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Mission Statement

*The Australasian Review of African Studies* aims to contribute to a better understanding of Africa in Australasia and the western Pacific. It publishes both scholarly and generalist articles that provide authoritative, informed, critical material on Africa and African affairs that is interesting and readable and available to as broad an audience as possible, both academic and non-academic.
Popular Music and Politics in Sékou Touré’s Guinea

Graeme Counsel

The West African nations of Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal and The Gambia, all of which formed part of the Empire of Mali (see figure 1), have since independence sought to revitalize and invigorate their traditional arts and culture.¹ Their cultural policies helped form one of the most vibrant music scenes in Africa, and authors such as Waterman, Schulz, and Charry have offered an examination of the origin of the musical styles.² As exercises in the relatively new field of ‘urban ethnomusicology’³ they concern themselves with the music of Africa’s cities and urban centres and underscore how music, as an aspect of culture, informs us about the nature of the society which created it. This paper, which examines the revitalization of traditional music in Guinea under Sékou Touré and the political role of musicians, in contrast examines how music can also fail to inform us.

The background can be set out briefly. In 1898, after a prolonged insurgency, Guinean resistance to French colonial forces collapsed with the defeat of Almami Samori Touré, the nation’s resistance leader. By the end of the century the French had colonized the greater part of what constituted the Empire of Mali and French Guinea, as the nation was then known, was incorporated into an administrative region known as French West Africa. Some sixty years later in 1958 Guineans voted in a referendum on whether to join other West African nations in a French confederacy. Spurred on by Sékou Touré’s famous statement that ‘We prefer freedom in poverty to riches in chains’, they voted decisively against the proposal and shortly thereafter Guinea became an independent nation.

¹ This paper was originally presented at a seminar at the African Research Institute, La Trobe University, on the April 9, 2003. It is based upon fieldwork conducted in West Africa from May-October 2001 as part of my larger doctoral research, in addition to the primary and secondary documentary sources cited. The focus of my fieldwork was to locate and interview members of Guinea’s orchestras who were active during the Presidency of Sékou Touré, and to access sound archives in the region.
independent state. The French, humiliated by the vote, began an immediate withdrawal, removing not only all furniture and cutlery, but also the telephones, medicines, medical equipment and blueprints to the electricity grid and sewerage systems. Guineans were left isolated, both politically and economically. The French had accomplished little in terms of advancing Guinea’s standard of living; much less than they had realized in other African nations. At independence just 1.3% of children were receiving a primary school education, and Guinea was left with just six university graduates from a population of approximately 4,500,000. The French had achieved even less in promoting Guinean arts, and Sékou Touré, the newly elected President, and his political party, the Parti Démocratique de Guinée (PDG), were determined to put the colonial era behind them and to restore their nation’s pride and place in the modern world.

Figure 1: Current political map of West Africa with approximate limit of the empire of Mali, ca 1500 CE
http://www.guiageografico.com/africa-fotos-viagem/mapa-africa.gif

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In Guinea, as in other West African nations, music and politics are inextricably linked. Using the popular music of Sékou Touré’s Guinea I propose that the rise of Guinean musical groups in this early post-colonial period closely mirrored the burgeoning dominance of Guinea’s independent political parties. Government cultural policy was directed at the griots, the hereditary bards, who, given their unique historical relationship with the traditional rulers, were considered the ideal choice for the dissemination of political doctrine. The griots, as I shall illustrate, were thus central figures in the creation of new musical styles in Guinea in the early independence era and beyond.

The griot’s social role and status in Mande society

Founded in the 13th century by Soundiata Keita, the Empire of Mali reached its height in the 15th century. Those who trace their ancestry to that empire are commonly known as Mande, and the term applies to such language groups as the Malinké in Guinea, the Bamana in Mali, and the Mandinka in The Gambia and Senegal. The term ‘Manding’ is equally applicable, as is the term ‘Mandingo’, although the latter is now considered passé. There are currently over twenty-five Mande dialects with over seven million speakers. Mande society was and still remains highly stratified, consisting of three main strata – the horon, who are regarded as the ‘noble’ class and are considered freeborn, or uncasted; the nyamakala, who are often referred to as the ‘artisan class’, and which include the griots, leatherworkers, wood carvers, and blacksmiths; and the jon, who are the descendants of slaves. These classes are generally endogamous, although marriages between different strata members are becoming more common.

Oral methods of retention such as story-telling and songs have been the primary methods by which the history of Mande society has been passed down through the generations. The griots have always played a central role in this retention, for as the hereditary musicians of the Mande, as the oral historians, they have been largely responsible for the preservation of their culture’s history. In recognition of this griots have been referred to as ‘the guardians of the word’,6 for their knowledge of history is indisputable.

The role of a griot in Mande society is however a highly complex one and they fulfil multiple tasks. They are most commonly described as bards, and are also widely referred to as singer-historians. Specifically, they act as genealogists, praise-singers, and entertainers. In the pre-colonial era they were the court

6 Camara Laye, The Guardian of the Word, trans. by James Kirkup, New York, Aventura, 1980. Camara, author of The Dark Child, was exiled from Guinea in 1966. His account of the griots was one of the first by an indigenous author.
musicians, serving not only as bards for the nobility but also as ambassadors for the king - delivering the king’s words to the subjects and also acting as interpreters. An important aspect of their role is that of genealogist. At weddings, funerals, naming days, circumcisions, and other important ceremonies, a griot is called upon to situate the event within its historical context. At these proceedings a griot’s responsibilities can include officially and publicly naming the child, with the griot proceeding to name the child’s relatives and provide the child’s genealogy to those present. A griot is able to expand upon genealogical lineages by recounting the deeds and events pertaining to a family’s history; which may include such events as those surrounding a family’s migration from one region to another, or that of a particular family’s role in historical conflicts, or descriptions of the lives of family members who died many generations ago. This role is facilitated by the historical alignment of certain griot families with others who belong to the noble (horon) class.

A griot’s repertoire of genealogies, political conflicts, and major events is related on important ceremonial occasions, and together these form part of an important body of epic narratives. The oldest of these narratives is known as Soundiata, named after Soundiata Keita, a warrior-prince, who founded the Malian empire over 700 years ago. The epic is but one of dozens which describe the lives of famous people and major events in Mande history. There are narratives which describe battles against the French in the 19th century,\(^7\) that espouse the valour of brave soldiers in the founding of the empire,\(^8\) that detail regional conflicts,\(^9\) that tell of the lives of kings\(^10\), and other epics which serve as moral tales.\(^11\)


These epic narratives are widely known amongst the Mande and are usually sung or delivered in a combination of singing and recitation. Musical instruments, whether solo or ensemble, accompany the performance of the narrative, and traditionally were limited to the kora (a twenty-one stringed harp-lute), the ngoni (a plucked lute), and the balafon (a xylophone). In modern times, particularly in the post-independence period, other instruments have been incorporated, most commonly the guitar. Men are usually the instrumentalists while women often sing in the role of either main vocalist or accompanying vocalist. As the story of each epic narrative is well-known throughout the Mande, the appeal for the listener depends on the ability of the griot to render the story interesting – whether it be through narrative ability or musical skill. Particular griots become famous not only for the quality of their story telling but also for the way that they sing. Similarly, as each piece has a set story, it can also have a set melody, and some griots are capable of highly complex musical improvisation upon these standard themes.

The griots’ royal court tradition indicates their important cultural role. Of the social contexts of a griot’s performance mentioned previously, the most common situation within a modern context is that of a griot performing for a patron. On these occasions the griot performs for payment, and will receive a gratuity according to the generosity of their patron. Payment is usually given during the actual performance and can be very generous. Griots are renowned for being able to move their audience to heightened emotional states. When listening to the griot singing of the glory of his ancestors, for example, the patron may be inclined to reward the griot richly, and gifts to griots in modern times have included large amounts of cash, gold, houses, and even a jet plane.¹²

The erosion of socio-political structures under French colonial rule had a profound impact on the status and role of the griots, the import of which is still being felt to the present day. To consolidate their control the French sought to limit the power of the Mande nobility by replacing the traditional leaders with loyalists who were appointed by the local French governor. They abolished the
highest symbols of Mande authority, whilst recognizing only individual forms of power at the expense of collective institutions of rule. The title of ‘king’ was abolished and supplanted by ‘chief’, and those chiefs who opposed the colonizing power were replaced whilst others had their authority reduced. The French also created new administrative precincts which failed to correspond to pre-existing political boundaries. The chiefs of these new precincts were not necessarily chosen according to their ancestral lineage to the traditional rulers. The colonial power delegated its authority only to those who were officially registered. Those eligible included civil servants with a good record of performance, soldiers of outstanding merit, and ‘notable natives, literate if possible, who have rendered services to the French cause’. As many of these new chiefs did not represent traditional authority they did not always command the respect of their constituents. Many were regarded as fonctionnaires – mere spokesman for the colonialists.

The monetary economy installed by the French had the immediate effect of preventing the Mande rulers, now paid a form of salary or wage directly by the colonial governments in lieu of the income obtained from their constituents, from obtaining taxes through traditional means. This eliminated a major source of revenue for the Mande leaders and a significant loss of income for the noble classes, with the result that many of the griots’ patrons could no longer afford the griots’ services. Whereas in the past a griot’s whole family may have been supported by a patron, sometimes on a permanent basis, this meant that many of the musicians now had to travel more frequently and much further in order to seek new patrons.

With the link between the nobility and the griots broken, the role of the griot in Mande society was being transformed. Of particular note was the increased role of praise singing. Formerly, the griots had reserved their praise songs for their immediate patrons. Now, in seeking out new patrons, they were increasingly characterized as mere flatterers who would sing the praises of anyone who had some spare change. Whereas before colonial rule they had occupied a unique position in Mande society, in the 1950s the French scholar Raymond Mauny would describe griots as:

members of a despised but feared caste of musician-genealogist-sorcerer parasites existing in a large number of West African

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peoples, living at the expense of chiefs for whom they sing praises and recite genealogies.¹⁴

This transformation of the griots’ role would continue in the post-colonial era, aided by the cultural policies of the newly elected independent governments.

**Cultural policy and its impact on popular music in Sékou Touré’s Guinea**

In the West Sékou Touré’s presidency may well be remembered for his iron-fisted rule, his anti-imperialistic stance, and for the oppression of his political opponents. Little is known about his contribution to African arts, although under Sékou Touré Guinea was the first nation in Africa to actively pursue a cultural policy aimed at the modernization of their traditional musical and artistic forms. The President endeavoured to strengthen and instil pride in Guinean culture, insisting that

(Guinean) music should rise up from a world which once degraded it through the practice of colonial domination and [it should] assert the full rights of the people.¹⁵

Through his direct involvement Guinean music would become one of the most influential and popular styles in West Africa, with many groups awarded major prizes at pan-African competitions.

One of the first acts of Guinea’s new cultural policy came into effect in 1959 - only a few weeks after independence - when Sékou Touré forcibly disbanded all dance orchestras in Conakry. None of these were playing indigenous Guinean music, rather they were performing ‘slavish’ renditions of French chansons and dance numbers void of local musical characteristics. In addition, all French and Western music was banned from the radio. In order to reinvigorate and modernize Guinean music Sékou Touré established instead a network of over thirty orchestras throughout the nation, each representing an administrative precinct. A typical line-up of a Guinean orchestra included two guitarists, a bassist, a brass section of saxophones, trumpet, and trombones, conga players, percussionists, a keyboard player and backing vocalists. All orchestras were supplied with new instruments, with the equipment being

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purchased in Italy by one of the *chef d’orchestres* at substantial costs.\(^{17}\) Prominent musicians from the pre-independence era were then assigned the task of organizing the new groups and training the musicians to play their new instruments.

Before independence, many of Guinea’s popular folk songs dealt with the struggle for self-rule, paying tribute to the PDG and Sékou Touré whilst denigrating the opposition.\(^{18}\) Of Sékou Touré, one song proclaims:

Listen to the story of Sékou.  
Sékou alone can do nothing,  
Just as no one can act alone.  
All the councillors are against him,  
As are all their henchmen.  
All the important people hate him.

Listen carefully,  
The elections are not yet validated.  
If you want the trouble to end  
Give the chiefdom to him who merits it,  
So the trouble ends.  
For the trouble has long antennae  
Which will cross your path  
When you least expect them.\(^{19}\)

Sékou Touré, a Malinké by birth, was born into the noble or freeborn class, the horon, and thus retained powerful backing and the unqualified support of the *griots*. Many of the musicians chosen soon after independence to form the first Guinean orchestras were Malinké. The seeds were thus sown for Malinké music to dominate the music of Guinea during Touré’s presidency, and for the Malinké *griots* to play a significant role. The PDG, which over time would become increasingly autocratic and Malinké dominated, turned to the *griots* and encouraged them to write new songs. These were often based on the old

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\(^{17}\) Balla Onivogui, the *chef d’orchestre* of Balla et ses Balladins, was flown to Italy to purchase the first instruments. From an interview with Balla Onivogui, August 14 2001. According to Almamy Oumar Laho Diallo, a musician and former *Secrétaire Général Chargé des Collectivités Décentralisées*, the instruments were renewed every two years. From an interview with Almamy Oumar Laho Diallo, August 23 2001.


\(^{19}\) Schachter, ‘French Guinea’s RDA folk songs’, p. 675.
melodies from the epic narrative tradition, which the musicians arranged for their new electric ensembles. Melodies that had once been played on traditional stringed instruments, such as the kora, were now adapted to the electric guitar, the saxophone, or other western-style instruments. This music proved to be enormously popular and very influential throughout West Africa.

As the 1960s progressed the PDG’s cultural policies were broadened, with the party imposing on the orchestras ‘a sacred obligation to draw their inspiration solely from the wealth of epic and popular folk traditions’. In accordance with Guinea’s socialist policies, the orchestras’ musicians were declared civil servants, receiving wages and entitlements as would any other government employee. The groups performed at state-owned venues and broadcast their songs on Guinea’s radio network, which was also state-controlled. There was only one recording studio, which was operated by the government, and only one recording label, Syliphone, which was again fully controlled by the PDG.

**Popular music becomes the voice of the State**

During Sékou Touré’s presidency Syliphone produced a total of eighty-two long play albums and seventy-five singles in the period from approximately 1967 to 1980 – a catalogue of over 800 songs. Whilst a broad spectrum of song topics is in evidence, several themes recur, namely: songs which espouse various government initiatives; interpretations of epic narratives in a ‘modern’ style; and praise songs to Sékou Touré and the PDG. In circa 1971, for example, the Horoya Band recorded a popular song called ‘Alphabetisation’. The song promoted a national literacy campaign which was organized by the PDG. Literacy in Guinea during this time was approximately five percent and increased literacy was a major priority of government policy. ‘Alphabetisation’ advertised the benefits of the PDG’s campaign and was warmly received by the government, who recorded it and released it on a Syliphone LP. Similarly, the song ‘Senero’ invited ‘all the people of Guinea’ to enjoy agricultural work. Les Amazones de Guinée, an orchestra which consisted entirely of female police officers, recorded ‘Salimou’, which warned ‘those who choose alcohol go on the road of folly’. Through songs such as these the policies of the PDG were being broadcast to the nation via popular recording artists. Traditional

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authority was engendered in the music, for most members of the bands – particularly the lead singers – were griots.

In addition to the advocacy of PDG policies there are many examples of songs whose praise is directed at the party itself. Little is heard however of party repression, although under Sékou Touré Guinea had rapidly evolved into a one-party state. By the late 1960s the PDG had extended itself into all facets of daily life via the establishment of a vast network of committees and councils. As the power of the PDG grew, however, so did the pressure to become a party member. A refusal to join could result in more dire consequences, such as imprisonment, torture, and execution. Some four million people became members of the PDG, and the party exercised rigid control. Women were encouraged to deny sex to their husbands if they did not become members of the party. In the 1970s the nation’s economy began to slide and the PDG assumed control of buying and selling all goods to the public. The crime of smuggling became punishable by death, though this radical policy ended abruptly in 1977 when market-women throughout the nation rioted. The Syliphone label makes no mention of any of these events, nor is reference to them found in the recordings. In fact we hear quite the opposite, with numerous examples of praise songs to Guinea’s sole political party in evidence. The song ‘La Guinée Horoya’, for example, is concerned with ‘the independence of Guinea, the united nation with precise objectives, [and with] the victories of the People whose heart is committed to a National Party’. Another song, ‘I Dyolooro’, explains that ‘The PDG is the party of reason, of justice, and of national unity’. A further example is found in the song, ‘Yahadi Gere’, which tells the story of a young radical who proclaims: ‘the revolutionary war is realised in the invincibility of the PDG’.

Of particular note is a recording where Kouyaté Sory Kandia, arguably the most popular singer in Guinea at the time, performed a nineteen minute homage to the PDG. In addition to this recording, two albums of poetry written by the President which exhorted the values and righteousness of the

25 Liner notes to Horoya Band National, author’s translation, Syliphone, SLP 41, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1972.
26 Liner notes to Keletigui et ses Tambourinis, author’s translation, Syliphone, SLP 30, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1972.
27 Liner notes to Pivi et les Balladins, author’s translation, Syliphone, SLP 31, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1972.
PDG were released. Sung by a soloist or by a chorus, one of the President’s poems includes the following lyrics:

[The PDG] destroys the evil and reinforces the good in any work .... It enriches the poor one and impoverishes the rich person on the anvil of equity .... O river which does not dry up! Fruit without bitterness! Fire which does not die out! The PDG gives life reason and substance ...

The breakdown of traditional patronage under the colonial regime, a practice which Sékou Touré exploited, meant that griots in Guinea were no longer acting as the voice of kings, but as the voice of the state. Moreover Guinea’s cultural policy was directed against those griots who still maintained allegiance to traditional rulers:

During an initial phase aimed at bringing about a change of attitude, which ran from 1958 to 1968, a relentless struggle was waged against all the after-effects of the domination that generated the colonial complex .... Our artists grappled with these phenomena, which took the form of religious mystification, polygamy, ignorance, alcoholism, dissolute living, lying, laziness, theft, the rural exodus, parasitism, intellectualism, the undue power of griots, etc. These problems were vigorously combated by the arts companies at all levels...While engaged in the eradication of the vestiges of colonialism, artists explored pre-colonial history in depth and rehabilitated the great figures from the years of resistance to foreign domination and the rulers of old Africa, such as Almamy Samori Touré, Alpha Yaya Diallo, El Hadj Oumar and Soundiata Keïta. Famous epics, virtually forgotten during the period of repression, were brought to light .... The masters of the old verse chronicles, the chroniclers who served as living libraries, storytellers of all kinds, men of learning who had jealously preserved the authentic African culture, were appointed honorary militants and are now engaged in reconstituting the inexhaustible heritage of Africa.

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29 *Poèmes militants*. Syliphone, SLP 13, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1970; *Appels au peuple*, Syliphone, SLP 26, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1971.
31 Guinean National Commission for UNESCO, ‘Cultural policy in the Revolutionary People’s
Sékou Touré’s policies were thus directed towards destabilizing the traditional ties that had been established between the griots and the nobility. Whilst the French had demoted or replaced Guinea’s traditional chiefs, Sékou Touré not only maintained but actually strengthened that policy. The Fula chieftaincy, which represented a large political bloc that threatened the PDG’s power base, were targeted. Fula chiefs were publicly assaulted, and their houses and crops were burnt down. It is pertinent to note that one of Sékou Touré’s first acts as leader was to abolish all the chieftaincies in Guinea, replacing them with PDG administrators. The party’s policy was designed to fragment opposition, and Touré actively continued this strategy in order to strengthen the constituency of the PDG and of his own position as head of state. The president’s neo-colonialist policy of erasing the chieftaincies was also focusing on those griots whose allegiance to the PDG was considered questionable.

Recorded songs on the Syliphone label illustrate how, via the narrow selection of willing griots who promoted government ideology, Guinea’s cultural policy under Sékou Touré sought to re-invent and re-figure Guinean history and culture. From the epic narrative repertoire we find a famous example of the song ‘Duga’, which had now been modernized and re-named ‘Armée Guinéenne’, a praise song to the Guinean army. There are also numerous modernized versions of other epics, such as the epics of Soundiata, Almami Samori Touré, Toutou Diarra, and Bakari Dian. Almami Samori Touré is a national hero in Guinea, and is one of the greatest figures in their modern history. The greatest praise of all however was reserved for the President himself. Nearly every Syliphone recording featured a praise song to Le Secrétaire Général et Responsable Suprême de la Révolution, as the President was officially referred to, or celebrated his political party, the PDG.

By the late 1960s, with the Syliphone label expanding rapidly, Bembeya Jazz National released their influential recording ‘Regard sur le passé’ which single-
handedly transformed Guinean music. A product of the *authenticité* campaign, a cultural policy directed towards ‘unearthing the positive values of the past for the edification of a modern society’, before its release no other orchestra had been so audacious as to compose a song that ran for over thirty-seven minutes – over both sides of the LP – and none had tackled or tried to encapsulate Guinea’s history in quite the same way. Innovative musically and thematically, ‘Regard sur le passé’ was the benchmark for Guinea’s bands, and was, perhaps, never surpassed.

Thematically, the album described the life of one of Guinea’s national heroes, Almami Samori Touré, who led a prolonged insurgency against the French in the late 19th century. An epic narrative (one of the most recent) was constructed in honour of Samori Touré’s achievements, and ‘Regard sur le passé’ presented a modern version of the epic. Bembeya Jazz National’s version of the epic concludes with the following lyrics:

> They did not die, these heroes, and they will not die. After them, daring pioneers once again took up the fight of national liberty which finally triumphed under the direction of Ahmed Sékou Touré, grandson of Samori.

Sékou Touré’s rise to power was undoubtedly enhanced by his widely publicized lineage from Almami Samori Touré, and his presidency was given ultimate legitimacy through recordings such as ‘Regard sur le passé’ which supported the contention. The *griot’s* traditional role as praise singer is in strong evidence here, with their role being to create a personality cult around their leader. Many authors and historians, however, disagree as to the question of whether the President was in fact the grandson of Samori or merely a close descendant:

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36 Bembeya Jazz National, *Bembeya Jazz National présente ‘Regard sur le passé’. Le premier grand concert musical Guinéen*, Syliphone, SLP 10, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1969. The album was later re-released (Syliphone, SLP 64, circa 1977). A live version was also released as *Inoubliable gala télévisé du Bembeya Jazz National. Pris sur le vif ‘Regard sur le passé’ avec les étudiants Ivoiriens (Janvier 1972)*, Syliphone, SLP 34, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1972.


38 Lansine Kaba, ‘The cultural revolution, artistic creativity, and freedom of expression in Guinea’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 14 (2), 1976, p. 214, author’s translation. The song also compared the president to other nationalist leaders including Soumiata Keita.

38
There was no scarcity of direct descendants of Samori Touré who made a practice of taking wives everywhere in his extensive travels. The mantle of succession fell upon Sékou Touré at least in part because he consciously emphasized the historical parallel of resistance against alien rule. In the later phase of his life when his power waned and he was under heavy siege from the Europeans, Samori’s victories decreased and his name became associated with acts of cruelty still remembered by the descendants of those Africans who suffered. Similarly, descendants of those captured by Samori’s wars remained resentful. ‘You will not sell us into slavery?’ asked some of the older villagers of Sekou Touré during his first campaign in the forest...

There is little doubt, however, that Sékou Touré used his ancestral relationship with Samori Touré to ennoble his origin and to validate his own position as head-of-state. Thus, to ‘look at the past’, which is a literal translation of ‘Regard sur le passé’, was a strictly controlled view, a Malinké view, which was dominated by the ideology of the PDG.

The Syliphone label released more praise songs to Sékou Touré than to any other figure, including Soundiata Keita, the founder of the Malian empire. ‘Mandjou’, for example, a song later made famous by Salif Keita, is a celebration of the Touré lineage, with the lyrics stating that ‘Sékou Touré you have the confidence of all the people ... thank you for what you did and continue to do for us.’ Bembeya Jazz National perform a song called ‘Touré’ which tells us more about the President: ‘You are honest, you are good, you are that which the people of Guinea need.’ One orchestra even wrote a song in praise of Sékou Touré’s wife, Andrée.

In light of these praise songs the brutality and repressive nature of Touré’s presidency must to be taken into context. Under his rule twenty-five percent of the population, a figure representing approximately 1,500,000 people, fled the country in order to escape both political and ethnic repression. Tens of thousands of people were imprisoned, tortured or executed. Many others

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simply disappeared. Among those executed was Fodéba Keita, the founder of Les Ballets Africains, who was convicted of treason in 1971 and died in prison. Guinea’s Minister for Justice, and the first Secretary-General of the OAU, Diallo Telli, was also arrested and died in prison. Marof Achkar, Guinea’s United Nations Ambassador, was secretly executed. During Sékou Touré’s era more than fourteen coups and plots were attributed to insurgents. The ‘teachers’ plot’ of 1961, for example, was followed by the ‘market traders plot’ in 1965. A medicine shortage in 1972 was allegedly part of a ‘physicians’ plot’. In 1973 a cholera epidemic was deemed to be part of a plot, as was Guinea’s defeat in the 1976 African Soccer Championship. These plots, with their mass purges, arrests and imprisonment, eventually gave way to the ‘perennial plot’, and Guinea closed its borders and was effectively cut off from the rest of the world. Sékou Touré’s public appearances had now become rare.

This is not the Guinea that is portrayed in the material produced on the Syliphone label. There were no songs released which made mention of the plethora of plots, the economic conditions, the riots, the political repression, or of the exodus of one quarter of the population. Rather, what is presented are songs that speak of ‘the happiness of the people, and of the youth’44 and which invite the listener to ‘imagine victorious warriors [are] dancing their success’ to the music.45 Notwithstanding Guinea’s government was extremely repressive during the 1970s, such was the domineering nature of the party’s rule that there are no examples of songs of dissent, rather quite the opposite.

Perhaps where Guinea’s music of the period was most unrepresentative, however, was in its failure to give voice to non-Malinké musicians and groups. In Guinea the major language group are Fula, who represent forty percent of the population, yet the majority of the orchestras were dominated by Malinké musicians. Even though orchestras were created in major Fula centres such as Pita, the third largest city in Guinea, the local orchestra46 failed to record a single song for Syliphone. The recording output of the entire Futa Djallon region (which represents the Fula heartland) was negligible, with no significant releases until 1980.47 Furthermore, there were very few recorded examples of epics from the Fula traditional repertoire. This underscores the suppression of Guinea’s ethnic groups during Sékou Touré’s rule, who collectively

44 Liner notes to ‘Dia Doni’, Camayenne Sofa, A grand pas, Syliphone, SLP 56, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1976. Camayenne Sofa were originally named ‘Kakilambé Jazz de Conakry II’, after their precinct in Conakry. They later became ‘Les Sofas des Camayenne’, taking their name from the term for a soldier who fought under Samori Touré (‘Sofa’) and a residential quarter in Conakry (‘Camayenne’).
45 Camayenne Sofa, A grand pas, Op Cit.
46 Kinkon Jazz (originally ‘Fetoré Jazz’).
47 Télé-Jazz de Télémelé, La fête au foutah, Syliphone, SLP 74, 33.3 rpm disc, ca 1980.
represented the PDG’s main political opponents during his presidency. The ethnocentrism of the Syliphone label contradicted the policies of the PDG, which regarded itself as a party of the masses. The PDG pursued nationalism as its ideal, and sought to portray Guinea, through musical and theatrical performances, as a cohesive and fraternal nation. The PDG’s cultural policies were directed towards a similar ideal, yet the reality was a different matter altogether. What is clear is that a Malinké cultural paradigm dominated the arts, with the President and the PDG as the chief patrons.

Conclusion

From circa 1967 to 1983 the Syliphone label produced a great wealth of inventive and original music which was an inspiration to audiences throughout Africa. During the era of Sékou Touré, Guinean music was the avant garde of African music, and it pioneered the concept of a return to the source for inspiration. It was truly ahead of its time; and according to Métoura Traoré, the chef d’orchestre of the Horoya Band National, ‘was like the lighthouse to music in Africa. And yet they said it couldn’t be done – to modernise African music.’

48 Guinea’s orchestras, via their releases through the Syliphone label, proved the sceptics wrong, and the music continues to inspire listeners all over the world. Popular interest in the Syliphone catalogue has remained steady, and several music companies have been re-releasing the original material on compact disc, with over thirty CDs currently available. The cultural policies of Guinea may be considered a success in this regard, in that a great volume of music was produced of a very high standard.

The music, however, told only half the story. Guinea had shown that her ancient musical traditions were still vital and appropriate to the modern world and that their dignity had been fully restored. Accordingly, Guinea’s cultural policies were lauded by other governments, including those of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Côte d’Ivoire, who introduced similar models with differing degrees of success. The cultural policies of Guinea failed, however, in their stated policy to ‘assert the full rights of the people’, for they effectively silenced opposition ethnic groups whilst establishing a personality cult around President Touré and the PDG.

48 Interview with Métoura Traoré, August 21 2001.
49 Syllart, Mélodie, Stern’s, Sonodisc, Popular African Music, and Bolibana.
Short bibliography


Syliphone discography

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