Digitising and Archiving Syliphone Recordings in Guinea

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Background History

Guinea is an unfrequented country. It lacks the sandy beaches of Sierra Leone, the allure of Mali, and the caché of Senegal, but what it does have is some of the finest music in Africa. It is blessed with tourist potential and rich in minerals, yet let down through corruption and mismanagement so rampant\(^1\) that basic infrastructure such as transport, water and electricity is denied to most of the population. Geographically and ethnically diverse, the savannah lands in the north-east of the country are close to the centre of the ancient Empire of Mali, an empire which at its height in the 13\(^{\text{th}}\) century CE encompassed great swathes of West Africa, including large parts of Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Côte d’Ivoire, and Burkina Faso. Those who trace their origins to the Empire of Mali are known as the Mandé, and griots are the hereditary musicians of the Mandé. The role of griots is very broad in Mandé society. They are the oral historians, and also act as genealogists, as the master of ceremonies at significant events in Mande life, such as births, deaths and marriages, and in the pre-colonial era they were the court musicians.

Guinea was colonised by France in 1898 and its experience with colonialism was as disastrous as its neighbours. Under French rule, barely 10\% of children received a primary school education and infrastructure outside of the capital, Conakry, was virtually non-existent. Sékou Touré led the independence movement, famously proclaiming that “Guineans prefer freedom in poverty to riches in chains”, and in 1958 Guinea became independent. President Touré immediately set about revitalising the nation and introduced a range of radical reforms. He decried the philosophy of négritude, which he considered as carrying an admission of European culture’s superiority over African. Rather, he was an adherent to the newer philosophy of authenticité, a movement which had captured the imagination of several African leaders, including Mali’s Modibo Keita and Zaire’s Mobutu Sese-Seko. Authenticité postulated that pre-colonial cultures were superior to post-colonial, and it sought a return to the values of “authentic” African traditions. Touré introduced a series of

\(^1\) In 2006 Guinea was described by Transparency International as the most corrupt nation in the world – see Chris McGreal. “History repeats itself in country judged most corrupt in the world.” In Irishtimes.com, Wednesday 24\(^{\text{th}}\) December 2008, <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2008/1224/1229728523878.html> (accessed 16th March 2009).
cultural policies which adhered to authenticité and which redefined Guinean art and music.

At independence, Guinea’s orchestras performed popular French or Spanish songs, with no local material represented in their repertoires. Early in his Presidency, Touré banned all foreign music from the radio, disbanded all musical groups, and instructed musicians that they were to seek inspiration for their songs from the indigenous repertoires. State-funded dance groups, theatrical troupes, and traditional music ensembles were created in every region, as were modern orchestras who were supplied with their own musical instruments, and national arts festivals were held every year.

All these successes were possible thanks to the application of the mass policy which liberated the creative capacities of the People and supported the return to African sources, the revalorization of traditional musical instruments, the rehabilitation of our songs, and the setting-up of instrumental ensembles and modern orchestras which drew their repertoire from the content of popular culture.2

The Syliphone recording company was created by Presidential decree with its purpose to capture the music of the era, and from a period of 1967 to 1984 Syliphone released 159 vinyl discs containing some 728 songs. Such a volume of recordings was unprecedented, and Syliphone pioneered the authenticité movement, promoting Guinean music throughout Africa and the world.

This side of Sékou Touré’s government is not well known, for his autocratic and brutal rule will forever mark him as a tyrant.3 Under his régime thousands were executed without trial and Guinea’s standard of living plummeted. When he died in 1984 a coup d’etat led by Col. Lansana Conté quickly dismantled the cultural policies of authenticité. Syliphone was no more. In 1985 a counter-coup saw the buildings of Guinea’s national radio broadcaster bombed, and the Radiodiffusion Télévision Guinée archives which housed the Syliphone recordings was destroyed. Since then, no-one has been able to

reassemble the complete collection, and many thought it had been lost forever.

**Digitising and Archiving**

In November 2007 I applied for funding through the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (EAP). I knew nothing of this programme until an employee of the British Library contacted me. He was also interested in African popular music and had discovered my web site, Radio Africa, and my penchant for discographies of rare African recordings. He suggested that I apply for EAP funding, and upon reading what kind of research projects the EAP were involved in, I thought I had a decent chance. My proposal to the EAP was two-fold, that I create the world’s first complete catalogue of Syliphone recordings, and that I digitise the reel-to-reel recordings of Guinean orchestras held at the sound archive of Radiodiffusion Télévision Guinée (RTG). These projects would be achieved in the briefest time slot of 4 months, and I submitted what I thought was a modest budget. In February 2008 I passed the initial round of offers and so proceeded to contact the director of the RTG. The political situation in Guinea is such that many government appointments are brief, and the average tenure of a Minister, much less a director, one would assume, is less than 12 months. Needless to say, my emails to the last known Director of the RTG bounced back, so I contacted the members of the Mande Studies Association for their assistance. I received a reply from Seydouba Cissé who suggested that the BNG would be a very willing partner in my project. I was provided with the email address of the current Director, Dr Baba Cheick Sylla. Dr Sylla was very amenable to my proposal, and agreed that the BNG would act as my archival partner. In July I was informed that my EAP Major Research Project was approved and in August 2008 I was in Guinea.

My daunting task was to first reconstruct the complete catalogue of Syliphone recordings. Over 14 years I had assembled a fair collection of the discs, however some were in very poor condition whilst there were others I had never seen and had only heard rumours of their existence from record collectors. I had been to Guinea twice before, though not since 2001, and I gave myself only a fair chance of gathering all of the discs.

Upon arriving in Conakry and escaping unscathed through the ‘formalities’ at Conakry’s notorious Gbessia airport, I met my translator, Allen Nyoka, and

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5 Whilst the EAP will fund independent researchers they prefer the backing of an institution, and here AFSAAP agreed to act as my Institutional Host. I am very grateful to the former President of AFSAAP, Dr Geoffrey Hawker, for agreeing to this, and to the former AFSAAP Treasurer, Dr Tanya Lyons, who agreed to administer the funds.
then with Dr Sylla of the BNG. From the outset Dr Sylla was very supportive. He arranged meetings with musicians, RTG personnel, government ministers, and people associated with the Syliphone label, and I found myself very busy early on. The newly created Ministère de la Culture, des Arts et Loisirs became involved, and I met with Minister Ifono who threw his complete support behind the project, declaring that it was the number one priority of his Ministry. Jeannot Williams, the lead guitarist with the Sékou Touré-era orchestra Camayenne Sofa, and now a senior journalist in Guinea, took over the media liaison, and a series of interviews on Guinean radio ensued. Riad Chaloub, the vocalist and harmonica player of Camayenne Sofa, and the number 2 in the Ministry of Arts, was also firmly backing the archival project. My days were spent with Dr Sylla in meetings with a broad spectrum of government officials and musicians. I scoured markets and private record collections for Syliphone discs, and as word of my project filtered out the recordings began arriving and my digitising of them commenced. Record players are now very rare in Guinea, so my project was to copy the vinyl recordings to compact disc format. I also scanned and printed the covers, and gave the completed CDs to Dr Sylla.

Each week the archive grew in size, and when it became apparent that it was close to completion Dr Sylla and the Arts Ministry arranged for an official launch. It was to be held at the National Museum and was called the Exposition du coffret Syliphone. Jeannot Williams contacted the media and the invitations went out. He even arranged for the RTG to broadcast a commercial advertising the archive launch, and so one day a camera crew arrived at the BNG and filmed Dr Sylla and I miming ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ as we looked over the Syliphone CDs. There are perhaps four commercials aired on Guinea’s only TV station, so this one drew a lot of attention.

The launch was set for September 29. I worked hard to prepare all of the compact discs and clearly recall the morning when I gave Dr Sylla the last of the Syliphone CDs. We shook hands. The collection was now complete. On the morning of the archive launch a huge storm blew in and it rained very heavily. A good sign, I was informed. The crowd gathered and there were many government officials, ambassadors, journalists, musicians, and friends. All of compact discs were put on display, in addition to original vinyl discs and posters I had made which featured some of the great Syliphone cover art. Speeches were made by Dr Sylla, who noted the role of AFSAAP, myself, Minister Ifono, and by Facinet Fofana, the ex-Minister of Energy and Natural Resources and a senior figure of the government. At the end of the ceremony Mr Fofana awarded me a Diplome d'Honneur. It was quite an emotional event. I was being congratulated by everyone, being pronounced "a Guinean", and some told me that they were so happy when they had heard of my project that
they felt like crying. Others told me they did cry when they saw the archive. When asked, I would often inform people that my 14 years of research on Syliphone wasn't work for me, it was actually a pleasure.

The Syliphone archive was shown at the National Museum for a week, and was then re-shown for another week during Guinea's 50th anniversary celebrations. It is also set to tour Mali through the Ministry of Tourism, and three Guinean ministries are now involved. In February 2009 I deposited a copy of the archive with the British Library, thus completing the major part of my EAP project.

After the launch of the archive I focused my efforts on the second part of my project, the digitisation to compact disc format of the reel-to-reel recordings of Syliphone-era musicians held at the sound archive at the RTG. These reels were the actual master tapes of the original studio recordings, and were destined for release on vinyl through the Syliphone label. Most of them, however, were unreleased and they represented an amazing archive of undiscovered material. Though I had the support of the RTG archive head, Mme Yayé Haby Barry, it took several weeks for the paperwork to come through. It is not easy getting access to the RTG, it's a heavily protected building with armed soldiers at the gates. I was finally given approval to access the material, and I discovered rooms in the RTG archive that I never knew existed, rooms full of reel-to-reels. In 2001 I was shown a hand written catalogue of their holdings, which amounted to some 50 reels of material. Now I had discovered perhaps 600 reels alone of music of musique moderne, with many unreleased recordings by the national orchestras. The bulk of the recordings, however, focused on the federal orchestras, with the earliest
recordings from 1963. It was a dirty and dusty job to winkle out the reels from the shelves, where they had sat for years, and I set up my recording studio and began copying as many of them as I could. On a good day I could copy 5 reels. I began to see first hand how desperately in need of archiving the reels were. Any reel recorded prior to 1965 usually broke when played and had to be repaired many times, for the tape had become brittle. Any reel recorded between 1965 and 1970 usually broke when re-wound and also had to be repaired, though tapes after 1970 were in a reasonable condition. I copied some truly rare and incredible music at the RTG, with some examples being 1963 recordings by the Orchestre Honoré Coppet (an early member of the Syliphon Orchestre National), 1963 recordings by Orchestre de la Paillote, 1964 recordings by the Orchestre de la Garde Républicaine 1ère formation, an unreleased 1988 album-length reel by Balla et ses Balladins, and many recordings by great Federal Orchestras such as Manden Könö, Kébendo Jazz, and Kaloum Star. CD copies of these recordings, over 100 reels, were given to the RTG archive and will also be housed at the British Library.

I worked at the RTG archives 6 days a week, copying as many reels as I could. Eventually, however, I ran out of time. 600 plus reels presents a lengthy archival project, and my 4 month window had proved too short. Furthermore, I had discovered that at the RTG offices in rural Guinea many more reels await digitisation. I am applying for further funding in 2009 to complete this aspect of the archival project.

A few weeks before I left Guinea I was informed that I was receiving a medal in recognition of my work on the Syliphon archive. The Guinean government through the Ministère de la Culture, des Arts et Loisirs, awarded me the medal of the Palme Académique en Or, Guinea's highest civilian honour, and on the day before I flew back to Australia I received it.

Since then, much has changed. President Conté, who had ruled Guinea in a dictatorial manner akin to his predecessor, and who had been infirm for many years, died on December 22 2008. Shortly after a bloodless coup installed Capt. Moussa Camara as head of state. Minister Ifono has been replaced by Justin Morel Jnr. in the newly created Ministère de la Culture et de l'Information. Morel was a journalist and leading figure in the Syliphon era, and was responsible for the annotations to many of the Syliphon discs. This augurs well for Syliphon related research, as does President Camara’s commitment to democracy and fair elections. Given Guinea’s history of authoritarian rule and political disenfranchisement, however, the future is very uncertain.
To access the Syliphone archive of vinyl discs digitised to compact disc format please contact Dr Baba Cheick Sylla, Directeur, Bibliothèque Nationale de Guinée, via email at sbabacheick@yahoo.fr. To access the archive of RTG reel-to-reels digitised to compact disc format contact Mme Yayé Haby Barry, Chef Service Documentation, Archives RTG, at byayehaby@yahoo.fr. Both archives are only available on site and for research purposes only. Copying of material is not permitted. Guinean reports on the Syliphone archive can be found at
http://www.justinmorel.net/index.php?id=33&no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=331&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=2,
http://www.tamsirnews.com/archive807.htm,

Both archival collections are held at the British Library. To access them please visit the British Library’s web site at http://www.bl.uk/.
Bibliography


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