, *nyama*, is released.

Hence, the *jeli*'s extensive training also becomes necessary for another reason: it prepares her/him to control the *nyama* released through speech, song, and instrumental performance. The *jeli*'s trustworthiness to manipulate the *nyama* released through performance and channel it into a benevolent purpose thus also becomes an important indicator of her/his skillfulness in continuing the cultural traditions of her/his ancestors in a way that also is useful to her/his contemporary patrons.

Origins of the Mande Balafon II: Importance of the Supernatural

The relationship between silence and sound, and the spiritual energy released during the process of creation, is relevant to the second aspect of the origin stories of the Sosso Bala that I will now examine: the importance of the supernatural. From its very beginning, the Sosso Bala was imbued with supernatural powers, having been created and given to Soumaoro Kanté by jinns.⁸ One published version of the Sunjata epic recounts how Soumaoro had to bargain with the king of the jinns, Jinna Maghan, in order to gain the Sosso Bala because the instrument belonged to all of the jinns (Conrad and Condé 2004, 102-103). According to Mande oral history, Soumaoro used the supernatural powers of the Sosso Bala for his own benefit, consulting the instrument as an oracle to show him future conditions that would aid him in his battles.⁹ The Sosso Bala, however, was not merely a tool used by Soumaoro. As the instrument he played not only to gain insight into his future but also to glorify his past accomplishments, the Sosso Bala becomes both a reservoir of spiritual power for Soumaoro and the inspiration for his

⁸ See pages 25 and 63 above.

⁹ From personal interview with Namankoumba Kouyaté. See also *Niagassola, Site Historique* (RTG 2001), which shows video footage of the current balatigui, El Hadj Filanin Sékou Kouyaté, playing the Sosso Bala in Niagassola at the 2001 Sosso Bala Festival.

worldly accomplishments. Thus, the Sosso Bala does not merely symbolize Soumaoro's power. The Sosso Bala actually embodies it.¹⁰

It is not surprising, then, that the Sosso Bala was the only one of Soumaoro's possessions that Sunjata kept,¹¹ taking the instrument so that its benefits and beauty could be shared by all the newly-united Mande peoples. Important here is the idea that a transformation takes place as the Sosso Bala changes ownership from Soumaoro to Sunjata. As the owner of the Sosso Bala, Soumaoro sought to use the instrument only for his own personal gain, hiding the Sosso Bala away in a guarded, secret chamber and allowing no one else to touch the instrument. When Balafaséké Kouyaté, Sunjata's personal *jeli*, gained access to Soumaoro's secret chamber and began playing the Sosso Bala, Balafaséké's act of defiance was born of his love for music and an irresistible attraction to the Sosso Bala that he felt immediately upon seeing the instrument.¹² Through his multidimensional artistry¹³ as a *jeli*, Balafaséké impressed Soumaoro so much that he not only spared Balafaséké's life but also commanded the *jeli* to be his own personal griot.¹⁴ While I mentioned previously the secret between Soumaoro and Balafaséké, there is another level of secrecy taking place simultaneously. Balafaséké was assigned to Sunjata to be Sunjata's griot long before the meeting between Balafaséké and

¹⁰ This is exemplary of a much more widespread phenomenon of an instrument embodying the power of a ruler. Often, the hero in a migration tale returns from his odyssey bearing the instrument that either symbolizes or contains his spiritual power. This instrument then becomes the basis for all others within a musical tradition and is believed to possess the energy of the society's ancestors. The information in this footnote comes from a personal conversation with my advisor, Dr. Carolina Robertson (9 February 2006).

¹¹ See page 24 above.

¹² See Niane (1994, 39).

¹³ In this case, his skill as an instrumentalist, singer, historian, charismatic praiser, and improviser.

¹⁴ In one version of the Sunjata epic, Soumaoro cuts Balafaséké's Achilles tendons to make him stay (Johnson and Sisòkò 2003, 197).

Soumaoro.¹⁵ Because of the inseverable relationship between Sunjata and Balafaséké, the deeper secret maintained by Balafaséké was that Soumaoro was giving control over the sacred instrument that embodied his spiritual power to the *jeli* of Sunjata, the man who was ultimately to vanquish Soumaoro in battle.

Thus, the transformation that takes place as the Sosso Bala is transferred from Soumaoro to Sunjata is one from secrecy to openness, but an openness that is nonetheless carefully controlled. The Sosso Bala goes from being a powerful force at the service of a tyrant¹⁶ to a symbol of the newly-unified Mande people. The Sosso Bala's power is thereafter harnessed to remind the Mande peoples of their glorious past, to inspire future Mande rulers to live up to the greatness of their ancestors, and to remind the Kouyatés of the important role they played both in the vanquishing of Soumaoro Kanté and in the preservation of the spiritual power of the united Mande peoples. The Sosso Bala thus metamorphoses from being a tool for the oppression of the Mande people to being a source of sustenance for them. The preservation of the Sosso Bala as a source of spiritual nourishment for the Mande became especially important during the colonial era, as the Dökala Kouyatés chose to resort to whatever means necessary to preserve the Sosso Bala and its associated traditions.

¹⁵ See Niane (1994, 17) and Camara (1984, 142-144).

¹⁶ Conrad attributes the depiction of Soumaoro as evil primarily to Niane's novelized version of the Sunjata epic, originally published in 1965. Conrad claims that the impression of Soumaoro as evil is a false one because it "fails to reveal that the alleged brutality is only one aspect of a multidimensional character portrayed by the Manding *jeliw*" (Conrad and Condé 2004, xx). Conrad points out that Djanka Tasse Condé, the griot whose version of Sunjata Conrad transcribes, relates that Soumaoro both performed "appropriately terrifying deeds" for a "sorcerer king" and provided "a great cultural legacy of fine musical instruments" (Conrad and Condé 2004, xx). Nevertheless, Conrad does not mention, in his brief defense of Soumaoro, that Soumaoro also gave up his only sister to the jinns to obtain the Sosso Bala and that he stole the wife of his nephew and general, Fakoli.

Susu/Malinké Relationships in Guinea

Before shifting the focus of this chapter to the role of the Dökala Kouyatés in the preservation of the Sosso Bala, however, I must comment on an especially ironic twist in the multi-layered relationship between the Susu king Soumaoro Kanté and the Malinké *jeli* Balafaséké Kouyaté. Christopher Miller points out that in *L'Aigle et l'épervier ou la geste du Sunjata* (Diabaté, 1975), “the clan of [Kouyaté] griots faithful to the [Sunjata] Kéita dynasty originally got their powers from Sunjata’s evil enemy [Soumaoro Kanté]” (Miller 1990, 93, note 56). Hence, I find it ironic that the most highly respected Mande *jeli* lineage received their spiritual powers from a Susu blacksmith via a sacred balafon, yet it is my teacher, Abou Sylla – a Susu balafon virtuoso who has studied Mande balafon performance with El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté, the modern master of the Mande Balafon, and Mande balafon history with Namankoumba Kouyaté of the Dökala Kouyatés – who is bringing the Mande balafon tradition to the United States and performing workshops and clinics to perpetuate the Mande balafon tradition outside of Africa.

The relationship between different Mande ethnic groups can be very confusing. At least one anthropologist has proposed that three ethnic designations in the region encompassing the Mande heartland in southwest Mali and northeast Guinea should no longer be considered “three ethnic groups [Fulani, Bambara, and Malinké]¹⁷ merely juxtaposed in space”; instead, he proposes that “they constitute in effect a system of

¹⁷ The Bambara (French equivalent of Bamana) are a Mande ethnic group who make up the majority of Mali’s population. The Fulani (also Fula) is the British term for the Fulbe (or Pulaar) ethnic group (Peuhl in French), whose language is related to other Senegal languages such as Wolof and Serer, which are a sub-branch of the Northern branch of the Atlantic languages. See Charry (2000, 15-22) for a chart depicting relationships between Niger-Congo languages spoken in West Africa, as well as musical interactions between different Mande ethnic groups and their non-Mande neighbors.

transformations. This threefold schema of identity appears as ‘onomastic emblems’ that the actors appropriate in aleatory fashion according to political contingencies” (Amselle 1998, 43). Amselle’s questioning of the fixity of ethnic designations encourages closer examination of the interactions between different ethnic groups, especially whether ethnic designations are self-constructed or imposed from outside. Nonetheless, as Christopher Miller points out, Amselle gives two important reasons why we cannot dismiss ethnicity as a rigid, divisional criterion arbitrarily applied to indigenous Africans by colonial occupiers (1990, 35). The first is that “application of a signifier to a social group itself creates that social group” (Amselle 1985, 37), thus giving “ethnonyms a *performative* power that transcends their initial inaccuracy” (Miller 1990, 35). The second reason ethnicity cannot be dismissed is that “ideologies of ethnicity [exist] within social groups, making the study of ‘ethnicity’ – now understood as a *discourse* – imperative” (Miller 1990, 35). The example Amselle draws on to support this second reason is the use of the Sunjata epic by the Mande to maintain social relationships (Amselle 1985, 35).

The malleability of ethnic identities among the Mande is particularly relevant to Abou Sylla’s identification as a Mande griot. Abou’s patronym, Sylla, identifies him as being from a familial line whose traditional specialization is Islamic scholarship.¹⁸ Abou’s father was a great balafon builder by profession, however, and built balafons for El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté, who became one of Abou’s teachers. Abou’s virtuosity on the balafon from an early age led him to make balafon performance his life’s occupation, and his rigorous apprenticeships with various different Mande griots, both Susu and

¹⁸ Personal conversation with Abou Sylla, 31 January 2006.

Malinké, qualified him to become a *jeli*, even if he was not, strictly speaking, born into a *jeli* lineage. When I have asked Abou about the relationship between the Susu and the Malinké, and how that relationship is connected to Mande balafon tradition, he has told me that the Susu are mainly known for their virtuosity and “flexibility” on the balafon as instrumentalists, while the Malinké are more renowned both for their singing ability and for their knowledge of Mande history and customs.¹⁹ Both groups, however, identify themselves as Mande, and use the Sunjata epic to link themselves to the origins of the Empire of Mali.

I emphasize Abou’s use of the term flexibility here because it is both an apt descriptor of the fluid nature of ethnic identification among the Mande and a necessity in many ways for the practicing *jeli*. Abou mentions flexibility often in my lessons with him, referring to the relaxed manner in which I need to play if I am to execute comfortably and rapidly the intricate patterns and “runs” he is teaching me.²⁰ As I have argued in Chapter Two, flexibility is also a necessary component of *jeli* performance and the ways a *jeli* negotiates social relations through performance. As I now redirect the focus of Chapter Three to the role of the Dökala Kouyatés in the preservation of the Sosso Bala and its associated tradition, we shall see that the flexibility of a specific lineage is also important to the survival of Mande culture.

¹⁹ Personal conversations, May 2005. I do not mean to imply here that ethnic affiliations do not have political consequences in Guinea. The ethnicity of the two men who have ruled Guinea since its independence, Ahmed Sekou Touré from 1959-1984 and Lansana Conté from 1984-present, have certainly affected the preponderance of individuals from each leader’s ethnic affiliation (Malinké for Touré and Susu for Conté) within each leader’s political regime.

²⁰ See Chapters Four and Five below for further elaboration on Abou’s teaching methods and terminology.

The Dökala Kouyatés and the Sosso Bala

With the advent of colonialism in Africa, the Mande, like many other indigenous African peoples, were forced to deal with the attempts by their colonial invaders, in this case the French, to impose systems of government on them that undermined their traditional societal structures and relationships. Prior to colonization, the Mande *jelilu* had relied on their *horon* patrons for support. With the dismantling of traditional systems of governance as a result of colonial rule, the *jelilu* had to choose between two options – either attempt to maintain their traditions by only performing their arts in a way that reflects historical customs or sing praise songs to the highest bidder, regardless of the recipient’s family origins.²¹ I will turn the focus of this chapter to the choice made by one particular family, the Dökala branch of the Kouyaté family, of Niagassola, Guinea, who are the direct descendants of Balafaséké Kouyaté, the *jeli* of Sunjata Keita, the founder of the Mande Empire of Mali in the thirteenth century CE. I focus on this family for two reasons: (a) because they made the decision to pursue other occupations, if necessary, in order to sustain a livelihood, rather than betray their *jeli* heritage by performing traditional praise songs for people who do not deserve to be honored by them, whether because of personal heritage or individual merit, and (b) because they are the guardians of the Sosso Bala, the original Mande *jeli* instrument, which they have maintained since the thirteenth century.

²¹ For more specific examinations of how colonialism affected the role of the *jeli* in Mande society, see Charry (2000), Hoffman (2000), Jansen (2000), et al. Most of the information I present in this chapter on the role of the Kouyaté family in the preservation of the Mande *jeli* tradition, however, comes from personal interviews and visits with Namankoumba Kouyaté (See page 23 above).

While scholars have written about specific aspects of *jeli* speech that contribute to its power and effectiveness,²² it is still the connection between the listener, who is also a participant in the performance – whether through dancing, giving gifts to the *jeli* honoring him/her, or other forms of interaction with the *jeli* – and the listener’s ancestors as evoked through the *jeli*’s performance that results in the joining of past and present to shape the future. This is why it is so important for the *jeli* to sing only the songs that are appropriate for each particular family. Otherwise, this historico-spiritual connection does not exist, and the performance becomes one of sheer artifice, perhaps admirable for the technical merit of the performer, but lacking the cultural context to signify it as true *jeliya*,²³ or *jeli* artistry. While the non-contextually-appropriate performance may adhere to the form of a traditional *jeli* performance, even using the same speech techniques, musical devices, and melodic and rhythmic formulae, it is not enough merely to repeat these procedures. While it is important to recognize that, as historian Paul Connerton states, “repetition automatically implies continuity with the past” (Connerton 1989, 45),²⁴ one must also understand that “to remember, then, is precisely not to recall events as isolated; it is to become capable of forming meaningful narrative sequences” (Connerton 1989, 26). Thus is it all the more necessary to perform the appropriate songs for the families whose ancestors’ deeds are being commemorated, as this music reinforces an ongoing narrative, usually heard many times throughout one’s life during performances of similar material for other family members, that is to be continued through the actions of the recipient of the most recent performance. The listener’s own life becomes a

²² See Hoffman (2000) and Jansen (2000). Also, see pages 54-56 above.

²³ This is the Maninka term. In Mandinka, it would be *jaliya*.

²⁴ Connerton refers in this quote to one of the reasons why commemorative ceremonies shape communal memory.

performed continuation of that master narrative in her/his efforts both to connect to and to build upon her/his family legacy.

It is through their daily, lived performance that *jelilu* shape the collective memory and history of their people. As the human repositories of the collective wisdom and history of their people, they are also responsible for the transmission of this knowledge to future generations. It is here that the balafon comes into play. As I stated above,²⁵ a distinguishing feature of the Mande balafon is that all current Mande balafons are traceable back to a single instrument, the Sosso Bala,²⁶ which has been preserved by the Dökala²⁷ branch of the Kouyaté family since the thirteenth century CE. As the hereditary guardians of this icon of Mande music and culture, the Dökala Kouyatés found it necessary to set up a protected area in a remote part of the country where they could subsist off of their own farming and preserve both the traditional Mande musical culture and the Sosso Bala without having to make the compromises in their art necessary to make a living as professional musicians. Their relative isolation also insured that the Sosso Bala, while still protected, would remain part of a living tradition through performance and not end up in a museum in the nation's capital, a lifeless component in a national *lieux de mémoire*. In order to keep the instrument alive through performance, the Sosso Bala was brought out into the public for special occasions and ceremonies, such as the installation of a new Balatigui or the performance of sacred rituals for the community. The Sosso Bala can only be played by the Balatigui, whose fame is largely

²⁵ See page 23 above.

²⁶ I use this spelling instead of Susu, the most common current spelling of the name of this language and ethnic group, because Sosso is the spelling used in Namankoumba Kouyaté's "*Échos d'une Veillee Culturelle*," the brochure for the second biannual Sosso Bala Festival in Niagassola, Guinea, May 30 – June 1, 2001.

²⁷ See note 2, page 2 above.

based on his ability to perform the repertoire of songs that describe the sacred origins of the Sosso Bala and how it was given by the Djinns, or musical divinities, to Soumaoro Kanté, the Sorcerer-King of the Susu, who used the Sosso Bala as an oracle for divination purposes.²⁸ By regularly performing these sacred songs with the Sosso Bala, the Balatigui assures that this sacred and symbolic instrument helps to create a *milieux de mémoire* that perpetuates a living societal memory accessible to the Mande people.

The story of how the Sosso Bala came to be located permanently in Niagassola is recounted by Charry as follows: “When the *balatigi* passed away in the mid-1970s there was a question whether it should be moved to the next eldest in line, who was living across the border in a village in Mali.²⁹ A major Kouyate family summit was held, and for various reasons, one being the recognition of its status as a national treasure, the bala remained in Guinea” (2000, 144-145). What is not mentioned here, but was confided to me while I was in Guinea,³⁰ is that shortly after Guinea and Mali gained their independence from France,³¹ Sekou Touré, the first president of Guinea, decided that the Sosso Bala was to remain in Guinea and would no longer travel back and forth between Guinea and Mali. He wanted the instrument to stay in Guinea for two reasons: to support his program of using African traditional culture to help create a national identity for Guinea, and because he was worried that something bad might happen to the instrument if it kept traveling. Touré negotiated extensively with Modibo Keita, the first president of

²⁸ *Les chants rituels*, described further in Kouyaté (2001, 20). The information about the Sosso Bala as an oracle comes from a personal interview (13 April 2004).

²⁹ Traditionally, when a new *balatigui* was chosen, the Sosso Bala would be conveyed by a delegation of the Dökala Kouyatés from the village of the old *balatigui* to the village of the new *balatigui*. Along with the guardianship duties of the Sosso Bala and its accompanying relics from the Sunjata era, the new *balatigui* would also inherit all the wives of the previous *balatigui*.

³⁰ I am exercising ethical discretion here, as the source asked me not to reveal her/his name.

³¹ Guinea in 1958 and Mali in 1960.

Mali, and eventually convinced Keita to let the Sosso Bala remain in Niagassola. These negotiations, while never published in any written account, are nevertheless fairly well known in Guinea, and reflect political involvement at the highest level in the use of traditional culture to help create a national identity for Guinea.

In order to share their cultural heritage with a larger audience, the Dökala Kouyatés, along with the government of Guinea, created the first bi-annual Sosso Bala Festival in April of 1999, which coincided with the installation of the current Balatigui, El Hadj Filanin Sékou Kouyaté. At the next festival, in May of 2001, the main cause for celebration was the designation of the Cultural Space of the Sosso Bala³² as one of the masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity³³ by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO PRESSE 2001). The festival continues to this day,³⁴ and Professor Kouyaté told me there has been discussion of construction of a more permanent building in Niagassola to house the Sosso Bala and its related paraphernalia.³⁵ The Sosso Bala would still to be overseen and maintained by the Balatigui and the Dökala Kouyatés, thus helping to ensure that the performances of *les chants rituels*; *les chants épiques*, which describe the exploits of the Mande heroes; and *les chants populaires*, which describe common themes, activities, preoccupations and

³² *L'Espace Culturel du Sosso-Bala.*

³³ *Chef d'œuvre du Patrimoine oral et immatériel de l'Humanité.*

³⁴ Sosso Bala Festivals were held in 2003 and 2005, but both were delayed significantly due to protracted negotiations between the Dökala Kouyatés and the Guinean government to secure funding for the festivals. I will not speculate here as to why this was the case, but this is certainly an important topic for future investigation.

³⁵ Personal interview, 13 April 2004.

morals of the Mande,³⁶ are preserved through the *milieux de mémoire*³⁷ of *jeli* performances.

Since the time of Balafaséké Kouyaté, the balafon, especially in Guinea, has played an important role in the transmission of Mande culture. I previously described how Namankoumba participates in this process by teaching the balafon to all of his children.³⁸ His whole life has been involved with teaching others about the importance of the balafon to the preservation of Mande society and culture, whether as a father, a professor of history, or a representative of the Guinean government.³⁹ Now that he has retired from the University and the Guinean government, Namankoumba devotes himself full-time to his obligations as a griot. Through his NGO, Association Dökala pour la sauvegarde et préservation du Sosso Bala et son environnement, Namankoumba works to increase awareness of the significance of the Mande balafon tradition. By preserving both the traditions of Mande balafon performance and the Sosso Bala itself, as well as passing the traditions along to their children, Namankoumba Kouyaté and the Dökala Kouyatés ensure the survival of an important component of both Mande and Guinean cultural identity.

Ideas of Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary West Africa

Before proceeding to an examination of the shift in emphasis from the Mande heartland to Conakry as the focus of innovation in Mande balafon performance, I want to address the issue of tradition versus modernity as it relates to artistic performance in

³⁶ See Kouyaté (2001, 20-22) for more information on these three types of songs performed at the Sosso Bala Festivals.

³⁷ See pages 36-38 above.

³⁸ See page 40 above.

³⁹ Professor Kouyaté served for a period of time in the Guinean embassy in Germany.

contemporary West Africa. The ongoing discourse between the concepts of tradition and modernity, often posited as polar opposites in Western European and Euro-American writings, has frequently been used to depict Africans and their culture as somehow pre-modern, backward, and lacking a means for critical self-reflection.⁴⁰ While recent scholarship has attempted to dispel such a bifurcated approach and its resultant negative stereotypes,⁴¹ a need for a re-evaluation of these concepts is still warranted. In order to break down the barriers between the conceptualizations of tradition and modernity, the terms need to be defined in a way that reflects how the concepts they represent are mutually co-dependent, especially in the context of contemporary West Africa. Tradition has been defined as “anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (Shils 1981, 12)⁴² and, more inclusively, “a set of customs passed down over the generations, and a set of values and beliefs endorsing those customs” (Fleishacker 1994, 45).⁴³ While tradition clearly contains an element of antiquity in its very definition, it must necessarily reflect the contemporary society it influences. One must remember that tradition, like anything that lasts over an extended period, is adapted to the needs of the society that preserves it. Thus, while tradition carries forward elements of the past, it nevertheless functions in, and is an essential part of, the present, even as it, as a prescriptive element of culture, also aims to affect the future.

Modernity, however, is a more elusive concept. In a general sense, modernity “can be defined as the ideas, principles, and ideals covering a whole range of human

⁴⁰ The number of works that reflect this approach is too numerous to mention, but for an overview of the use of this argument in Western European and Euro-American scholarship to denigrate Africans and their culture, see Peter Amato (1997).

⁴¹ See Charry (2000), Reed (2003), C. Waterman (2002), et al.

⁴² Quoted in Gyekye (1997, 219).

⁴³ Quoted in Gyekye (1997, 219).

activities that have underpinned Western life and thought since the seventeenth century” (Gyekye 1997, 264). More specifically, however, especially in academic discussions about Africa and African culture, modernity refers to the European and Euro-American influences on African culture and the urban, industrial, contemporary way of life presented by colonial powers as the ideal toward which all other societies should aspire. Though tradition and modernity may be sometimes at odds with one another,⁴⁴ they are necessarily complimentary forces that together shape contemporary African society. West African nations in particular, in their attempts to throw off the shackles of their colonial past, have created traditional performance ensembles to showcase their valuable contributions to world culture.⁴⁵ These ensembles, however, perform modern depictions of traditional art forms that are institutionalized and modified to appeal to a non-African, overseas audience. Thus, even in ensembles that purport to serve as examples of traditional African performance arts, there is a negotiation between tradition and modernity that takes place, as the production is adapted to appeal to both an African and a Western aesthetic.⁴⁶ Agawu refers to this very situation as “one of the paradoxes of postcolonial African life” (2003, 19).⁴⁷

Ethnomusicologists have explored the necessarily complimentary nature of tradition and modernity revealed through performance in more ostensibly traditional settings, too. In his ethnography of Ge performance among the Dan cultural group in

⁴⁴ Some examples would be features considered traditional in African societies, such as a communal and a spiritual emphasis, as opposed to modern secular and humanistic emphases.

⁴⁵ Guinea, Senegal, Mali, and Ghana have all created national dance ensembles that tour internationally for this purpose.

⁴⁶ See Charry (2000, 211-213) for a description of how Fodeba Keita, founder of Guinea’s national dance ensemble Les Ballets Africains, dealt with such issues.

⁴⁷ For a thorough elucidation of the development of National Orchestras in Guinea and Mali and the relationship between traditional Mande music and post-WW II popular music in these countries, see Charry (2000, 242-307).

contemporary Côte d'Ivoire, Daniel Reed examines how his "French-speaking consultants"⁴⁸ used the terms "tradition" and "modernity" (2003, 10-11, 62-66). While they used the term "the tradition" to refer specifically to Dan religion, as distinct from both things that they considered "modern" or "popular" and Islamic or Christian religious ideas, "the boundaries between these separate categories ... were fluid, permeable, and historically contingent. 'The tradition' was adaptable; it was timeless yet of the moment" (Reed 2003, 10). Reed further describes how Dan Ge performers incorporate elements of current popular music into their performances in a way that displays the adaptability and relevance to contemporary society of an ancient indigenous tradition. This incorporation of modern elements into traditional performance is thus not a corruption of an inviolable and unchanging social construct. Traditional performance, through its adaptability, is made more powerful and thus more likely to survive coexistent with contemporaneous forms of expression that come in from outside the society.

The necessary convergence of the traditional and the modern in Africa is nowhere more evident than in the creation of West African popular musics. Senegalese popular musician Youssou N'Dour's mixture of traditional Wolof Sabar drumming, Afro-Cuban horn sections and rhythms, Western synthesizers and electric guitars, jazz-influenced instrumental solos, and melismatic, Islamic- and Wolof-griot-influenced vocal styles to create his signature *mbalax* music genre is a representative example of the hybrid nature of West African popular musics, which represent both a geographically and diachronically broad range of influences. Ethnomusicologist Christopher Waterman, in

⁴⁸ Consultants is the term Reed chooses to use, but informants is more common in ethnographic literature. The current trend is to come up with terms that reflect the attempt at achieving an egalitarian, or at least symbiotic, relationship between the ethnographer and the cultural insider(s) with whom s/he interacts.

his studies of Yoruba popular musics in Nigeria, describes how artists are using musical performance to create unique identities in a way that cleverly negotiates societal boundaries – whether between the traditional and the modern, the public and the private, or the individual and the masses (2002).⁴⁹ Eric Charry, in his thorough analysis of the music of the Mande peoples of West Africa, points out that the terms “traditional” and “modern” are used by Mande musicians – either in English, French, or local languages – to make distinctions between older indigenous musical instruments and styles and newer ones, but with the following clarification:

Traditional and modern in a Mande context do not refer to opposing sides of battle with impenetrable lines, or to blind adherence to colonial lexical categories and mentalities, but rather reflect states of mind that can be fluidly combined and respected in innovative and often humorous ways. (2000, 24)

Thus, one may find electric guitars playing traditional music at Mande weddings alongside indigenous instruments, or indigenous instruments such as the *kora* or *bala* being played alongside electric instruments in the ensembles of internationally renowned popular musicians like Salif Keita. All of these examples illustrate how the traditional and the modern are but complimentary aspects of a more all-encompassing musical reality acted out by musicians in West Africa.

Guinean Independence and the Shift in Focus to Conakry

The interweaving of the traditional and the modern to create a national identity for postcolonial Guinea began shortly after independence. Soon after taking power as the first President of the newly independent nation, Sekou Touré set about creating an infrastructure of state support for performance ensembles, both national and regional, that

⁴⁹ See also C. Waterman (1990b).

would draw upon the music and dance traditions of Guinea for their primary source of material and inspiration.⁵⁰ As Charry points out, there were three types of performing groups that “took on the French titles *orchestre*, *ensemble*, and *ballet* with very specific and mutually exclusive references” (2000, 252). The *orchestres* played popular music, primarily with Western instruments. The *ensembles* played traditional music, using only indigenous African instruments and vocalists. The *ballets* were drum and dance ensembles. These performing groups, especially the national groups that toured internationally, helped demonstrate the vast cultural resources of Guinea to a worldwide audience, setting the example for similar groups established by other newly independent West African nations.

While there were many excellent regional groups throughout Guinea, it was the national groups, located in Conakry, Guinea’s capital city, that drew the most attention and possessed the most prestige. The country’s best musicians were selected to join these groups, and regional groups could become nationalized by proving their merit at various national competitions. It was thus that Conakry became the focus of Guinea’s developing professional music industry, and the balafon, as the primary *jeli* instrument in Guinea, played an important role in that transformation. Because the ensembles were the performing groups that primarily featured indigenous African instruments, it was through the ensembles that the balafon had the most direct influence. One individual in particular has been vital to the establishment of Conakry as the post-independence center of innovation in balafon performance. It was in his role as the first balafonist and eventual

⁵⁰ See Charry (2000, 251-264) for an examination of the development of the Guinean national and regional ensembles that focuses on the influential Guinean guitarists who helped create a distinctly West African style of popular music based on Guinean musical traditions.

director of Guinea's National Instrumental Ensemble that he changed not only the physical structure of the balafon itself but also the importance of the balafon as an international symbol of Guinean identity. The individual to whom I refer is El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté, and it is to his influence on the development of the balafon that I will now turn my attention.

El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté was born in 1918 in Kindia, a village 130 kilometres away from Conakry. He is a descendant of Balafaséké Kouyaté, and he received his first balafon, when he was twelve years old, from his two older brothers, who were both famous griots in the coastal region of Guinea (Hantute 1992, 3). In 1961, Djeli Sory joined the newly-formed National Instrumental Ensemble in Conakry, along with his lifelong friend and fellow Kindia native Sory Kandia Kouyaté, who is perhaps Guinea's most famous griot singer. Djeli Sory toured internationally with the National Instrumental Ensemble, and in 1982, he was appointed Director of the ensemble, a post he holds to this day. It was not only through the National Instrumental Ensemble, however, that Djeli Sory contributed to the development of Mande balafon performance and exposure of the Mande balafon to a worldwide audience. From 1965-1969, he toured the world with the Djoliba Ballet, during which time the group received the gold medal at the 1969 Pan African Festival in Algiers (Hantute 1992, 3). Djeli Sory was also featured as the balafon soloist on the "1968 Bembeya Jazz album-length epic *Regard sur le passé*, based on the jeli piece *Keme Burema*" (Charry 2000, 263). This was a rarity for the time period, especially as the balafon featured so prominently on an album by one of Guinea's national orchestras, because "other than a single bala, traditional instruments did not enter

into the orchestras. Rather, bala playing styles entered via the guitar, played primarily by those coming from jeli families” (Charry 2000, 263).

Over his lifetime, Djeli Sory Kouyaté has seen the balafon go through many changes, some of which he pioneered himself. He described to me how most of the balafons played during his father’s generation had fifteen keys.⁵¹ By the time Djeli Sory was a young man, balafons of seventeen keys were more commonly played. As he grew older, the range of balafons was expanded again to nineteen keys, the number of keys on the Sosso Bala.⁵² Djeli Sory extended the range of the balafon even further in the 1960s, to twenty-two keys, because he needed three full octaves to play with an orchestra.

When I asked him about how accompaniment parts to different songs have changed over the years, he told me that accompaniment parts to songs on the balafon are unfinishable. They can be played many different ways across the range of the balafon. Djeli Sory explained that since he was born, all he knows is the balafon. He said that over time, as a person keeps the same job, he experiments and improves. Now, when he is playing the balafon, he “is like a bird sitting in a tree” and “can sit on any branch” (personal interview, 19 May 2005), meaning that he can play an accompaniment pattern to a song on any part of the keyboard. A fitting tribute to Djeli Sory states that “his style is very personal and his interpretations of the classics of the Mandingo [Mande] repertoire confound all musicians who attempt to imitate him. Some say that in human memory throughout the Mandingo [Mande] empire no one has ever known such virtuosity on the balafon” (Hantute 1992, 3).

⁵¹ The information about El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté in this subsection comes from a personal interview at his home in Conakry (19 May 2005).

⁵² See Charry (2000, 143-144) for comparison of the size of the Sosso Bala to the smaller, in overall size if not in melodic range, balafons commonly played today.

Of all of Djeli Sory's performances, perhaps the most important one, in terms of international political significance and directly affecting the lives of a large number of people, occurred in 1975 at the behest of Guinea's president, Sekou Touré. In 1974, a border dispute had erupted between Mali and Upper Volta.⁵³ In order to help resolve the conflict, Sekou Touré invited Mali's president, Moussa Traore, and Upper Volta's president, Sangoule Lamizana, to meet in Conakry in an attempt to resolve their differences. As part of the conference, Touré asked Sory Kandia Kouyaté to perform for the three presidents and their assembled guests. Djeli Sory created all of the musical arrangements for Sory Kandia's performances, and thus was also an integral part of this historic performance. Sory Kandia and his ensemble, led by Djeli Sory, performed the Mande traditional song *Sori Kemedon*, but Sory Kandia changed the lyrics to the song, renaming it *An yé kélé bila*, which translates as "Let's stop fighting." In his rendition of this song, Sory Kandia reminded the Traore and Lamizana of the shared history of their people; what they have in common through their ancestry is much more significant than any contemporary differences between the two nations. The two leaders were so moved by the performance that they embraced each other immediately afterward and agreed to put an end to their conflict.⁵⁴ Djeli Sory's participation in this historic performance is a testament to his involvement in both the perpetuation of the Mande griot tradition and his

⁵³ Upper Volta was renamed Burkina Faso in 1984.

⁵⁴ My description of this event is drawn from four sources: my aforementioned interview with El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté (19 May 2005); a personal conversation with Abou Sylla (31 January 2006); a personal email from my good friend and research associate in Guinea, Siafa Koly Balla (17 March 2006); and an online review of '*Cousinages a plaisanteries, notre héritage commun*,' a book by Dökala Kouyaté family member Siriman Kouyaté, on the website of Guinean journalist Justin Morel Junior, http://www.africatime.com/guinee/nouvelle.asp?no_nouvelle=100576&no_categorie=4 (accessed 29 March 2006).

role in continuing to adapt the tradition to resolve the dilemmas inherent in contemporary African existence.

About Sylla and the Transition from Guinea to the United States

My primary teacher, Abou Sylla, is another significant individual who has contributed to the development of the Mande balafon, especially in the expansion of the instrument into new contexts. Abou was born in 1958 in Kindia, also the birthplace of El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté. I stated previously that Abou's father was a great balafon builder,⁵⁵ but he also played the balafon, and some of Abou's earliest memories of the balafon are seeing his parents perform together at traditional ceremonies when he was five years old (Van Buren 2001, 156).⁵⁶ Abou's father taught him the basics of balafon building and playing and took Abou with him to performances, where he soon began performing alongside his father. Eventually, Abou began performing on his own and apprenticing with other *jeli* balafonists. During his six years of public school, Abou had a schedule worked out that allowed him to continue his *jeli* training simultaneously. He would perform in the evenings, sometimes until around 2:00 a.m., and then come home and sleep. He would then wake up each morning around 6:00 a.m., practice for an hour, and then wash quickly and head to school in order to arrive by 7:30 a.m. Eventually, this routine caught up to Abou, causing him to fall asleep in class. Three months before his sixth year exams, Abou stopped attending school entirely, spending his time performing or practicing during the day. He took his exam, and was first in his class, but the teacher told Abou's father, who at that time was unaware, about Abou's prolonged absence from

⁵⁵ See page 72 above.

⁵⁶ Much of the information in this section of Chapter Four comes from personal conversations with Abou over the past three years. When I use information specifically from Van Buren (2001) that was not told to me directly by Abou, I will cite it accordingly.

school. Abou's father reacted violently, extremely upset that Abou was skipping school. As a result of this confrontation with his father, Abou resolved to quit school entirely and devote his life to playing the balafon.⁵⁷

Abou's devotion to the balafon and skill as a young player brought him to the attention of Kwoka Salieu Jorbate, the lead balafonist with *Les Ballets Africains*,⁵⁸ in 1980.⁵⁹ Jorbate asked Abou to come to Conakry and join the company, but an illness forced Abou to return home to Kindia two years later. In 1990, Abou rejoined *Les Ballets Africains*, which was then under the artistic direction of Mohamed Kemoko Sano. Abou performed and toured throughout Africa with both *Les Ballets Africains* and Sano's own company, *Les Merveilles d'Afrique*, for two years. In 1992, Abou toured Europe with *Les Ballets Africains*, and in 1993, another *Les Ballets Africains* tour brought Abou to the United States for the first time. In 1995, Abou returned to the United States with *Les Merveilles d'Afrique*, settling in New York along with the rest of the company. In New York, Abou worked hard both to establish himself as a highly regarded teacher and performer in the United States and to send money back to his family in Guinea. Among the many performing opportunities Abou created for himself was the founding of Féraba,

⁵⁷ This story differs from the one recounted in Van Buren (2001, 156-157), but I have related it here as Abou told it to me in a private conversation in Kountiya, Guinea (16 May 2005), as it underscores the idea of using *jeliya* as means of healing to resolve trauma (See page 67 above).

⁵⁸ *Les Ballets Africains* is the world renowned African music and dance ensemble that was founded in the late 1940s in Paris by Fodeba Keita of Guinea to present the indigenous performance arts of West Africa with an emphasis on Mande music and dance from Guinea and the Casamance (Kaba 1976, 202). After Guinean independence in 1958, Sekou Touré made *Les Ballets Africains* the national ballet of Guinea and called Fodeba Keita back to Guinea to become Minister of the Interior.

⁵⁹ Most of the information in this paragraph is culled from Van Buren (2000, 157-158). In order to avoid a citation at the end of each sentence, I will place one parenthetical reference at the end of the entire paragraph.

an “African Rhythm Tap” music and dance company, with Austrian tap dancer Irene Koloseus.⁶⁰

Abou has continued to perform with Les Merveilles d’Afrique in the United States, and during his tenure with the ensemble, he has expanded the role of the balafon within a traditional West African drum and dance ensemble. By using the instrument to tie together the various sections of the ensemble, as well as the types of music performed, Abou is performing his role as a griot instrumentally, maintaining the musical relationships between the different elements of the ensemble and guiding them through the course of a performance. Explaining his role in Les Merveilles d’Afrique to ethnomusicologist Tom Van Buren, Abou stated that the balafon supports the entire ensemble by occupying at least four different roles within the group: first, as a melodic reference point for the singers in the ensemble; second, as a compliment to the percussion section, maintaining a musical dialog with the drummers and sustaining the rapid tempos required to accompany a dance performance; third, as an “intermediary,” weaving together the different parts of a performance by playing solo pieces to “relax the audience” and give the dancers a chance to rest in between the long, vigorously energetic dance sections; and fourth, as a musical accomplice with the kora player, performing for the more “relaxed and light” dances that feature the long, flowing costumes of the female dancers (in Van Buren 2001, 158). Abou is thus using his multiple talents as a virtuoso balafonist to maintain the musical relationships between the different elements of the dance ensemble while innovatively showcasing Mande traditional artistry in a way that

⁶⁰ For further information about Féraba, see the ensemble’s website: <http://home.rmci.net/ferabas/frame.html>

both honors the tradition and makes it accessible and entertaining to a contemporary, international audience.

While Abou is generally acknowledged to be one of the best balafon players in the world, he has also benefited from immigrating to New York at a time when the primary Mande balafonists who had come to the United States before Abou were no longer living in the city, making Abou the most important Mande balafonist in New York (Van Buren 2001, 159). Abou took advantage of this situation and began creating a network of students that he maintains to this day through performing workshops at his and his students' homes, conducting seminars at universities, acting as a guest instructor for various African dance troupes, and teaching private lessons. He also performs in one of the most innovative contemporary griot ensembles, Super Manden, which is based in New York and led by an internationally renowned Malian *jeli* singer, Abdoulaye Diabate. The ensemble performs pieces from the traditional Mande griot repertoire, but with the addition of electric guitar and/or electric bass. They also frequently augment the ensemble with a jembe player. Occasionally, the group will even add a drumset player for performances at large venues. By performing with Super Manden, Abou maintains his association with the highest caliber of *jeli* musicians while adapting the tradition to an ensemble that includes Western, electric instruments, thus freshening the *jeli* repertoire and making it accessible to a audience more familiar with Western popular music.

In 1998, Abou obtained permanent residency status in the United States, allowing him to return to Guinea to visit his family and travel more freely back and forth between Guinea and the United States (Van Buren 2001, 159). In 1999, Abou began taking some of his U.S.-based students with him on his trips to Guinea, further enriching the

educational experience of his students and providing them with the chance to gain a deeper understanding of Mande balafon performance within an indigenous cultural context.⁶¹ Currently, Abou spends most of each year in the United States, though he travels back to Guinea at least once a year. He is currently building a house in Guinea, however, and eventually plans to return there to make Guinea his primary country of residence.

Summary

The Mande balafon's origins, even as they are told in various renditions of the Sunjata epic, are shrouded in secrecy. From the initial exchange between Soumaoro Kanté and Balafaséké Kouyaté to Balafaséké's ultimate desire to return to Sunjata with the Sosso Bala, secrecy has played an important role in the transfer of this sacred instrument from one ruler to another. The importance of secrecy within Mande culture also underscores an significant dilemma that must be resolved by Mande *jelilu* through the process of performance. The *jeli* must always be concerned with balancing the need for secrecy as a means of preserving Mande culture with the obligation to transmit Mande culture through interactive performance. Thus, the Mande *jeli* must undergo a rigorous apprenticeship, learning when, where, how much, and to whom it is appropriate to reveal knowledge of Mande culture and traditions. It is the *jeli*'s discretion in determining how much is revealed to whom that is the measure of her/his trustworthiness and, ultimately, her/his status as a *jeli*.

The Mande *jeli*'s apprenticeship also trains her/him how to handle properly the *nyama* released during the process of *jeli* performance and channel that spiritual power

⁶¹ I address further the nature of the experience of traveling with Abou to Guinea as a student and the opportunities for cultural exchange that such an experience affords in Chapter Five.

into a benevolent usage. The supernatural is not merely an external force within Mande culture. It can be manifest in specific objects, like the Sosso Bala, that come to possess the spiritual power of their users. Such supernaturally endowed objects also may be used for whatever purposes their manipulator desires. When the Sosso Bala passed from Soumaoro Kanté to Sunjata Keita, the instrument was transformed from a tool for nefarious oppression to a unifying source for cultural healing that can be drawn on in perpetuity as solace during times of cultural trauma.

The malleability of the Sosso Bala as a source of supernatural power also reflects the flexibility inherent in ethnic designations among the Mande. The complexity of the Susu/Malinké relationship within the Mande balafon performance tradition is mirrored in the interactions between Soumaoro Kanté and Balafaséké Kouyaté, Abou Sylla's relationship as a Susu balafon virtuoso with his Malinké teachers, and Abou's identification as a Mande *jeli*. The physical flexibility necessary to achieve technical proficiency on the Mande balafon must, therefore, also be coupled with the conceptual flexibility necessary for the manipulation of identity by the practicing griot.

A specific *jeli* lineage that has both historically and continuously shown the flexibility necessary to preserve the Sosso Bala and to transmit Mande balafon performance traditions on to future generations is the Dökala branch of the Kouyaté family. Direct descendants Balafaséké Kouyaté, the Dökala Kouyatés have maintained the original Sosso Bala through a means of strict guardianship and adherence to rules surrounding the transfer of the instrument from one generation to another. They have also settled in a remote area of Guinea to protect the Sosso Bala better through isolation. Nevertheless, the Dökala Kouyatés have also devised ways to showcase the Sosso Bala as

a symbol of Mande unity and Guinean national identity, teaming with Guinea's government to create a biannual festival to expose the cultural significance of the Sosso Bala to an international audience.

The desire of the Dökala Kouyatés to strictly maintain the integrity of the Sosso Bala yet give it relevance to life in contemporary Guinea reflects the perpetual negotiation between tradition and modernity that is part of everyday existence in postcolonial Africa. Tradition and modernity, if the two terms are to be applicable descriptors of elements of contemporary West African musical performance, must be understood as complimentary elements of an everyday, lived reality that combines both. Thus, tradition and modernity must not be seen as mutually exclusive opposites, for both aspects are continually present in today's West African music.

The use of a combination of tradition and modernity to create a national identity in postcolonial Guinea manifested itself in the establishment of state-sponsored performing arts groups that drew on indigenous material as their primary inspiration. One particular Mande balafonist who thrived within this system, using his talent and creative vision both to extend the role of the balafon as a signifier of Guinean identity and to increase exposure of the Guinea's cultural richness to a worldwide audience, is El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté. Expanding not only the role of the balafon but also the range of the instrument itself, he also helped shift the focus on preservation of and innovation within the Mande balafon tradition from the Mande heartland in northeastern Guinea and southwestern Mali to Guinea's coastal capital city, Conakry.

One of El Hadj Djeli Sory Kouyaté's students, and my own primary teacher, Abou Sylla, took the transmission of knowledge about Mande culture a step further,

immigrating to the United States and establishing himself as the premier Mande balafonist in what is arguably one of the musical capitals of the world, New York, New York. Since coming to the United States, Abou has collaborated with artists from other cultural traditions to create new forms of artistic expression, while maintaining his cultural heritage by performing a Mande traditional repertoire with other *jelilu* who have also immigrated to the U.S. Furthermore, Abou has striven to pass along knowledge of the Mande balafon to students in the U.S., teaching them not only how to play the instrument but also the importance of the history of and the context surrounding the songs and the musical tradition he is transmitting. In Chapter Four, I will examine specific pieces within the Mande balafon repertoire as Abou has taught them to me, exploring aspects of the Mande balafon tradition that are best revealed through musical analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE REPERTOIRE OF THE MANDE BALAFON: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

My analysis of Mande balafon performance could not be complete without an examination of the music itself. As ethnomusicologist Pirkko Moisala states, “music is, like language, a primary modeling system, ... a system that guides or forms our perceptions of the world or a system on which we model the world around us” (1999, 1). Thus, even though I have described the history and development of the Mande balafon within Guinea and the socio-cultural practices and issues related both to Mande balafon performance and to the *jelilu* who play the instrument, I must also investigate how the music reflects the aforementioned aspects of the Mande balafon tradition. This process of investigation involves two levels of abstraction from the actual musical sound. The first is the rendering of the music into a symbolic form that can be written down so that others may understand it, a process known as transcription. The second is the analysis of the music transcriptions, an attempt to determine the significance of the music according to schema applied by the analyst. In the following analysis of selected pieces from the Mande *jeli* repertoire, I will focus on five elements of the music that exhibit cultural characteristics of Mande society in particular and interconnectedness in African artistic performance in general. Those five elements are: (1) rhythmic repeated-note patterns that are a common feature of Mande balafon accompaniments, (2) the use of simultaneous duple and triple rhythms in balafon accompaniment patterns, (3) the different ways that balafonists embellish their accompaniment patterns, (4) the way simultaneous accompaniment patterns can sound as if they are in different meters but actually work together to create an interwoven rhythmic and melodic texture, and (5) how harmonic

phrasing in balafon accompaniments reflects rhythmic interaction in Mande drumming and dance performances. By pointing out these specific elements of Mande balafon performance and describing how they relate to aspects of Mande culture that I have already examined, I will demonstrate what we can learn about Mande music and culture from musical transcription and analysis that we cannot learn otherwise.

My analysis here will focus primarily on five pieces of music. Eric Charry refers to three of the pieces – *Sunjata*, *Boloba*, and *Lamban* – as the “Sunjata complex because they are all associated with the era of Sunjata, and they share a similar harmonic scheme” (Charry, 184). I have chosen these three pieces primarily because I am also able to compare them with transcriptions made by Eric Charry in 1989 of two different balafon players from Guinea, Bala Dounbouya¹ and Siriman Kouyate,² and transcriptions made by Lynne Jessup in the Gambia in 1981 of her Gambian teacher, Maudo Suso.³ My own transcriptions, made between 2002 and 2005, come from lessons with my primary teacher, Abou Sylla,⁴ his older brother, Bangali Sylla,⁵ and my friend, Olushola Camara,⁶ who first introduced me to Abou and with whom I traveled to Guinea in April and May of 2005. The fourth piece, *Kalata Mori*, I have chosen both because of the rhythmic relationships that exist between its accompaniments and because it serves as an excellent illustration of how variations are constructed to elaborate on basic accompaniment patterns. I chose the fifth piece, *Nanfulen*, for two reasons: because of its

¹ *Boloba* and *Sunjata*. Recordings made between December 1988 and May 1989 in Dakar, Senegal. Bala Dounbouya is originally from Norasoba, Guinea. See Charry 182-189, 465.

² *Boloba* and *Lamban*. Recordings made between September and November 1989 in Brikama, The Gambia. Siriman Kouyate is originally from Koundara, Guinea. See Charry 182-189, 465.

³ See Jessup 53.

⁴ *Sunjata* and *Lamban*. Recordings made by me in February 2003 in Washington, DC, and April and May 2005, in Kountia, Guinea

⁵ *Boloba*. Recordings made in March and April 2004 by me in Cité de l’Air, Guinea.

⁶ *Lamban*. Transcribed from unrecorded practice sessions in April and May 2005 in Kountia, Guinea.

unusual harmonic scheme of having three sections of equal duration and because its harmonic phrasing is an example of a phenomenon I call “harmonic anticipation” in Mande balafon music. I will relate this concept to what I refer to as “anticipatory overlapping phrasing” in Mande dance and drumming.

Transcription Methodology

My method of transcription relies on Western musical notation, because most of my lessons on balafon with Abou have taken place on balafons tuned to a Western, diatonic “C” scale. One of the advantages to this approach is that a student can easily transfer the music to any Western mallet percussion instrument, such as a marimba or xylophone. One of the disadvantages to this method of representation is that it implies that Mande *jelilu* perceive the music as diatonic, which certainly is not the case. Those who either play Western instruments or play in ensembles with Western instruments certainly must play balafons that are tuned to Western diatonic scales. The *jelilu* who play in ensembles comprising only traditional instruments that use traditional tunings, as well as those who learned the Mande *jeli* repertoire on traditionally tuned instruments, will not see the music as being diatonic. The transition between traditional and Western diatonic tunings is eased somewhat, though, by the fact that traditional Mande tunings are heptatonic. While they do not line up exactly with Western tunings, they are close enough to facilitate going from one to the other, though Western tunings will sound out of tune to those used to traditional tunings. I experienced this phenomenon myself after returning to the U.S. from my first trip to Guinea in 2004. All of my lessons were conducted on a traditionally tuned balafon, which I brought back with me and subsequently practiced on. When I transferred the music to one of my balafons that is

tuned to a diatonic C major scale in preparation for a workshop with Abou in Connecticut, the songs sounded very strange to me, and it took some time for me to become accustomed to hearing them in a Western tuning. The next year, when I returned to Guinea with Abou after a year of playing primarily on a “C” balafon, the first time I played a traditional balafon, at Namankoumba Kouyaté’s home, I was surprised by how odd the traditional tuning sounded to me.

I will not delve too deeply into the traditional tuning system here, as several exhaustive studies, using both large and small samples, have been conducted (Jessup 1983, Knight 1991, Panneton 1987, Rouget and Schwartz 1969 et al.).⁷ My own understanding is that even though each of the studies basically concludes that the traditional tuning system is equiheptatonic, with seven roughly equal intervals to the octave, there is a great deal of regional variation between tunings. One of the advantages of an equiheptatonic tuning is that a balafonist can start a piece of music on any key, depending on where the most comfortable range is for the singer or string player with whom he is performing, and there is no sense that one is playing a different piece. Thus, for the balafonist playing a piece in a traditional tuning on a traditional instrument, what defines a specific piece is the rhythm of the patterns and the intervallic relationships between the notes comprising either the melody or the accompaniment patterns. Nevertheless, there is a growing preference among Mande balafonists, at least in the area surrounding Conakry, for balafons tuned to Western diatonic scales. I asked Fodé Camara, one of Abou’s favorite balafon makers, who also made a beautiful professional-quality “C” balafon for me during my last trip to Guinea, about preferences among

⁷ See Charry (2000, 165-167) for a brief overview of these studies and his own personal observations regarding Mande balafon tuning.

contemporary balafonists in Guinea for instruments in traditional tunings or Western tunings. He told me that, for the most part, the younger players all want instruments in Western tunings, and only the older balafonists still want instruments that are traditionally tuned.⁸ I do not know if this preference among younger players in Coastal Guinea for balafons in Western tunings reflects a desire to perform with ensembles that include Western instruments, a more general move toward performing traditional musics in Western tunings, a desire to follow in the footsteps of other Mande popular music stars like Salif Keita and Mory Kante, who have gained international fame by taking traditional music and rearranging it for electric ensembles that play in Western tunings, a combination thereof, or some other change in the aesthetic preferences of Mande musicians. In any case, this is certainly a phenomenon that invites further inquiry.

In regard to notating rhythmic organization of the music, I have indicated time signatures and beamed individual notes into groupings that reflect the way Abou taught the rhythmic patterns to me. The starting point of each pattern is the place where Abou indicated that each pattern repeats itself, and that one emphasizes by playing “runs” – melodic embellishments that can either signal a transition to a new accompaniment pattern or add variety to the pattern one is playing. I do not, however, want to give the mistaken impression that Mande balafon music, when performed in a traditional context, has a set beginning place. Charry points out that pieces played in a traditional setting do not start from a fixed place so much as the musicians gradually ease into them until all the musicians are playing together. He uses the apt image of boiling water to prepare tea as a way of describing the way musicians prepare to play a specific piece of music

⁸ Personal conversation, May 2005. The only thing I saw Fodé using as a reference for tuning balafons when I was in Guinea in 2005 was a Korg CA-30 chromatic tuner.

together. French anthropologist Charles Joyeaux's description of an early twentieth-century Mande celebration is very similar to my own experiences attending Mande balafon performances in Guinea:

The leader begins the concert by exercises of virtuosity on his instrument; he plays a 'cadence,' dare I say, characterized by rapidly descending lines. Then, calming down, he attacks the tune taken up by all the other [balafon] players and sung by the singers ...; in turn the drums come in and the piece is under way." (Joyeaux 1924, 207-208)⁹

While Joyeaux was describing a Konkonba mask performance in Kankan that involved eleven balafonists, and most of the performances I attended were either wedding or naming ceremonies that involved only three balafonists, the method of beginning a song has changed little in the past eighty years.

Nevertheless, in his attempts to make the learning of Mande balafon music more accessible to his students here in the United States, Abou has devised a way of teaching that reflects the way he hears the pulse of the music and allows Western students the ability to grasp more readily the way the individual accompaniment parts are phrased and organized rhythmically so that they line up together. I have tried to reflect Abou's approach in my transcriptions. The different accompaniments are individually transcribed as they were shown to me, numbered from one to the final number of parts I was shown for a specific piece, with variations successively numbered as Acc. 1 Var. 1, Acc. 1 Var. 2, etc. In my rendering of Charry's and Jessup's transcriptions, I have transposed them to the key of my transcriptions of my own teachers' parts for ease of comparison. I have also transformed the style of notation of each of these scholars to resemble my own. As both Charry and Jessup used a style of notation that is similar to

⁹ Quoted in Charry (2000, 182-183).

Western notation, the transfer was a relatively easy task. I have used black ink to represent notes played with the right hand and red ink to indicate which notes are played with the left hand. Notes beamed together are to be played by both hands simultaneously. The notes with a dot directly above or below the note head are notes that are muted by pressing the mallet into the particular bar of the balafon immediately upon striking it and holding the mallet onto the bar to deaden the sound. Unlike Charry, I have also divided the accompaniment parts into two or more measures, depending on how the parts were counted out to me by Abou as he was teaching them to me.¹⁰ While Abou has not used the specific term “measure” in one of my lessons, he often says to me, when teaching me a piece for the first time, “this accompaniment has two parts,” or more, depending on the number of sections to a specific accompaniment. In transcribing the accompaniments, I wrote out each section of the accompaniment as a separate measure, which would then indicate to me the meter I should use to transcribe the accompaniments to each piece. The one exception to this strategy is *Boloba*,¹¹ which was taught to me by Abou’s older brother, Bangali Sylla. He showed me the part completely by rote, and did not count out the meter to me, but as *Boloba* has a distinct meter, being the only piece in the Mande *jeli* repertoire with five pulses to each section of the accompaniment, the choice of meter was not difficult.

One of the trickiest things about notating the transcriptions was the decision whether to use broken triplets or eighth notes to delineate subdivisions of the basic pulse

¹⁰ Jessup subdivides some of the accompaniments with equally-spaced vertical dotted lines where I would delineate measures, but does not indicate why she only does this for some of them and not all (Jessup 1983, 71-141).

¹¹ Jessup refers to this piece as *Kura*, and Bangali told me during my lessons that the piece is known both as *Boloba* and as *Koura*.

on certain pieces, as in *Sunjata*. Though I was tempted to use the convention of jazz composers and render the parts with straight eighth notes, with the understanding that both performers and those familiar with West African music would know to “swing” the eighth notes, I wanted the notation to be as clear as possible and to reflect the way Abou teaches the patterns. In a performance context, however, especially where dancing is involved, the music becomes too fast to continue to round out eighth notes as broken triplets and, similarly to jazz, the performer plays evenly divided duple subdivisions of the pulse. At slower tempos, the parts are played with the subdivisions, whether they are written as straight eighths or as broken triplets, as something rhythmically in between the two, so that the parts as notated sound stiff when the notation is used prescriptively and played back through a synthesizer. So the caveat for this, as with any descriptive notation, is that, while I have tried to render the music in as accurate a manner as possible, there is no substitute for hearing the real thing. That being said, I believe that my choice of notation does allow the reader to perceive more clearly the rhythmic relationships between different parts, as the clearly delineated pulse and subdivisions show exactly how each part converges with the others.

Terminology

Before proceeding directly to the analysis, I need to clarify some issues of Mande musical terminology. Mande musicians have their own musical terminology. As Charry points out, most of the musical terminology related to musical performance is more commonly used by players of the two primary *jeli* string instruments, the kora and the koni, than by balafon players, most likely because the terminology relates to concepts of tuning, which are less applicable to a fixed-pitch instrument (Charry 2000, 308-328).

Nevertheless, there are two Mandinka terms in particular that require explanation if one is to understand indigenous rhythmic and melodic concepts that pertain to Mande balafon music. The first is *ben*,¹² which literally means “to meet.” The second is a compound word that combines the word *kun*, or “head,” with *ben* to achieve the resulting “*kumben*,” which also refers to a coming together, and whose Mandinka equivalent, *kumbengo*, is used by Mande *jelilu* who play stringed instruments to refer to many things, including the tonic of a piece of music, a method of tuning, or rhythmic characteristics of an accompaniment pattern. *Kumbengo* can also be used as a generic term for an accompaniment pattern (Charry 2000, 313-315).¹³ Charry states that kora and koni players use the Mandinka terms *kumbengo* and *birimintingo* to refer, respectively, to “cyclic melodic or harmonic patterns identifiable as versions of named pieces that may take ornamentation and variation, and relatively long, fast-moving virtuosic melodic lines that may be considered as extended ornamentation or as expansion and variation of some element of the cyclic pattern” (Charry 2000, 314). Jessup defines *kumbengo*, in relation to Mandinka balafon music in the Gambia, as follows:

The basis of balafon music is the *kumbengo*, which is the basic melodic and rhythmic pattern of each piece of music, similar to an ostinato in Western music, but with much broader usage. The word *kumbengo* is also used for the tonal center of each piece of music, and for octaves. (Jessup 1983, 57)

While she defines *birimintingo* as “more extensive ornamentation and improvisation passages” that provide “an opportunity for the jali to display his virtuosity by incorporating descending runs, ornamental patterns, faster moving melodic themes,

¹² The Mandinka term is *bengo*.

¹³ For a detailed accounting of these terms and how they are used by Mande *jelilu* who play the kora and/or the koni, see Charry (2000, 308-328).

octave displacement, and improvised passages into the music,” Jessup also defines the term *variation* as “small changes in the kumbengo [that] add variety and interest” but that “are kept within the framework of the ostinato” (Jessup 1983, 58).

I asked my primary teacher, Abou Sylla, if there are any equivalent Susu terms that are used to describe these elements of balafon music, but he said that there are not any. Abou speaks English well, so my lessons with him are conducted primarily in English, though he sometimes uses French terms to convey his meaning more effectively. My lessons with Abou’s older brother, Bangali Sylla, were conducted entirely in French, and he did not use any Susu terms to convey musical concepts to me. Abou uses the term “accompaniment” to refer to what Gambian Mandinka balafon players call *kumbengo*, while Bangali used the French cognate *accompagnement*. Abou also uses English terms such as “variation” and “embellishment” to refer to what he calls “runs,” which can be used either in the same sense in which Jessup uses the term *variation* or as a means to transition from one accompaniment part to another. Bangali also used the French cognates *variation* and *embellissement* in the same sense that Jessup uses the term *variation*. Charry also points out that “some jelis use the French terms *accompagnement* for *kumbengo* and *solo* for *birimintingo*” (Charry 2000, 314), and Abou follows this practice as well, which is especially convenient for him because he can use the same terminology for both his Francophone and Anglophone students.

The Transcriptions – *Sunjata*

The image displays four staves of musical notation for the accompaniment of the piece *Sunjata*. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The first three staves are grouped under the label 'Acc. 1', with sub-labels 'Acc. 1', 'Acc. 1 Var. 1', and 'Acc. 1 Var. 2' respectively. The fourth staff is labeled 'Acc. 2'. The notation features eighth-note triplets, indicated by a '3' above the notes and a bracket. Red dots are placed above the notes in each triplet. The first three staves consist of a sequence of eighth-note triplets followed by a quarter rest, repeated four times. The fourth staff follows a similar pattern but includes a triplet of eighth notes that descends from the second line to the first space of the staff.

Figure 1. Maudo Suso’s Accompaniments to *Sunjata*

The image displays six systems of musical notation, each consisting of a single staff in 4/4 time. The notation is primarily composed of eighth and sixteenth notes, with many notes highlighted in red. Each system is labeled with an 'Acc.' (Accompagnement) or 'Var.' (Variation) number and includes '3' markings above groups of notes, indicating triplets. The systems are as follows:

- System 1:** Labeled 'Acc. 1'. It features a sequence of eighth notes with red stems, grouped into triplets.
- System 2:** Labeled 'Acc. 2'. It includes eighth notes with red stems and some beamed sixteenth notes, with triplet markings.
- System 3:** Labeled 'Acc. 3'. It shows eighth notes with red stems and some beamed sixteenth notes, with triplet markings.
- System 4:** Labeled 'Acc. 3' and 'Var.'. It features eighth notes with red stems and some beamed sixteenth notes, with triplet markings.
- System 5:** Labeled 'Acc. 4' and '5'. It consists of eighth notes with red stems and some beamed sixteenth notes, with triplet markings.
- System 6:** Labeled 'Acc. 6' and 'Var.'. It features eighth notes with red stems and some beamed sixteenth notes, with triplet markings.

Figure 2. Bala Dounbouya's Accompaniments to *Sunjata*

The image displays a musical score for Abou Sylla's accompaniments to *Sunjata*. It consists of nine staves of music, each with a unique title and a measure number. The music is written in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including triplets and runs. Red dots are placed under certain notes, likely indicating accents or specific rhythmic markers. The staves are as follows:

- Staff 1: *Acc.* 1
- Staff 2: *Acc. 1* *Var.*
- Staff 3: *Acc. 1 & Run* 1
- Staff 4: *Acc. 1 & Run 1 to Acc.* 2
- Staff 5: *Acc.* 2
- Staff 6: *Acc.* 3
- Staff 7: *Acc. 3* *Var.*
- Staff 8: *Acc. 3 & Run* 2

Figure 3. Abou Sylla's Accompaniments to *Sunjata*

The first piece I will examine is *Sunjata*. According to the epic of *Sunjata*, this piece was composed by Balafaséké Kouyaté to commemorate Sunjata's defeat of Soumaoro Kanté and subsequent founding of the Empire of Mali. As Charry points out, it is one of the oldest pieces of music in the Mande repertoire, and it is also believed to come originally from the balafon repertoire.¹⁴ *Sunjata* is also a good example with which to begin, as the different accompaniments provide examples of characteristic rhythmic repeated-note structures found in balafon accompaniment parts for many different pieces. Charry identifies four different types of consistent rhythmic repeated-note characteristics that appear in many balafon accompaniments (Charry 2000, 185-187). Three of these four can be found in the preceding transcriptions of balafon accompaniments to *Sunjata*.

The first is a repeated note on the third pulse of each beat, exemplified by Bala Dounbouya's Acc. 1¹⁵ and Abou Sylla's Acc. 2. In both of these cases, the sole exception is the offbeat of the second beat in the second measure of the accompaniment, which moves from a "c" to a "d" to accommodate the change in harmony. The second characteristic pattern occurs when a note is repeated on the first and third pulses of beats two and four in each measure. This pattern exists in the transcriptions of accompaniments to *Lamban* (*Lambangó* in Gambian Mandinka), but a variation of it – a repeated two-note pattern on the first and third pulses of beats two and four in each measure – occurs in Abou Sylla's Acc. 2, with the note on the third pulse of beat two in

¹⁴ See Charry (2000, 184). Charry, in his discussion of Mande *jeli* repertoire, lists approximately thirty-five pieces, designating from which area the pieces originated and on which instrument they were most likely to have been initially composed (Charry 2000, 148). While not a complete list of the entire Mande *jeli* repertoire, he insightfully covers the most common pieces, explaining the relationships between many of them (Charry 2000, 145-157).

¹⁵ Hereafter I will abbreviate references to different specific transcribed accompaniments thusly, mirroring the way they are labeled in the examples.

the second measure being changed to fit the harmony. The third repeated-note pattern occurs on the first pulse of each beat. This pattern characterizes all of the accompaniments and variations for Maudo Suso's version of *Sunjata*. As with most of the accompaniments by the other balafonists, the note changes on beat three to account for the change in harmony there. These two accompaniments to *Sunjata* played by Maudo Suso also emphasize the fact that either hand can be used to maintain these repeated-note patterns, as he maintains the pattern in his left hand in Acc. 1, along with the subsequent variations, and he maintains the pattern in his right hand in Acc. 2. The fourth characteristic pattern consists of a repeated note on the first and third pulses of beats one and three in each measure. This can be found in Bala Doubouya's Acc. 2, Acc. 3, and Acc. 5; Abou Sylla's Acc. 1; and Mudo Suso's Acc. 1 Var. 1. Dounbouya and Suso change the notes on beat three in the second measure, while Abou plays repeated notes that do not need to change to accommodate the harmonic shift on that beat.

Suso's Acc. 1 is also of interest because of the nature of the rhythmic movements it requires between the two hands. Jessup states that "Kumbengo #1 [Acc. 1] is an excellent illustration of the 2 against 3 motor pattern found in so much of African music" (Jessup 1983, 131). Charry also found this motor pattern to exist in the accompaniments Bala Dounbouya taught him to the piece *Kulanjan*, "a signature piece of the hunter that comes from the simbi"¹⁶ (Charry 2000, 183). Describing these accompaniments, Charry states, "The steady repetition of a tone (F) in one hand is typical of bala playing, but the obvious polyrhythmic relation between the two hands is uncommon in the bala" (Charry

¹⁶ The simbi is a heptatonic Maninka hunter's harp that is not played by *jelilu*, but some of whose music has made its way into the *jeli* repertoire. According to Charry, simbi pieces "belong to the oldest layer of the jeli's repertory" (Charry 2000, 152).



Figure 5. Abou Sylla’s Acc. 6 to *Saka Dougou*

Whether Abou’s more frequent use of simultaneous, complimentary duple and triple rhythms in his accompanying parts is due to his superior ability or is indicative of a more general aesthetic preference that has changed in the fifteen to twenty years since Charry and Jessup made their balafon recordings is not clear, but in either case, the phenomenon is indicative of an increased prevalence of rhythmic symbiosis in Mande balafon performance.

My comparison of the different transcriptions of *Sunjata* balafon accompaniments reveals some the different ways that recurring rhythmic repeated-note patterns are manifest in the balafon accompaniments. These patterns are analogous to the repeating rhythmic patterns found in Central and West African dance drumming that Agawu refers to as *topoi*.¹⁷ The presence of rhythmic *topoi* as a constituent element of balafon accompaniment patterns thus conceptually links Mande balafon performance to other African music and dance styles, revealing a broad rhythmic connection between different African performing arts. By comparing the accompaniment patterns from three different

¹⁷ See pages 31-32 above.

balafonists who combined duple and triple rhythms in their accompaniment figures, I have also demonstrated why the simultaneous use of duple and triple rhythms is better thought of as a complimentary, and not contradictory, use of rhythmic expression. My demonstration provides additional fodder for African, and Africanist, scholars and musicians who argue against describing African music as being polymetric with an emphasis on simultaneous contrasting rhythms.

The Transcriptions – *Lamban*

The image displays five staves of musical notation, each representing a different variation of an accompaniment figure. The music is written in 4/4 time and features a complex interplay of duple and triple rhythms. The first staff, labeled 'Acc. 1', consists of a sequence of eighth notes with a '3' above a bracket indicating a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff, 'Acc. 2', introduces a more complex pattern with eighth notes and a triplet of eighth notes, with a '3' below the triplet. The third staff, 'Acc. 2 Var. 1', continues this pattern with slight variations in note placement. The fourth staff, 'Acc. 2 Var. 2', and the fifth staff, 'Acc. 2 Var. 3', further elaborate on the rhythmic structure, incorporating more triplets and eighth notes. Red dots are placed under certain notes in the lower staves, likely indicating specific rhythmic accents or syncopations. The notation uses a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb).

Figure 6. Maudo Suso’s Accompaniments to *Lambango (Lamban)*

The image displays five variations of musical accompaniment for Lamban, arranged vertically. Each variation is written on a single staff in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. The music is characterized by frequent use of triplets and eighth-note patterns.

- Acc. 1:** Features a sequence of eighth-note triplets and eighth notes, with some notes highlighted in red.
- Acc. 2:** Includes eighth-note triplets and eighth notes, with some notes highlighted in red.
- Acc. 3:** Consists of eighth-note triplets and eighth notes, with some notes highlighted in red.
- Acc. 3 Var.:** A variation of the third accompaniment, featuring eighth-note triplets and eighth notes, with some notes highlighted in red.
- Acc. 4:** Features eighth-note triplets and eighth notes, with some notes highlighted in red.
- Acc. 5:** Consists of eighth-note triplets and eighth notes, with some notes highlighted in red.

Figure 7. Siriman Kouyate's Accompaniments to Lamban

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of seven staves. The first six staves are melodic accompaniments, and the seventh is a Dunun rhythm.

- Staff 1:** Labeled "Acc. 1". Features a melody with eighth notes and triplets. A "3" above a triplet of eighth notes is present.
- Staff 2:** Labeled "Acc. 1 Var.". Similar to Staff 1 but with a different rhythmic variation. A "3" above a triplet is present.
- Staff 3:** Labeled "Acc. 2". Features a melody with eighth notes and triplets. A "3" above a triplet is present.
- Staff 4:** Labeled "Acc. 2 & Run". Features a more complex melody with eighth notes and triplets. A "3" above a triplet is present.
- Staff 5:** Labeled "Acc. 3". Features a melody with eighth notes and triplets. A "3" above a triplet is present.
- Staff 6:** Labeled "Acc. 3 Var.". Features a melody with eighth notes and triplets. A "3" above a triplet is present.
- Staff 7:** Labeled "Dunun". Shows a rhythmic pattern for the Dunun drum, consisting of quarter notes and rests.

Figure 8. Abou Sylla's Accompaniments and Dunun rhythm to *Lamban*

The musical score is presented in eight staves, each with a label below it. The notation is in 4/4 time and uses a treble clef. Red dots are placed under the notes to indicate accents. Triplet markings (the number 3) are placed above groups of notes. Slanted lines above notes indicate runs. The staves are as follows:

- Staff 1: *Acc. 3 & Run 2*. Features a sequence of eighth-note triplets with slanted lines above them, followed by a final triplet.
- Staff 2: *Acc. 4 & Run 3*. Features a sequence of eighth-note triplets with slanted lines above them, followed by a final triplet.
- Staff 3: *Acc. 4 & Run 3 Var.*. Features a sequence of eighth-note triplets with slanted lines above them, followed by a final triplet.
- Staff 4: *Acc. 5*. Features a sequence of eighth-note triplets with slanted lines above them, followed by a final triplet.
- Staff 5: *Acc. 3 & Run 2 (cont'd)*. Continues the pattern of eighth-note triplets with slanted lines above them, followed by a final triplet.
- Staff 6: *Acc. 4 & Run 3 (cont'd)*. Continues the pattern of eighth-note triplets with slanted lines above them, followed by a final triplet.
- Staff 7: *Acc. 4 & Run 3 Var. (cont'd)*. Continues the pattern of eighth-note triplets with slanted lines above them, followed by a final triplet.
- Staff 8: *Acc. 5 (cont'd)*. Continues the pattern of eighth-note triplets with slanted lines above them, followed by a final triplet.

Figure 9. Abou Sylla's Extended Accompaniment (Acc. 5) and Accompaniments with Runs to *Lamban*

I will now turn to an analysis of the piece *Lamban*. According to Charry, it is unique among the Mande *jeli* repertoire because “it is perhaps the only pre-twentieth-century piece played by jelis that has no story behind it. It is a celebratory piece dedicated not to any single person but to the whole Kouyate lineage of jelis” (Charry 2000, 152). Charry also relates that *Lamban* is also one of the few pieces in the repertoire that has a specific dunun part, divulging its nature as a dance piece (Charry 2000, 152). Jessup does relate a story behind the piece, but it is vague enough that it does not contradict Charry’s assertions. The story basically asserts that all the balafon players gathered together during the reign of Sunjata and created their own song to dance to themselves. The piece thus “became a general dance tune for all jalis, which they used to play and dance to, to entertain their heroes, kings, and patrons” (Jessup 1983, 105). The popularity of this tune among *jelilu* has made it a preferred source of music on which to base contemporary compositions for patrons (Charry 2000, 152).

The accompaniments to *Lamban* basically fall under two types. The first is based on the following rhythm:



Figure 10. First Accompaniment type – *Lamban*

This is the most prevalent of the accompaniments, characterizing each one except for Abou Sylla’s Acc. 2 and Siriman Kouyate’s Acc. 5. These two remaining accompaniments exemplify Charry’s second characteristic balafon accompaniment pattern, as both contain a repeated “c” on the first and third pulses of beats two and four

in each measure. Another important aspect is that two of these accompaniments are representative of a fifth type of repeated-note pattern that I have found to be common among balafon accompaniments. These two accompaniments, Siriman Kouyate’s Acc. 1 and Maudo Suso’s Acc.1 both have the following repeated-note rhythm in the left hand on the lowest note:

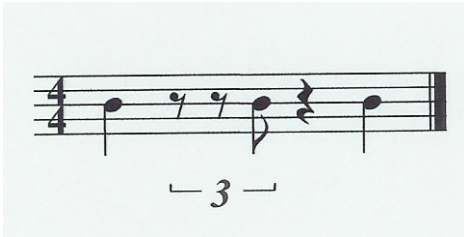


Figure 11. Rhythmic Repeated-Note Pattern # 5

While none of Abou’s accompaniments for this piece reflect this pattern in the left hand part, it does exist in the right hand in an anticipatory fashion, starting on pulse three of beat four, in his Acc. 3. This pattern also shows up in his accompaniment patterns to other songs, notably in *Keme Burema*, an extremely popular piece in Guinea because it is associated with the country’s first post-colonial president, Ahmed Sekou Touré. The piece was originally named after the courageous brother of Almami Samory Touré, a nineteenth-century general who valiantly fought against the French in their attempts to colonize the parts of northern Guinea and southern Mali under his control, whom Sekou Touré claimed as an ancestor. The pattern is found in the right hand part below:



Figure 12. Abou Sylla’s Acc. 2 – *Keme Burema*

Returning to *Lamban*, the three runs notated in Abou Sylla's accompaniments reflect the descending patterns common in many embellishments and improvisations that occur during the course of a Mande balafon performance. While these runs are simplified versions of the elaborate embellishments Abou would use in an actual performance, they reflect the general aesthetics of Mande balafon playing. Robert Farris Thompson, referring to the importance of this descending motion reflected in many different styles of African music, dance, and sculpture, calls this the "get down quality" (1974, 13). He states that this quality reflects the "opposition of high and low, gentle and sudden, [that] fits the familiar African taste for high-affect combinations," and that "get down sequences are ... virtuosic" (Thompson 1974, 13). He cites many examples from African and Afro-Caribbean cultures that exemplify this quality, describing how dancers especially perform their most elaborate movements in close proximity to the earth. The rapid and sudden descents of the balafon runs also convey this "high-affect" quality as they draw attention to the player executing them and inspire both dancers and singers to enliven their own performances. The flashes of instrumental virtuosity also provide the balafon soloist, especially, with a means of negotiating his own subjectivity through the act of performance. It is his ability both to maintain smoothly flowing accompaniment patterns and to suddenly abandon them in the pursuit of elaborate flights of musical fancy that swoop down in their melodic movements like birds of prey honing in on their hapless victims only to return seamlessly to the comfortable nest of their accompaniment patterns that designates the supremely talented Mande balafonist. His familiarity with the repertoire allows him the freedom to negotiate and transcend its boundaries, innovatively

dissolving the demarcation between agency and structure in the course of an exquisitely affective musical performance.

While elaborate solos are one way that a *jeli* will enhance a balafon performance, more subtle tactics are reflected in Abou Sylla's Acc. 5 to *Lamban*. Here he takes the two measure accompaniment and extends it into a four measure pattern that maintains the harmonic structure, but manipulates the bass line in a way that provides musical interest while challenging the player's dexterity.

By comparing the different accompaniment patterns to *Lamban*, I have shown that the accompaniment patterns are broken down into two types, the first of which is characterized by a four-beat rhythmic pattern that becomes a *topos* in and of itself, as it is an important identifier of the majority of the *Lamban* accompaniment patterns. Analysis of the remaining patterns shows the prevalence of one of Charry's four repeated-note rhythmic groupings.¹⁸ My comparison of two of the *Lamban* accompaniments to one of Abou Sylla's accompaniments to *Kemé Bouréma* reveals a fifth repeated-note ostinato that is common in Mande balafon accompaniment patterns. Once again, I link Mande balafon performance with other expressive African art forms by describing how the descending runs use by Abou and other Mande balafonists, which are represented in a simplified form in my *Lamban* transcriptions, are indicative of a general aesthetic appreciation for descending displays of virtuosity and combinations of extremes in African artistic performance. Lastly, my examination of Abou Sylla's Acc. 5 shows another, more subtle means of enhancing accompaniment patterns in Mande balafon performance, the extension of the length of the patterns.

¹⁸ See page 109 above.

The Transcriptions – Boloba

The image displays two staves of musical notation for the accompaniment of the song 'Boloba'. Both staves are written in 5/8 time and use a treble clef. The first staff, labeled 'Acc. 1', features a sequence of chords and eighth notes, with some notes highlighted in red. The second staff, labeled 'Acc. 2', provides a complementary accompaniment with similar rhythmic patterns and chord structures, also featuring some red highlights.

Figure 13. Maudo Suso's Accompaniments to *Kura (Boloba)*

The image displays five staves of musical notation for accompaniment, all in 5/8 time. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and chords. Red dots are placed on specific notes across all staves, likely indicating a key signature or specific harmonic choices. The staves are labeled as follows:

- Staff 1: *Acc. 1*
- Staff 2: *Acc. 1 Var.*
- Staff 3: *Acc. 2*
- Staff 4: *Acc. 3*
- Staff 5: *Acc. 4*

Figure 14. Bala Dounbouya's (1 & 2) and Siriman Kouyate's (3&4) Accompaniments to *Boloba*

The image displays a musical score for accompaniment, consisting of seven staves of music. Each staff is written in a treble clef with a 5/8 time signature. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. Red markings highlight specific notes and stems across the score.

- Staff 1:** Labeled "Acc. 1". It begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note, a quarter rest, and another quarter note. The notes are G4, A4, B4, and C5.
- Staff 2:** Labeled "Acc. 2". It features a more complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes.
- Staff 3:** Labeled "Acc. 2 Var.". This is a variation of the second staff, showing different rhythmic groupings.
- Staff 4:** Labeled "Acc. 3". It starts with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note, a quarter rest, and another quarter note.
- Staff 5:** Labeled "Acc. 1 (cont'd)". This staff continues the first staff's pattern.
- Staff 6:** Labeled "Acc. 2 (cont'd)". This staff continues the second staff's pattern.
- Staff 7:** Labeled "Acc. 2 Var. (cont'd)". This staff continues the variation of the second staff's pattern.
- Staff 8:** Labeled "Acc. 3 (cont'd)". This staff continues the third staff's pattern.

Figure 15. Bangali Sylla's Accompaniments to *Boloba*

Boloba, like *Lamban*, is one of the oldest pieces in the *jeli* repertoire and is believed to have originated as a balafon piece (Charry 2000, 150-152). While Charry 2000, 152) states that *Boloba* is dedicated to Soumaoro Kanté, and the translation of the Gambian Mandinka lyrics to *Kura (Boloba)* translated in Jessup (1983, 142) only mention Sunjata by name, Abou Sylla told me that *Boloba* is a piece that was historically played for kings, or honored or powerful people, who had either done good things for people or eliminated something bad or evil (personal conversation, March 2006).

The technique of extending an accompaniment pattern, while still maintaining the harmonic structure, as a means of embellishment, which Abou used in his Acc. 5 for *Lamban*, is clearly evident in *Boloba*. This is especially so if one compares Bangali Sylla's accompaniments with those of Maudo Suso, Bala Dounbouya, and Siriman Kouyate. Bangali's accompaniments consist of eight-measure patterns as opposed to the four-measure patterns of the other accompanists. By adding a run in the seventh measure, he extends the length of the accompaniment and provides a convenient vehicle for a smooth transition between different accompaniments. As Acc. 2 and its variation can also be played an octave lower, measure seven could also be played down one octave, using the left hand instead of the right, as a transition into the lower octave, thus providing even further variation to the accompaniments while still maintaining their continuity.

Another curiosity of this piece, beyond its five-pulse-per-measure phrasing, is the starting point at which Jessup transcribes Maudo Suso's accompaniments to *Kura (Boloba)*. While Suso's Acc.1 would easily align harmonically with the other players'

accompaniments if one moved the starting point for the pattern to pulse four in the first measure, the second accompaniment poses more of a conundrum. It would have to be completely rearranged to line up both rhythmically and harmonically with the other accompaniments, and even then, assuming one plays each measure in pulse order of 4-5-1-2-3 and starts with such a reconfigured measure three, one would have to allow for an extended harmonic variance, with the change in harmony starting in the beginning of the fourth measure instead of on pulse three in the fourth measure, as is the case for all the other accompaniments, in order for the parts to be synharmonic. In her “teaching suggestions” that she provides after the transcriptions, Jessup states that “the two kumbengos are not played together” (1983, 42), but provides no further explanation as to why this is so, even though such a practice would violate performance norms for Mande balafon music. I can only assume that this is a localized convention of performance specific to the Gambia, as such is not the case with the accompaniments taught by the other balafonists, all of whom are originally from Guinea, though only Bangali Sylla still lives there.

The main point of my comparison of the different transcriptions of *Boloba* is to show how Bangali Sylla extends what could be considered a standard four-measure accompaniment into an eight-measure pattern by doubling the length of his four-measure pattern and adding a run in the seventh measure. The technique of extending patterns in the course of performance is not uncommon, but by adding a run in the same place for each pattern, Bangali provides an embellishment that both creates a more interesting pattern and facilitates the transition from one pattern to another during the course of a performance. My comparison also reveals the unusual nature of Maudo Suso’s second

accompaniment to *Kura (Boloba)*. Since this accompaniment does not align harmonically with any of the other *Boloba* accompaniments, both its source and how it might fit into the greater scheme of Mande balafon accompaniments for *Boloba* is, at this point, a bit of a mystery. It is possible that the accompaniment in question may reflect a regional variation specific to the Gambia.

The Transcriptions – *Kalata Mori*

The image displays a musical score for the piece *Kalata Mori*, specifically focusing on the accompaniment parts. The score is written in 12/8 time and consists of eight staves. The first staff is labeled 'Acc. 1'. The second staff is 'Acc. 1 Var. 1'. The third staff is 'Acc. 1 Var. 2'. The fourth staff is 'Acc. 1 Var. 3', which includes a triplet of eighth notes marked with a '3' and a slur. The fifth staff is a 'Transition Acc. 1 to Acc. 2'. The sixth staff is 'Acc. 2'. The seventh staff is 'Acc. 2 Var. 1'. The eighth staff is 'Acc. 2 Var. 2'. All staves are in treble clef and feature a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some notes highlighted in red.

Figure 16. *Kalata Mori* – Abou Sylla’s Accompaniments 1 and 2 and their variations

The next piece I will examine is *Kalata Mori*. Aside from its rhythmic significance, this song is particularly important to Abou Sylla, as it is one of the songs performed to praise people from his lineage. The song title literally means “marabout,

pick up your pen.” As the Sylla patronym is generally associated with marabouts, or African Islamic scholars, the song is used to praise members of his clan, as well as others with the same affiliation. I learned the accompaniments to these two pieces from Abou during two different periods, the first being a balafon workshop he conducted in Woodbury, CT on March 23-24, 2003, and the second during my second trip to Guinea with Abou during April and May of 2005. During the workshop, Abou showed me the basic version of accompaniments one and two, the first variation on those accompaniments, and how to transition between the two accompaniments. During my second visit to Abou’s home in Guinea, he showed me further variations to accompaniments one and two, different runs that can be used to embellish these accompaniments, and a third accompaniment pattern.

This song is an excellent example of how two accompaniments that at first hearing might appear to be in different meters, actually compliment each other by interlocking to reinforce the same harmonic structure. The first accompaniment pattern sets up a clear triple prolation with four beats of three pulses each to the measure and a two measure accompaniment pattern. The second accompaniment pattern sounds like it is in a fast three-four time with duple prolation, where beat one of each measure coincides with beats one and three of the four-beat pattern of the first accompaniment. A closer inspection of the two accompaniments, however, reveals directly overlapping notes and rhythms between the two, despite the different rhythmic sensations of each. Specifically, the first half of measure 1 of accompaniments one and two lines up exactly, both rhythmically and tonally, albeit the first note is an octave higher in the second accompaniment, thus providing a synchronous point from which to transition smoothly

between the two accompaniments. Thus, what at first may sound like two parts occurring simultaneously in different meters is actually two parts that interweave in a more complex fashion, subtly reinforcing each other while providing a polyrhythmic multidimensional complementarity that enhances the overall performance and provides the soloist with more choices to draw upon in his improvisations. In order to depict the rhythmic relationship between the two parts, I have notated them in the same meter, 12/8, to portray visually the proximity of their rhythmically complimentary relationship.

The image displays three staves of musical notation in 12/8 time. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a 12/8 time signature. The first staff is labeled 'Acc. 1 Var. 2 & Run 2'. The second staff is labeled 'Acc. 1 Var. 2 & Run 2 Var. 1'. The third staff is labeled 'Acc. 1 Var. 2 & Run 2 Var. 2'. The notation shows a complex interweaving of notes, with some notes in red. The third staff features a triplet of eighth notes and a pair of eighth notes beamed together with a '2' above them, indicating a specific rhythmic variation.

Figure 17. *Kalata Mori* – Development of Run 2 Variations

Another important reason why I chose *Kalata Mori* is that because Abou showed me the different parts over an extended period of time, I have learned from him some of the different tactics that balafon players use to create variations or runs that enliven accompaniments during the course of a performance. As my skills have increased, the techniques Abou has shown me have become more advanced, so that I learn not only how to play a simple run but also how to embellish that run with creative techniques that make it both more complex and more interesting to the listener. Thus, in my transcription, we

see first Acc. 2 with a simplified Run 2. Here in this run one may observe visually Thompson's "get down quality" as the notes resemble a downwardly undulating sine wave like a river meandering toward its terminus. In the more developed Run 2 Var. 1, the addition of sixteenth notes creates brief rapids in our flowing river, strategically placed at the melodic apex and nadir of the run to highlight both extremes before slipping smoothly yet quickly back into the accompaniment. In the final variant, Run 2 Ver. 2, the embellishments become more elaborate sixteenth note triplets, with the most rapid combination of notes occurring at the very end of the run, a final flourish before resuming the flowing accompaniment. While this is not the only method for ornamentation of accompaniments,¹⁹ it provides an example of how runs and other variations can become progressively more complex, as the player's level of ability allows for their implementation.

My analysis of *Kalata Mori* thus reveals two specific aspects of the accompaniments. The first is an examination of how two specific accompaniments that can sound to the listener as if they are in different meters actually compliment and reinforce each other rhythmically. Like my previous comparison of different accompaniments that combine duple and triple and triple rhythms within each accompaniment (pages 110-113), my analysis of the rhythmic relationship between Acc. 1 and Acc. 2, and their variations, of *Kalata Mori* provides further support to those who argue against describing African music as being characterized by the use of competing or contrasting rhythms.

¹⁹ Another example would be the doubling of certain notes in octave intervals, as in Acc. 1 Var. 2. Abou is particularly renowned for his superlative ability to play rapid, complex passages in doubled octaves.

The Transcriptions – *Nanfulen*

The image displays a musical transcription of Abou Sylla's *Nanfulen* Acc. 1. It consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time, written in treble clef. The melody is marked with red notes and stems. The first staff is divided into two measures by a vertical line. Below the first measure is the chord *D/F/A/D*, and below the second measure is the chord *D/F/A/B*. The second staff is also divided into two measures by a vertical line. Below the first measure is the chord *C/F/A/C*, and below the second measure is the chord *D/F/A/D*. The music ends with a double bar line.

Figure 18. Abou Sylla's *Nanfulen* Acc. 1 – showing harmonic structure and transition points

Nanfulen is, like *Boloba*, an unusual piece in the Mande *jeli* repertoire. What is unusual about *Nanfulen*, however, is not its metric structure. *Nanfulen* is one of two pieces in the Mande *jeli* repertoire that consists of three harmonic areas of equal duration in each accompaniment pattern. *Nanfulen* is most probably a twentieth-century piece that comes from the balafon (Charry 2000, 286). Abou Sylla translates *Nanfulen* as a contraction of the Maninka phrase *na n fule*, meaning “come, release me” or “come, help me.”²⁰ He told me that the idea is comparable to the French word *secours*, meaning “help” or “aid,” and that the song is “played for generous people who can help you out” (personal conversation March 2006). Charry considers *Nanfulen* a “musical child of

²⁰ See Charry (2000, 286, note 43). He cites Mamadi Kaba (1995, 221), who translates *Nanfulen* the same way as Abou, but describes the origin of the song as being a World War II era protest against French colonial rule.

Fakoli,” a much older piece that comes from the balafon and also has three harmonic areas of equal duration (2000, 153, 188).²¹

One aspect of *Nanfulen*, however, that is common in the Mande *jeli* repertoire is the point in the measure at which each change in harmony occurs. The switch to a new harmonic area always occurs in an anticipatory fashion, leading into the beginning of the next measure and giving the piece a sense of constant forward momentum. This phenomenon, which I refer to as “harmonic anticipation,” reflects a general preference for anticipatory movement common in Mande music and dance.

The importance of anticipation in Mande music and dance is particularly evident in the overlapping of phrasing between the drummers and dancers. An example of this would be *Titiba*, which has the following accompanying drum rhythms:²²

²¹ When I asked Abou if there is a historical connection between *Fakoli* and *Nanfulen*, he said that he did not know of one. Charry also states that *Fakoli* is “a little-known bala piece” (2000, 153), but I found it to be fairly well-known in the coastal region of Guinea. The two balafon players from whom Charry learned the piece are originally from Kindia, also Abou’s hometown, which is in the coastal region of Guinea, so perhaps this explains the discrepancy between the frequency of Charry’s encounters with the piece and mine.

²² This is a transcription of the dunun and sangba accompaniment that is played on two drums by one player, the jembe accompaniment parts, and the jembe break to the Mande dance *Titiba*. Dununs are traditional African drums that are cylindrical in shape, rope-tensioned, and covered on both ends with animal skin heads, usually cow skin due to its relative thickness. The player uses straight wooden sticks to strike the drums. The notes in the bottom, or first, space indicate when the sticks strike the dununba and the notes in the second space, directly above the first, indicate when the sticks strike the sangba. The note with a dot beneath it indicates a pressed stroke, where the stick is pressed into the drum by the player instead of being allowed to rebound freely. The jembe is a goblet-shaped, rope-tensioned hand drum that is carved from a single piece of wood and covered on the goblet end with a stretched animal skin, usually that of a goat. There are three primary sounds played on the jembe. They are the “bass,” played with the palm of the hand in the center of the drum; the “tone,” played with the fingers held flat and closed together near the edge of the drum; and the “slap,” played with the fingers relaxed, spread apart, and naturally curved near the edge of the drum. A bass is indicated by notes in the first space. A tone is indicated by a note in the second space. A slap is indicated by a note in the third space. I transcribed these rhythms during an African dance class I observed at Dance Place in Washington, DC, 2 March 2003. The class was taught by Sylvia Soumah, who has trained in Guinea and Senegal with members of the national ballets of both countries.

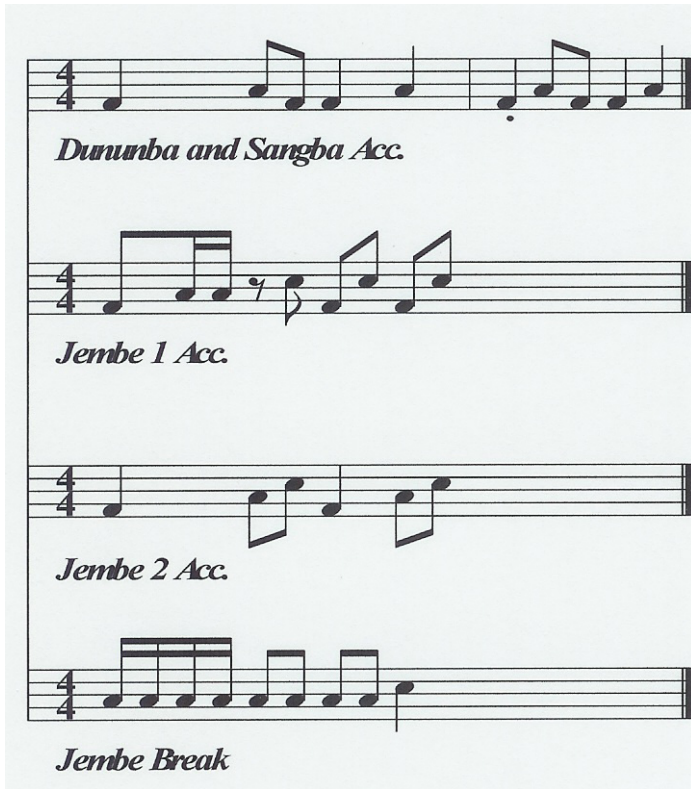


Figure 19. *Titiba* accompaniment patterns

As can be seen from these examples, anticipation is present in the accented upbeats in the jembe parts, especially the slap that immediately precedes the downbeat at the beginning of the repetition of the pattern in both jembe accompaniments. Included in the preceding transcription is the jembe break that signals the dancers to change movements. When the dancers begin a new movement, however, that movement begins on the fourth pulse of the break, so what transpires as a result of the dancers anticipating the repetition of the drum phrases with their own movements is an intertwining of the drum and dance phrasing that binds the two media together in the syncretic realization of a single art form. Thus, as an interconnectedness between African music and dance

occurs through the correspondence between dance movements and rhythmic patterns,²³ so is it also realized through anticipatory overlapping phrasing.

The use of harmonic anticipation in Mande balafon accompaniments is thus linked to a more pervasive aesthetic in Mande artistic performance. The use of anticipation both to give the music forward momentum and to create an interlocking relationship between performers helps to foster a sense of interconnectedness that, as I shall explore in the next chapter, facilitates the sharing of musical information across cultural boundaries.

Summary

Musical analysis can be a useful tool to improve one's understanding of the culture of the people who play the music. By examining specific elements of musical performance practices, as they are represented in the sound itself, one can discover how specific cultural characteristics are conveyed through musical performance. In order to tailor one's analysis so that it accurately reflects the connections between the music played and the people playing it, one must be careful of the methodology one uses to represent the music in a written, analyzable format. My methodology in this study reflects both my own background as a musician trained to read Western notation and my teacher's pedagogy, which adapts Mande balafon music to Western-tuned instruments but still depicts his own emic idea of how music should be phrased, where phrases begin and end, and the rhythmic relationship between individual notes within an accompaniment and between simultaneous accompaniment patterns. My choice of using

²³ See pages 29-32 above.

a Western tuning, while not unproblematic, does reflect both the manner in which I was taught most of the pieces and current trends in Mande balafon performance in Guinea.

Each of the five specific elements that I focus on in my analysis of Mande balafon music relates to an important aspect of either the interconnectedness of African artistic performance in general or Mande musical performance in particular. The first element I address, the prevalence of rhythmic repeated-note patterns in Mande balafon music, is similar to rhythmic phenomena in African drumming that Kofi Agawu describes as *topoi*. As well as providing rhythmic coherence to accompaniment patterns, these ostinatos act both as signifiers of specific accompaniments and as source material for soloists to incorporate into their improvisations. The similarity between the rhythmic repeated-note patterns in Mande balafon music and Agawu's *topoi* implies a larger connection between different West African musical styles based on the importance of rhythmic signifiers to each tradition.

Two other characteristics of Mande balafon accompaniment patterns that I analyze are also related to the rhythmic nature of the accompaniments. One deals specifically with the simultaneous use of duple and triple rhythms, one played by the left hand and the other by the right. Although such rhythmic combinations are common throughout African music, the prevalent misconception is that the two rhythms are somehow conceived by the musicians playing them as being in two separate meters. When this rhythmic combination is examined as it is manifested in balafon accompaniments, however, it becomes clear that the sub-patterns played by each hand combine to provide a dual function. Together, they both outline the harmony of the piece and provide two different rhythmic strata that the soloist may choose to emphasize during

the course of his solos. Thus, the rhythms played by each hand are best conceived of as being complimentary and not contrasting, as this conceptualization more clearly reflects how they are used by the person playing them.

The other rhythmically-focused Mande balafon accompaniment feature is the use of two coexistent accompaniments to the same piece that sound as if they are in different meters. Again, my musical analysis of the patterns reveals that they work together to create melodically and rhythmically overlapping sections. These overlapping sections facilitate the transition from one accompaniment to the other, while also dispelling the aural illusion of two separate meters occurring simultaneously. The two accompaniments therefore develop an intertwining melodic and rhythmic texture that reveals their inherently synchronistic nature.

The two remaining facets of Mande balafon accompaniments that I examine are important as they reveal ways that Mande balafon performance is similar to other African artistic traditions, especially dance. My examination of the different means Mande balafonists use to embellish their accompaniments discloses a proclivity toward downward virtuosic melodic flourishes that exhibit a link to a similar aesthetic preference characteristic of other forms of African artistic performance, known as the “get down quality” (Thompson 1974, 13).²⁴ My explanation of the anticipatory nature of harmonic phrasing in Mande balafon accompaniments depicts a connection to a significant interartistic phenomenon in Mande culture – the rhythmic interaction between drummers and dancers in Mande dance performance. Through anticipatory overlapping phrasing, the dancers and drummers both reveal the importance of anticipation as a technique for

²⁴ See page 119 above.

providing forward momentum in a dance performance. Thus, an aesthetic of anticipation is revealed to be a meaningful component of Mande artistic performance.

Ultimately, the overriding theme of my musical analysis has been a focus on connection, cooperation, and transartistic similitude. This is fitting from an instrument whose origins lie in a symbol of the strength, unity, and courage of the different Mande peoples. As we shall see in the next chapter, my teacher is continuing his emphasis on this aspect of the Mande balafon tradition by using cross-cultural musical education as a means of bringing together people from diverse backgrounds who are drawn together by their mutual affection for a musical tradition.

CHAPTER FIVE

TRANSMITTING THE MANDE BALAFON IN THE UNITED STATES

Since coming to the United States in 1995, Abou Sylla has created a network of students excited about learning to play the balafon and learning more about Mande music and culture. He also engages regularly in musical performances, either of traditional Mande repertoire or in collaboration with musicians in other styles of music. In this chapter I will describe how Abou is continuing the *jeli* tradition of preserving and disseminating Mande musical culture, both in the United States and during his return visits to Guinea. I will also examine my hypothesis that by taking his students with him to Guinea, Abou facilitates a cultural tourism experience that serves as a context for the transmission of identity from himself to his students, and thus reinforces a type of community he is building through his workshops in the United States. I will analyze how Abou's teaching methods foster community among his students here in the U.S. and why the cultural tourism experience provides an ideal locus for the transmission of identity from Abou to his students. I will also analyze how Abou's experience, as well as my experiences with him, have led me to formulate a new mode of being, based on the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, that Abou actualizes through his multifaceted existence as a *jeli*, a musician, a cross-cultural collaborator and educator, a proponent for his cultural traditions, and an individual who is breaking new ground, innovatively linking the past and future through his own presence.

Abou Sylla's Balafon Workshops and Paul Gilroy's "Ethics of Antiphony"

By coming to the United States to teach the balafon to students, Abou is expanding the role of the balafon as a vehicle for the transmission of Mande culture.

Since coming to the U.S., Abou has developed a style of teaching that involves multiple students in a workshop format and challenges them individually, yet involves them in the creation of a type of community by using teaching methods that reflect an inherently African performative environment. This environment, conveyed through Abou's teaching methods, allows for a receptivity among Abou's students to a transmission of identity from Abou to them that is further reinforced among those who travel with him to Guinea to study in the original homeland of the Mande balafon.

In his examination of the interaction between audience and performer in diasporic African musics, Paul Gilroy states that a "relationship of identity" develops as the "performer dissolves into the crowd" (Gilroy 1993, 200). This statement is based on the inclusive nature of performance in both African and African American musical cultures, which I have examined in some depth in Chapter Two. He locates this specific "relationship of identity" between performer and audience in the "ubiquity of antiphonal social forms that underpin and enclose the plurality of black cultures in the western hemisphere" (Gilroy 1993, 200). This relationship results because the "performer takes on a communicative role comparable to the role of the storyteller" (Gilroy 1993, 200). This concept of performer as interactive narrator can be seen directly in the use of call and response techniques in both African and African American musical performance, whether it be through a musical dialogue between jembe soloist and dancer, balafon soloist and griot singer, or an American rap artist telling the audience to "throw your hands in the air and wave 'em like you just don't care."¹ This call and response

¹ This famous phrase is ubiquitous in rap and R&B concerts, and has been included in lyrics to songs from artists as diverse as LL Cool J (Rap), Alanis Morissette (Rock), and the Backstreet Boys (Boy-band Pop).

technique also occurs in Abou's approach to teaching the balafon. When teaching an accompaniment pattern to his students, Abou first demonstrates the rhythm and then plays along with his students as they attempt to duplicate what he has played. The transmission of musical information continues in this fashion until the student can maintain the specific pattern. Once this occurs, Abou then solos over the top of the students' repetition of the accompaniment patterns, both demonstrating his prowess on the balafon to inspire his students and challenging them to maintain the rhythmic accompaniment steadily enough for him to perform complementarily divergent rhythms as he solos. As each student is ready for a new, more complex pattern, Abou shows her/him that new pattern while the other students are holding down their own patterns. Thus, the various different accompaniment patterns to a song progressively unfold over the course of a workshop like a story being gradually narrated by Abou to all the students in a multi-interactive fashion.

This participatory interaction between instructor and student is reflective of what Gilroy refers to as "the identity-giving model of democracy/community that has become the valuable intersubjective resource that I call the ethics of antiphony" (Gilroy 1993, 200). Through his teaching technique, Abou challenges his students at the level at which they currently perform, successively increasing the difficulty of each individual's part, until that individual can hold her/his new accompaniment pattern simultaneously with others that occur around it. This model of challenging students, each according to her/his own ability, allows for a fully participatory interactive workshop setting where each

The earliest attribution of the quote that I can find is to live performances in the early 1970s by DJ Kool Herc (born Clive Campbell), who is generally considered to be the founding father of rap music.

student serves an important role in creating a multilevel, interconnected soundscape. The absorption of individual students into a collective soundscape allows each to reconfigure her/his identity in relation to her/his role within the created musical community and link her/himself to others who have participated in similar musical experiences with Abou. Abou's creation of interconnected musical networks that are based upon learning the balafon in this specific manner involve his students directly in a form of community building that is distinctly African in character, and thus he transfers to them an appreciation for the efficacy of a specific type of intercultural relationship.

It is not merely Abou's teaching method, however, that helps foster appreciation of Mande culture among his students. During Abou's workshops, which usually take place over a weekend, starting on Saturday morning and concluding Sunday afternoon, there is always an extended break for food at some point during the first day. During that break, either Abou himself, or one of his friends, will cook traditional African food for everyone there, literally giving the participants a taste of Mande culture. Usually, there are also other, more subtle cultural elements that take place at Abou's workshops, allowing participants to become further involved through their senses in Mande culture without traveling to Guinea. During one of the workshops that I attended,² Abou had with him some video footage of his 1999 trip to Guinea to perform at the first annual Sosso Bala Festival. The footage consisted of both his own performance at the festival and footage of his family members playing the balafon in his native village of Kindia. Abou took some of his students with him on this trip, and he was showing the footage to us, his current students who had not gone on that excursion with him, both to give us an

² 23-24 March 2002 in Woodbury, CT.

idea of balafon performance in Guinea and perhaps to entice us to come with him to Guinea on a future voyage. At another workshop I attended,³ we took an evening break from playing and took a couple of balafons over to an African dance class that a friend of Abou's was conducting at Yale University. Some of the participants in the workshop played balafon with Abou to accompany the class, while another participant and I danced with the students as part of the class. In this case the workshop attendees were afforded the opportunity to experience an important facet of balafon performance – accompaniment of dancers.

Cultural Tourism and the Transmission of Identity

While it is important that Abou's teaching methods reflect Gilroy's ethics of antiphony, as this methodology serves to incorporate important elements of African artistic performance into the learning process, even more significant is his taking the further step of bringing his students to his home country of Guinea to experience studying the balafon in the land of its origin. This significance is due to the unique nature of the cultural tourism experience. "Cultural tourism is a form of experiential tourism based on the search for and participation in new and deep cultural experiences of an aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or psychological nature" (Stebbins 1997, 450, based on Reizinger 1994, 24). If "identity is formed through consumption and play" (Urry 1994, 235), and "tourism in the postmodern age has become a main pattern of consumption" (Stebbins 1997, 451), then it follows that cultural tourism, encompassing elements of both consumption and play, can serve as a locus for the construction of identity. One important thing that sets cultural tourism, as defined above, apart from other forms of

³ August 2004 in New Haven, CT.

tourism is the desire of the tourist to learn more about another culture by traveling to the source of that culture and immersing her/himself within it, usually as part of some manner of instruction. In order to engage in such activity, there must be a motivation within the potential tourist to understand another culture on more than just a superficial level. This desire for new and deep cultural experiences predisposes the tourist to act as a willing receptor of any aspect of the culture that can be transmitted during such experiences. In the case of a cultural tourist who seeks to learn about a musical tradition, the transmission of musical knowledge, while significant, is not the sole reason for traveling to another cultural domain to study its music. Cultural tourists seek a transformative experience that will intensely affect the way they both view themselves and present themselves to others.

In order to facilitate this transformative experience, Abou's students live with his family and interact with them on a daily basis, eating the same food and sleeping in the same accommodations. We study the balafon with not only Abou but also his older brother Bangali, one of Abou's teachers, and other members of Abou's family. We also see how the instrument is made, interacting on a personal basis with Abou's favorite balafon builders and learning exactly what goes into the creation of a professional quality instrument. As tourists, we absorb from Abou's family, our hosts, a direct appreciation for the cuisine and culture of our surroundings through our direct experience, literally "consuming" the experiences. But there is more to the experience than just seeing what Abou's life is like in Guinea by participating in the same daily activities that he and his family do. We also see how we are contributing to his and his family's well-being. In

Guinea, especially as far out in the suburbs as Abou lives,⁴ it is rare for a native Guinean to have international visitors, especially from the United States, come to live in his home at least once a year. Because he is accompanied by not just visitors, but friends and students from the U.S., Abou is accorded a more privileged status in his home country, and is able to obtain access to powerful people and places more easily. By helping Abou and his family out financially, we see the direct benefits of our involvement in his life, whether it is something as small as buying a pair of shoes for one of his children or something as large as contributing significantly to the construction and improvement of his house. By being with Abou on a daily basis and witnessing some of the most intimate aspects of his existence, sharing both the joys and frustrations of living in an impoverished country with a poor infrastructure but an abundance of considerate, creative thoughtful, and hardworking people, we, as his students, participate in a special kind of cultural tourism, where we, as cultural tourists, absorb an aspect of identity from our hosts through our ability to empathize with their everyday struggles. Thus, the paradigm of tourist as mere observer is reversed and the tourist becomes a “host of identity,” receiving a form of cultural understanding only afforded by the interactive experience of direct, meaningful participation in another person’s daily life. The ethnomusicologist, exploring the potentiality for identity re-creation inherent in the cultural tourism experience, becomes a paradigm buster in her/his reversal of the tourist/host relationship, as the two previous others share an element of identity through a mutually-endured, daily ethics of antiphony.

⁴ Abou’s residence is in Kountiya, a suburb approximately thirty-five kilometers from Conakry, Guinea’s capital city.

Another important way in which the usual tourist/host paradigm is switched in this particular instance of cultural tourism is that the tourist is traveling to Guinea to learn a specific skill that is commonplace throughout Guinea and something most Guineans are exposed to throughout their lives. I am not implying that all people from Guinea learn to play the Mande balafon, but most of the people in the areas of Guinea where we travel with Abou do grow up hearing and seeing the instrument played frequently in both ritual and entertainment contexts. As tourists coming into Guinea to learn to play an indigenous instrument within an indigenous context, we place ourselves in situations where we are evaluated by our hosts for our understanding of their cultural traditions and our ability to replicate them through performance. In this case, the usual situation of tourist as spectator and touree as performer (van den Berghe and Keyes 1984, 347) is reversed, again blurring the distinction between the roles of tourist and host and exemplifying the idea of transmission of identity as the level of cultural understanding absorbed by the tourist can be evaluated by her/his hosts.

Welcome to my Ethnoscape

A useful concept that can be employed to describe how elements of Abou's identity transfer to his students as part of the cultural tourism experience is Arjun Appadurai's notion of ethnoscares. Appadurai defines ethnoscape as "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live" (Appadurai 1994, 329). Appadurai uses this concept as a building block of his theory of "imagined worlds," an extension of Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" and an attempt to account for the ways increased global interaction, both personal and technological, have necessitated conceptualizations of human association as "a complex transnational construction of

imaginary landscapes” (Appadurai 1994, 327). The idea of an ethnoscape, when focused on at the level of the individual, is a beneficial model for examining more subtle transpersonal interactions. By bringing his students to Guinea with him, Abou is inviting them further into his own personal ethnoscape, extending the transpersonal sharing of identity between him and his students beyond the environs of workshops or private lessons in the United States. As an individual who travels frequently between the cultural domains of the United States and Guinea, he becomes imminently qualified as a negotiator, or culture broker, between the two worlds, interpreting his cultural traditions for his students. By bringing his students into the lives of his family and friends in Guinea and embedding them there, albeit temporarily, he creates a nurturing environment within which to expose his students to life in Guinea, the role of the balafon within Mande culture, and the importance of understanding context to learning a musical tradition.

The Phenomenology of *Jeliya*

The importance of context to the formation of identity is particularly applicable in the case of the Mande *jeli* in general and Abou Sylla in particular. To step back and take a more theoretical approach, I will turn now to the necessary conditions for the formation of identity for the contemporary African and then apply them to the particularities of Abou’s existence as I have come to know it and share a part of it. Returning once again to Syrotinski and his analysis of the works of Mudimbe,⁵ the contemporary African artist – trapped between the dual exigencies of creative agency and obeisance to the strictures of ancient, though living and malleable, traditions – needs to aim “for the *restoration* of a

⁵ See pages 49-52 above.

fully conscious, intentional subject ... [that is] concrete, very deliberately existential and *phenomenologically* determined ... [and] is also seen as an assertion of the singularity of its place and its time” (Syrotinski 2002, 23).⁶ Thus the artist’s work needs necessarily to reflect the realities of her/his lived existence. For the contemporary *jeli*, especially one engaged in bringing her/his tradition to an international audience, this work must reflect the encounters with a modernity that reflects the interactions of Africa and the United States (and/or Europe). The necessity to make one’s tradition relevant to a diasporic audience while still upholding that which historically informs one’s being and enables one to return and easily re-integrate into her/his native culture requires an artistic, as well as existential, balancing act through which the contemporary African artist must both create and sustain her/his essential self.⁷

Taken in this light, contemporary *jeliya*, whether in an African or a diasporic context, can be seen as a hermeneutic interpretation through performance of Mande musical and cultural tradition, as lived by the *jeli* who performs it. Particularly applicable to contemporary Mande *jeliya* here is the way Eritrean philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan defines “African philosophy as the hermeneutics of the post-colonial situation,” stating that it is:

⁶ Italics in original.

⁷ Essential self indicates that part of a person that transcends the exigencies of experience, personality, history, and context.

the critical remembrance, itself interior to the lived emancipatory *praxis* of contemporary Africa, that cultivates, mediates, and revitalizes the origin or the source of this emancipatory *praxis* as the historicity of its effective inheritance. It is the discourse which concretely evokes and evocatively recalls to this emancipatory tradition the “truth” of its originative disclosure. Occasioned by the felt and lived needs of the present, it explores the future embedded and preserved in the possibilities of the heritage of its own enduring horizon. (1994, 28)

Serequeberhan uses the terms “horizon” and “discourse” here in a very specific sense, defining horizon as “the historico-hermeneutical and politico-cultural milieu within and out of which specific discourses (philosophic, artistic, scientific, etc.) are articulated” and “the overall existential space within and out of which they occur.” Discourse is seen as the “articulated concerns interior to the concrete conditions-of-existence made possible by and internal to a specific horizon” (Serequeberhan 1994, 18). Thus, like philosophical discourse, *jeliya* as artistic discourse can definitely be seen as “critical remembrance,” applying the collective wisdom of Mande culture as contained in its songs and stories to concrete situations that reflect present-day realities, critically mediating the message in a way that liberates its hearers to act courageously and independently yet grounds them in the horizon of their own cultural heritage. In this way, Mande tradition is constantly re-affirmed and re-evaluated, yet preserved for future generations to apply critically to the vicissitudes of their own existence.

If *jeliya* is to be actualized as “critical remembrance” that is “interior to the lived emancipatory *praxis* of contemporary Africa,” however, we must also consider the everyday performances of the *jeli* as well as her/his musical performances before an audience, however participatory that audience might be. We must remember that the *jeli*, even today, plays many roles. As a skillful negotiator, the *jeli* is frequently called upon

to mediate disputes and resolve crises, whether for a patron, her/his immediate family, or in this case, one of his first students, who is perhaps a little of both. The following anecdote about an event that occurred while I was last in Guinea with Abou will help to illustrate this issue of how a contemporary *jeli* deals with crises in a way that reveals his mediatory skills and exemplifies his actions as embedded in the horizon of contemporary Africa. This incident is an example of Abou's flexibility as a *jeli* in that he is open to using whatever means are necessary to resolve the dispute, but he does it in a way that will have particular resonance with the individuals whose actions he is attempting to influence.

The incident occurred early in my second trip to Guinea.⁸ Another of Abou's American students who traveled to Guinea for this trip had an iPod stolen from his room. The room was locked and the iPod was hidden in his luggage, so whoever stole the music player either had access to the student's room while he was away or sneaked into the room where his luggage was stored when he was not looking. Both the student and Abou were extremely upset. Abou had invited him here to Guinea and felt responsible for not only the student but also all of his belongings. When you invite guests into your home in Guinea, they are considered to be members of your family. Just as significantly, this theft brought dishonor not only on Abou but also his entire family, as they were the ones most likely implicated in the crime. Abou's response was quick and decisive. He went to the market early the next morning, a Wednesday, after being informed of the incident, and purchased enough kola nuts to be able to distribute at least ten of them to seven different mosques that Friday, honoring Allah and asking him to reveal the thief so that s/he may

⁸ Specifically, Tuesday, April 13, 2005.

be punished and the student might recover his iPod. Abou's response reflects both his devotion to both Islam – in his appeals to Allah for help and guidance – and his belief in the importance of the observance of West African traditions – which dictate the giving of kola nuts as a gesture of humility, gratitude, and one's desire to pay respect to and honor the person to whom one is giving the kola nuts. On a more personal level, Abou's response also reflects the influence of his family heritage as his patronym, Sylla, is associated with the profession of Islamic scholarship. Abou thus imbeds his actualization of his role as mediator and resolver of disputes in the horizon of contemporary Africa and the many levels of historical influence that entails. He appealed to his international faith, Islam, in a way that is distinctly West African, through the offering of kola nuts. Both aspects of his actions are informed by Abou's family heritage as devotees of Islamic scholarship and faith. Thus, Abou fulfills his obligations as a *jeli*, as a Muslim, as a friend and teacher, and as a Sylla. Also important to Abou's actions is the fact that he let everyone know what he did so that whoever the thief was would hear about his actions, hoping they would understand the punishment that awaited them if they did not return the iPod was far greater than anything Abou could mete out on his own, as Allah was to be appealed to in a way that, according to West African tradition, practically guaranteed His interference in the matter and a swift dispensation of divine justice. An empirical validation of Abou's efforts occurred the following morning, as the student's iPod was left on Abou's doorstep, thus relieving Abou of the task of having to travel to seven different mosques and possibly suffering the disgrace of having a family member exposed as a thief. The effectiveness of his actions displays how appealing to traditions to mediate contemporary crises and resolve them in a way that is inherently African can

open the possibility to a re-imagining of tradition that is efficacious for the contemporary African.

The Mande *Jeli* as *entre-soi*

The conceptualization of *jeliya* as discourse embedded in emancipatory praxis brings to mind the phenomenological ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1948),⁹ in which Sartre describes two types of being, the *en-soi*, or "in-itself," and the *pour-soi*, or "for-itself." The former is the category of material things or concrete objects; the latter is the realm of consciousness – fluid, unsettled, and in constant dialog with the *en-soi*. While Sartre considers these two as distinct and separate categories, he also believes that there is an inherent ambiguity in human existence, as human beings combine both states of being in their praxis, and it is through their praxis that human beings move from the fixed *en-soi* of their past to the potential *pour-soi* of their future, finding themselves at any given moment within a present that consists of an enigmatic *mélange* of the two.

One of the problems, however, of applying Sartre's ontological criteria to the existential horizon of contemporary Africa, at least among the Mande peoples, is that history is not conceptualized as something that is inert, lifelessly preserved in museums or written texts. History is dynamic and constantly being manipulated to harness its affective power to influence any given situation. It is the *jeli*'s duty to mediate between the living, ever-present past of the Mande and the individuals whom s/he seeks to

⁹ I am particularly indebted in my discussion of Sartre to Flynn, Thomas, "Jean-Paul Sartre", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2004 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2004/entries/sartre/>, accessed 31 January 2006.

influence. As the individual approved by society to occupy this role, the *jeli* is in a constant state of between-ness, marginalized and condemned by those who feel vulnerable to her/his powers of persuasion, but nevertheless needed and welcomed by those who benefit from her/his actions on their behalf.

With this idea in mind, I pose the suggestion that the *jeli*'s unique role in the society as perpetual mediator warrants a new ontological conceptualization of the *jeli* as neither *en-soi* nor *pour-soi*, but instead as *entre-soi*, or "between itself." Thus the *jeli* is in a perpetual state of negotiation, whether between patron and others, between her/himself and potential patrons, between traditional and modern musical conceptualizations, between pre-colonial histories and genealogies and modern African nationalisms, or between the "West" and "The Africa," which also places the *jeli*'s existence in perpetual ambivalence,¹⁰ as a result of the necessity of constantly reaffirming her/his own subjectivity, and that of others, in negotiation with a future bound inextricably to a living, ever-present past.

To account for the "irreducible ambivalence" of the *jeli*'s ontological condition, I have coined an appropriately ambiguous, open-ended term, *entre-soi*, that on the surface may seem nonsensical, as the literal translation is "between oneself," which leads to the obvious question between oneself and what? Like the famous Zen koan, "what is the

¹⁰ I am using "ambivalence" here in the same sense as Butler (see page 51 above), but I want to clarify that my usage of the term here should not be read in the sense of "uncertainty." I am using the term more in the sense of the etymology of its Latin root, *valens*, which is the present participle of the verb *valēre*, which means "to be strong." (Dictionary.com, Lexico Publishing Group, 2006, <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=ambivalence>, accessed 2 February 2006) Thus the individual who is ambivalent is capable of acting, as well as feeling, strongly in both directions, whatever s/he must choose between.

sound of one hand clapping,”¹¹ *entre-soi* points to a deeper truth. The point of this term is that like this Zen koan, the understanding of culture, and especially the role of pivotal individuals within its socio-cultural matrix, is not something that can be apprehended through reason alone; like words on a page, it is something that must be intimately investigated and wrestled with until one comprehends its meaning corporeally and not merely intellectually. This is why it is imperative for Abou to take his students with him to Guinea so that they can partake of his ethnoscape and gain some sort of understanding of his worldview.

Abou Sylla as *entre-soi*

As *entre-soi*, Abou negotiates his own existence, exercising his ability to define himself, his music, his tradition, his country, as well as to negotiate oppositional boundaries to bring people together, yet he is also inherently the negotiator of interstitial realms wherein culture is lived, embodied, and enacted on a daily basis. As Homi Bhabha states in *The Location of Culture*, “we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (1994, 38).¹² In order for Abou’s students to understand, literally, where Abou is coming from, they need to travel to his homeland and experience the role the balafon plays in Guinea; how Abou as *entre-soi* acts as an intermediary between people, musics, cultures, and nations; and how he combines all these elements together to create his own conceptualization of the potentiality of music to unite people. Abou’s stated goals are many – to expose people to the beauty and importance of Mande

¹¹ See Reps (1989, 24-26) for an example of the use of this koan.

¹² Emphasis Bhabha’s.

music in general and the balafon in particular, to reach out to people of other musical cultures to expand both his own knowledge and theirs of different musical traditions, and to enable his fellow musicians in Guinea to travel abroad to the United States to expand their own musical, and preferably financial, horizons. But ultimately, he is interested in using music to bring people together, to fulfill his obligations as *jeli* and *entre-soi* to forge links across cultural boundaries.

It is this aspect of Abou's identity that he is transmitting to his students by taking them with him to Guinea and embedding them in his personal *weltanschauung*. He is showing his students where he comes from, how he relates to people within his own culture, and how he serves as a link that binds different peoples from different areas through their interest in musical cooperation. By involving the students in musical and cultural activities, from participating in traditional ceremonies to meeting individuals who play important roles in perpetuating Mande music and culture – whether they are performers, directors, instrument-makers, or some combination of the above – to interacting with people from all walks of life and sharing their daily experiences, Abou seeks to transfer to his students the understanding of how music and the performance and appreciation thereof across cultural boundaries can be useful to dispel negative stereotypes and misunderstandings that drive people apart from one another. By accomplishing the transmission of this aspect of his identity to his students, Abou fulfills his responsibility to bridge the gap in understanding between people from different musical traditions and, hopefully, fosters in them the desire to engage in this mission themselves, that by expanding the musical and cultural horizons of individuals, they will

effect an overall increase in the cooperative understanding of different peoples across cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

The transmission of contextual knowledge along with musical knowledge is a challenge for anyone teaching within a diasporic context. By incorporating elements inherent to African performance into his teaching, however, Abou creates an atmosphere of inclusion that allows his students to experience a culturally specific understanding of how the balafon facilitates the transfer of knowledge about Mande culture. While Abou's workshops allow for the development of extended community among his students, it is by taking his students with him to Guinea that he brings them into his own personal milieu to comprehend more readily his worldview and how it informs the musical and cultural understanding he is transmitting.

By assuming the role of cultural tourist and student, I am exploring the need for ethnomusicologists to examine experiences made available by global migrations of musicians who seek to spread knowledge of their indigenous music and culture outside of their homeland. As cross-cultural contact becomes an ever-increasing phenomenon throughout the world, it is incumbent upon us as ethnomusicologists to examine on a personal level how musical and cultural interaction facilitates the transmission of identity from teacher to student and opens the possibility for further research into ways to promote global cooperation and understanding.

CHAPTER SIX
TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Petit à petit, l'oiseau fait son né.

– Bembeya Jazz

In closing my dissertation, I want to comment on a few overarching issues that link together different ideas I have explored thus far. I have examined some of the core principles and beliefs of Mande peoples, how the Mande balafon both represents and helps to define a sense of identity both among the people of Guinea and among a larger, transnational Mande ethnic affiliation, and how the Mande *jelilu* who play the balafon performatively and continually recreate their own subjectivity in a way that balances their obligations to preserve their traditions with a desire to make those traditions relevant to the exigencies of contemporary African existence. I believe that my work provides an original contribution to the already extensive literature on the Mande through my examination of the correlations between African philosophy, literature, and artistic performance traditions. Perhaps even more importantly, my transcriptions and analysis of Mande balafon music demonstrate how important concepts related to Mande musical performance, and connecting Mande musical performance to other African artistic performance traditions, are embodied in the sound of the music.

Additionally, my examination of Abou Sylla's role in transferring his knowledge about Mande balafon music and history to a U.S. context, his immersion of his students into his native cultural milieu in Guinea, and how he actualizes a perpetually in-between

mode of being in his use of musical performance and education to facilitate an awareness of and appreciation for the vast cultural diversity of humanity, represents an important foray into the realm of biographical ethnomusicology. By exploring how analysis of an individual musician's life affects those around her/him, I reveal the importance of the student/teacher relationship to ethnomusicological study and how an examination of this relationship can provide valuable insight into the development of cross-cultural understanding. In this final chapter, I will focus more on my own role within the construction of the reality that informs my fieldwork experiences and conditions my gradual coming into an awareness of the realms of Mande musical experience that I have negotiated through my interactions with my various teachers, especially Abou.

The Many Faces of Complicity

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing trend in ethnographic writing toward a more dialogic style, largely in an attempt to include the voices of the objects of ethnography within the resultant narrative.¹ One of the results of this trend has been a re-examination of the ethnographer's role in creating the "ethnographic fiction" (Clifford 1986, 6) that results from her/his efforts. As Clifford points out, calling an ethnography a fiction does not mean that it is inherently not true. Instead, the use of the term fiction "suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive" (Clifford 1986, 6). As an example of how "a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact," Clifford examines an ethnography by Richard Price (1983) based on his fieldwork among the Afro-Caribbean Saramakas, a Maroon society in Suriname. Price's work is apt to my own research, as the message of a Saramaka

¹ For an excellent overview of this trend, representing the differing viewpoints of several of the trend's practitioners, see Clifford and Marcus (1986).

folktale that “knowledge is power, and that one must never reveal all of what one knows” (Price 1983, 14)² sounds very similar to the words of the Mande *jeli* Mamadou Kouyaté, as transcribed by D.T. Niane, that “knowledge must be a secret” (Niane 1965, 41).³ Price learned from his experience with the Saramaka that their “strategies of ellipsis, concealment, and partial disclosure determine ethnographic relations as much as they do the transmission of stories between generations” (Clifford 1986, 7). These Saramaka strategies for the transmission of cultural knowledge reflect their belief that “a person’s knowledge is supposed to grow only in small increments, and in any aspect of life people are only told a little bit more than the speaker thinks they already know” (Price 1983, 10).⁴ Clifford describes how “the message of partiality resonates throughout” Price’s ethnography, thus making the work representative of both the specific nature of Price’s fieldwork situation and the fragmentary nature of ethnographic knowledge in general (Clifford 1986, 8).

While I have already commented on the importance of secrecy as an essential element of Mande culture,⁵ I also think that Price’s work is similar to mine in its emphasis on the gradual unfolding of knowledge within the culture he is studying. The following anecdote from my fieldwork will bear this out. My first full day in Guinea was a difficult one. I had just traveled for two days on an airplane. I was staying in the family compound of Abou’s father-in-law, where I knew no one. I had been served a breakfast of hard-boiled eggs mixed with slices of raw onion and tomato, which, while very generous, was not what I was accustomed to eating, so my stomach was upset. I

² Quoted in Clifford (1986, 7).

³ See page 65 above.

⁴ Quoted in Clifford (1986, 7-8).

⁵ See pages 63-68 above.

was disoriented because it was my first time in Guinea, so I was not yet accustomed to being without things I took for granted, like running water, twenty-four-hour electricity, and availability of bathroom facilities. Fortunately, my hosts were extremely accommodating and made every effort to make me feel as comfortable as possible, but on top of my other issues, I was taking my first lesson with Bangali Sylla, Abou's older brother and, as the oldest male in Abou's generation, head of Abou's lineage in the Conakry area. Needless to say, I was a bit intimidated. I was also frustrated because, due to my physical discomfort and my being unsettled by an environment completely different from anything I was used to, I was unable to learn the parts Bangali was teaching me as quickly as I normally would. Bangali clearly sensing my frustration, smiled reassuringly and said, "*petit à petit*,"⁶ meaning that I should relax and take my time. The message he was trying to convey to me was that by being patient, persistent, and content to learn one thing at a time, I will eventually be able to play the accompaniments he shows me. As I was to find out during both my trips to Guinea, the saying "*petit à petit*" is one that is used often to counsel someone who is trying to undertake a daunting task. The phrase is a contraction of the song lyric that I quote at the beginning of the chapter, and based on its ubiquity of usage in Guinea, it could possibly be considered an unofficial national motto.

The gradual unfolding of knowledge through musical instruction has definitely been a significant part of my study of Mande music and culture with Abou Sylla. I have described one example of this phenomenon in Chapter Four,⁷ but I think that the issue concerned here is broader than just my studies with Abou. In any ethnographic

⁶ Literally, "little by little," or as Bangali would say "small small."

⁷ See pages 129-130 above.

experience where the learning of a musical instrument, especially one that involves a prolonged one-on-one interaction between teacher and student, is at the core of the study, the progress is dependent on both the teacher and the student. The gradual unfolding of the student's understanding is, to a large extent, dependent on the skills and diligence of the student, but the transmission of knowledge about music from teacher to student is constantly negotiated between the two. This is particularly true because most one-on-one musical education involves some occurrence of incidents where the student teaches the teacher. The truly effective instructor is constantly re-evaluating her/his teaching methods based on the efficaciousness of any given strategy used to convey knowledge to her/his student. Likewise, the student, especially in the cross-cultural transmission of musical knowledge, shares aspects of her/his own musical tradition that may be of interest to her/his teacher.

The interactive nature of the cross-cultural transmission of knowledge about music extends as well into other elements of ethnographic inquiry. In his examination of the ethical and cognitive issues surrounding the nature of ethnographer-informant relationships in "multi-sited spaces of contemporary ethnography," anthropologist George Marcus posits the idea of complicity as an appropriate descriptor for these relationships (1998, 105-131). Marcus begins his discussion with an examination of Clifford Geertz's use of complicity to achieve rapport with his informants in his now famous (at least among ethnographers) essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (1973). Marcus states that Geertz's privileging of the achievement of rapport as an ideal way to maneuver one's way "inside" a culture is reflective of an outmoded conceptualization of fieldwork that, while popular from the 1960s through the 1980s, is

no longer applicable to contemporary fieldwork situations. Aside from the potentially negative ethical implications of befriending someone in order to finagle one's way far enough into their cultural milieu to claim a native understanding of it, the idea of a culturally-isolated fieldwork site not impacted by outside forces is no longer reflective of the contemporary reality of a globally interconnected world.

Proceeding to an analysis of two approaches pursued in the 1980s as an effort to problematize and attempt to provide alternatives to earlier fieldwork methodologies exemplified by Geertz's rapport-seeking approach, Marcus describes the shortcomings of each before providing his own alternative, "a conception of complicity that is largely free of the primary connotations of rapport" (1998, 107). The first of the directions Marcus examines is one that replaces the ideal of rapport with that of collaboration, where an ethnographic text is a dialog between two equal authors, the ethnographer and her/his native collaborator (1998, 112-113). As Marcus points out, the problem with this approach is that it still adopts the same outmoded model of going inside a specific, geographically isolated culture where an ethnographer collaborates with a native inhabitant to eventually present their cooperative understanding of the culture to an outside readership (1998, 113-114). The second direction Marcus assesses is a critique of the notion of rapport as being grounded in the colonialist relationship between ethnographers and informants in earlier ethnography, though he also critiques the failure of this approach to go beyond ethical considerations and examine the limits of the older, isolated-site-specific concept of the field (1998, 114-116).

Marcus's goal in reconfiguring the notion of complicity, therefore, is to account for "discontinuity in cultural formations – their multiple and heterogeneous sites of

production – [that] has begun to force changes in the assumptions and notions that have constructed the traditional *mise-en-scène* of fieldwork” (1998, 117). The ethnographer is thus forced to face the fact that any site s/he chooses is necessarily connected to others in a way may never be comprehensible to either the native inhabitants or the outside researcher. With this context in mind, there is thus no way to ever go inside a culture as a researcher, for even the locals use nonlocal conceptualizations to create their own subjectivity. Thus, “the recognition of the idea of complicity forces the recognition of the ethnographers as the ever-present markers of ‘outsideness’” (1998, 118). The ethnographer thus serves as a physical reminder of the outside influences affecting every society, and it is through the interaction with the cultural insider that a researcher gains knowledge about the response to the affecting phenomena that influence daily existence. Marcus’s reimagined version of complicity, therefore, “tries to get at a form of local knowledge that is not accessible by working out internal cultural logics” (1998, 119). It is through the researcher and the informant’s shared understanding that local individuals “are participating in discourses that are thoroughly localized but that are not their own,” and their mutual desire to resolve the anxiety created by the shared ambiguity of their commingled existence, that they are complicit in their efforts to work together to relieve that anxiety through mutual understanding (1998, 119). The ethnographer and informant thus create through their shared understanding a communal context for the production of knowledge about the cultural time and space they inhabit and examine together during the period of ethnographic fieldwork.

In the case of my own multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, the situation becomes even more complexly interwoven, as Abou inhabits most of the sites in which I conduct

my research. As a native Guinean who has spent more than ten years traveling back and forth to the U.S. on a regular basis, he is familiar with life in both countries and the many ways political and economic forces affect societies both globally and locally. Our complicity together in the conducting of my research, however, is motivated by many different aims, some of which we share and some of which are our own. In terms of goals we share, such as the desire to spread knowledge of and an appreciation for Guinean and Mande music and culture, the desire to bring people from different cultures together through music, and the desire to exchange musical information through practice and performance, our interactions in multiple contexts help contribute to their achievement. But each of us also has his own personal goals, the attainment of which is also benefited through our association. Abou conducts lessons, workshops, and visits to his home country, all of which I have participated in as part of my research, as an important source of income for himself and his family. He also has included me in his network of students he strives ever to expand to help him fulfill his previously mentioned goals. Furthermore, he hopes that my completion and publication of research will lead to his further recognition as an internationally-significant and innovative artist and educator, thus adding to his resume and making him more marketable as a performer and a clinician. My own goals are to conduct my research; complete a dissertation; travel to Guinea and experience life in a country whose music and culture I love; to help Abou, his family, and my many other friends there in any way I can; and to use my dissertation and the degree I obtain upon completing it for meaningful employment.

I think it is important to consider how the motivations for conducting fieldwork affect the resultant ethnography, and especially in light of Marcus's model of complicity,

how the researcher and her/his co-complicitor create the context out of which the ethnography arises. The question then, especially as it relates to the product of my own research, is how much of what Abou is transmitting is traditional Mande culture, how much reflects his experience in America and the influences he has absorbed there, and how much of the resultant ethnographic analysis that I have rendered into textual form is my own creation. In an effort to provide an answer to these questions, I will turn to my conceptualization of Abou as *entre-soi*, describing my inspiration for coining the term, why I think it is an appropriate descriptor for the many roles he performs as an interlocutor for his many constituents, and what, if anything, is still inherently African about this transmission process.

With One World Ahead and Sunjata Behind

The insight about the inherent “between-ness” of the *jeli* came to me as I was singing a song in the shower one morning. The song, “Between,” which comes from one of my two-year-old daughter’s favorite DVDs, a Sesame Street production titled *What’s the Name of That Song* (Sony Wonder 55275, 2004), is sung by Wayne Brady and has various comic images of him maneuvering in between the two different muppets or other objects named in each stanza of the lyrics. In most of the cases, he is trapped between two opposing forces and must somehow extricate himself from between them before they close in on him.⁸ Sometimes he succeeds, and sometimes he does not, but he manages to make each situation humorous despite its eventual outcome. The storyline of the DVD is that Grover is trying to find one song that everyone in the whole world can sing together, so he, Elmo, and Big Bird, ask different people, and muppets, for suggestions.

⁸ In one situation, he is between Cookie Monster and a large cookie, and this is certainly a dangerous place to find oneself.

“Between” is one of the songs suggested by one of the characters in the video. In the end, of course, no one song is chosen, and the beauty of societal diversity is celebrated in the ability of everyone to sing whatever song s/he pleases. The important thing is that everyone is singing.

While I was singing “Between” in the shower, I began thinking about the *jeli*’s role as mediator on many different levels both within and outside of Mande society. I was also contemplating Syrotinski’s exegesis of Mudimbe’s interpretation of Sartre’s existential subject and wondering what concept I could create that would unite these disparate yet complimentary aspects of my research. Then the idea struck me at once, and the imagery of Wayne Brady successfully dodging most of his humorous pitfalls while continually smiling made perfect sense within the context of my research. I wanted to replicate the simplicity of Sartre’s terminology, but I wanted the label for my concept to be in French to reflect the fact that Guinea is a Francophone country and French is Abou’s primary non-African language. I also wanted to choose a term that reflects the ambiguity inherent in the *jeli*’s existence due to the many factors s/he has to mediate through her/his performance and the many influences that inform her/his artistry, especially in the case of Abou, who has traveled internationally and collaborated with many artists from different musical traditions.⁹

The time has come to merge different systems of thought if our ideas about contemporary culture are going to accurately reflect the inherent interconnectedness of people worldwide. If we are to represent the state of hybridity wherein culture as lived experience lies, we must reflect that understanding in our conceptualizations and not rely

⁹ Abou’s most recent recorded musical collaboration was with Angélique Kidjo on her CD *Oyaya* (Columbia 89053, 2004)

on a strictly African or European dichotomous dualization. The reality is that both ways of viewing the world are functioning in the daily lives of the contemporary individual, so our terminology and concepts need to be both clear in their explanatory efficacy and at the same time ambiguous enough to evoke the existential conditions out of which they arise. Thus, a concept inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre, Valentin Mudimbe, a Sesame Street video, Mande *jeliya*, and a Zen koan, while specific to my own worldview, can also be elucidatory both of a reality that I have constructed with Abou in our interactions related to the Mande balafon and of the contemporary conditions of people whose existence involves the interaction of multiple epistemologies competing at various levels for the individual's ideological preference.

In terms of the transmission process between Abou and me, and what is being transmitted to me that is African if Abou and I are mutually imagining and constructing the ethnographic space of my research through our interactions, it is important to remember what brought us together in the first place – a shared love of a specific African traditional instrument, the Mande balafon. No matter how much of the reality of my fieldwork is the product of a creative fiction constructed in the shared context of my experiences in both the U.S. and Guinea, it is still my overriding desire to learn how to play the Mande balafon that initially inspired me to undertake my study of the instrument, its origins, its musical and cultural context, and its influential players and makers. Even if we grant that the whole of ethnographic fieldwork is more than the sum of its parts, it cannot be wholly different from those constituent parts, for they condition the outcome of their synthesis. Additionally, the style of Abou's transmission of information, no matter how adapted it is to teaching people in the U.S., is inherently

conditioned by his years of *jeli* training and performance. Thus, even if Abou is transmitting from an in-between place with one world ahead and Sunjata behind, his grounding in the Mande balafon tradition will necessarily condition what he brings forward to a shared experience of Africa that we have lived together.

Ultimately, It's All About Bringing People Together

Perhaps the most important thing I have learned during my study of the Mande balafon tradition is how music can transcend cultural boundaries to bring people together. My time spent with Abou has shown me that one of his primary goals as a musician is to use his talent to help people around the world understand the depth and beauty of Mande music and culture. Abou's virtuosity on his instrument comes from years of musical training, but it also reflects the sheer joy he both expresses through his performance and brings to those who hear him play. When he first came to the United States, Abou had people tell him that he could make good money by going to workshops and teaching people very simple patterns and having people repeat them over and over until their time was up. But Abou could not bring himself to rip people off that way. It was not fair to them, and it was disrespectful to his music tradition, which he had spent a lifetime learning, to represent it that way. If students were going to pay him well, he was going to give them as much information about the balafon in one lesson as they could absorb. His honesty and fervent desire to nourish in his students a healthy love for the Mande balafon and its music has allowed Abou to build a devoted student base in the U.S. He also takes time to foster the same enthusiasm for the Mande balafon during his return trips to Guinea, instructing his students there, who range from some of the most advanced young

players in the country to his grade-school children learning their first accompaniment patterns.

By completing this study on the Mande balafon, I am attempting to do my part to inform people about the rich cultural heritage of the Mande peoples and the beauty of Mande balafon music in Guinea. I have much yet to learn about this valuable musical tradition, but by documenting what I have learned thus far, I hope to encourage others to learn more about it as well. My own study of the Mande balafon has helped me realize a dream of fostering cultural interconnectedness in a world that desperately needs it. In a time when global inequality is wreaking havoc on the country that is home to the Sosso Bala, I look forward to a future when Guinea is appreciated for the importance of its cultural contributions and justly rewarded for the many gifts it has to offer humankind.

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