Cultural Policy in Mali

The following paper is based upon fieldwork that I conducted in Mali as part of my PhD research at the University of Melbourne.

In the last decade Cultural Studies has become an increasingly significant area of academic enquiry. My own research area has focused largely on cultural events pertinent to the independence era in West Africa, which is to say the period of the 1960s and 1970s when new cultural policies in the region were being formulated. That Cultural Policy is still an active part of government planning can be seen when one of Africa’s premiere cultural events returned to the continent in 2001 after an absence of more than a decade. Mali’s national arts festival, which was last held in 1988, made a welcome return to the capital, Bamako. The two week festival featured ensembles and performance groups from all over the country, and promised an eclectic mix featuring the best talent from Mali’s diverse cultural groups.

Mali has produced some of Africa’s greatest musical talent. From the 1960s to the 1980s Mali’s orchestras were at the forefront of a new modern style which transposed traditional melodies and songs into a modern performance context. Groups such as Super Biton, Les Ambassadeurs and the Orchestra Rail-Band were pioneers, and solo performers such as Salif Keita, Ali Farka Touré, Ami Koïta, and Tata Bambo Kouyaté are now established artists and are well known throughout the world. Mali continues to produce new artists, such as Oumou Sangaré, Rokia Traoré, and Toumani Diabaté, who are also having a major global impact. Many of these artists gained their first exposure in the national arts festivals.

Music has always played an important role in Malian culture. Since the founding of the Malian empire in the 13th century AD, musical performance has largely been the provenance of musicians known as griots, who, along with leatherworkers, wood carvers, and blacksmiths, form a caste of artisans known as the nyamakala. Griots fulfil a range of key functions, and are widely known for their performance of epic narratives. They are the oral historians of their culture, and in the pre-colonial era they were the court musicians to the nobility. The close relationship between griots and the noble classes has dissipated in modern times, yet the link between the griots and the power-brokers of Malian society remains strong.

Accordingly, griots have an intimate involvement with Malian politics. In the independence period their musical expertise was sought in order to re-shape and re-
define modern Malian music. Upon independence in 1960, in fact the very day after independence, the Malian government created a national orchestra – The National Orchestra of the Republic of Mali Formation A (L’Orchestre National “A” de la République du Mali).

[SHOW ALBUM]

There were eventually three national orchestras, formations A, B, and C, as there were too many talented musicians to fit into one orchestra. The National A orchestra were the first of many national and regional musical troupes created by the cultural policies of Mali’s first president, Modibo Keita, and they were one of the first groups to play electric instruments in Mali. The government described the National “A” Orchestra as consisting of

musicians [who are] sworn to serve their country by contributing with all their genius to the protection and revalorization of Malian musical art.
(L’Orchestre National “A” de la République du Mali [1970]: liner notes)

Like the National “A” Orchestra, Mali’s newly-formed orchestras featured electric guitars, saxophones, trumpets, drum kits and percussion, and in later years, keyboards. The personnel of these ensembles would sometimes number over 12 musicians. It was big-band music West African style, and through their creative talents these groups were responsible for modernising Malian music.

As a response to the colonial strategy which sought to divide the nation by promoting ethnic factionalism, Modibo Keita’s Socialist government promoted nationalism as the key to the nation’s unity and future. He adopted the cultural policies of neighbouring Guinea, and encouraged nationalist ideologies to be expressed via the medium of music. As with Guinea, Mali’s orchestras were state-sponsored, and they were the primary vehicles for the dissemination of government policy to the masses.

To encourage competition and foster new creative talents in the arts, Mali launched the inaugural national arts festival in 1962. These festivals were known as the National Youth Weeks (Semaine Nationale de la Jeunesse) and they were modelled on the arts festivals of Guinea. Mali’s National Youth Week brought together young musicians, performers and athletes from all over the country. The cultural objective was to contribute to the promotion and the democratization of art and culture. Collectively, the performers represented the various regions of Mali, and at the festivals they would compete against each other for prizes in several different performance categories. There is little doubt that these festivals were responsible for nurturing some of the greatest artistic talent that Mali (and Guinea with her festivals) produced. The cultural
policy was deemed so successful that, albeit with mixed results, the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Niger adopted similar models.

In 1968, however, a military coup deposed President Keita and installed Lt. Moussa Traoré. Mali’s radical cultural policy was abandoned by the new régime, who disbanded all of the regional and national orchestras. The new government was concerned that these orchestras, who were created by the previous ruling party, owed their political allegiance to the former government, so hey replaced all of the musicians. An enquiry recommended, however, that the National Youth Weeks remain as a central platform for cultural activity. In order to distance themselves from the previous government, the new régime renamed the festival the Bi-annual Arts and Culture Festival for the Young (Biennale Artistique et Culturelle de la Jeunesse) which was commonly known as the Biennale. As the name indicates, the festival was now held every two years, though the principle of mass representation via regional performance troupes was maintained.

1970 was the year of Mali’s first Biennale under the new government, and an outstanding series of long play records were released to coincide with the event. These were recorded by Radio Mali through the Ministry for Information, and they represent the first commercially released recordings by Mali’s orchestras.

These regional orchestras were the breeding ground for Mali’s musicians. Several of Mali’s most renowned artists performed in the regional orchestras or other state-sponsored groups, notably Salif Keita, who first recorded with the Rail Band. Some of the other stars whose career was launched by their Biennale performances include Tata “Bambo” Kouyaté, who performed as the “rising star” for the district of Bamako in 1963. In 1973, Kasse Mady Diabaté was the lead singer of a group called Super Mande, an orchestra which won the modern orchestra category. He later became the lead singer of Mali’s National Orchestra Formation “B” (L’Orchestre National “B” de la République du Mali). Nahawa Doumbia can be heard at the 1980 Biennale performing as the “rising star” for the region of Sikasso, a category that she won at the national competition. Ali Farka Touré has also had a long association with the Biennales and National Youth Weeks, where he performed with a variety of ensembles. Other artists who have received national exposure through the competition include Toumani Diabaté, Ibrahima Dicko and Fissa Maïga, to name but a few.

The Biennale festivals were held from 1970 to 1988, and ceased in 1990 due to
a number of factors. A rebellion in the north of the country was threatening civil war and IMF economic reforms meant that there was much less funding for the arts. President Traoré was himself ousted in a coup in 1991, and a new government was installed. Major democratic reforms in the 1990s delayed the reintroduction of the Biennale until the Ministry of Culture reinstated the competition in 2001. It was re-named once again, and is now called the National Week of Arts and Culture (Semaine National des Arts et de la Culture), or by the acronym of SNAC.

The SNAC festival retains the basic principles of the former arts festivals, in that it aims to fully represent the diverse regions and indigenous cultures of Mali in a spirit of national competition. The festival continues to be designed on a “base to summit”1 model, whereby the early rounds of the competition commence at the village level, with hundreds of communities across the nation competing. The finalists in each performance category then advance to the next round of competition, which is held at the district level some months later. After the district level competition is completed, a further stage occurs at the regional level. Here performers can gain entry to the regional troupes and orchestras. Given that Mali is more than twice the size of France, the structure of the competition results in a very lengthy and expensive process, with the competition rounds taking a year to complete. Once the preliminary competition stages have finished, only the best artists from each of Mali’s regions are left to compete at the national competition held in Bamako. In 2001 all of Mali’s administrative regions competed at the festival, with artistic troupes from Tombouctou, Ségou, Sikasso, Gao, Kayes, Mopti, Koulikoro, Kidal and Bamako. At the festival, which was scheduled for a week, each regional troupe was required to present a public performance in the following five categories:

1. modern orchestra (orchestre moderne)
2. traditional music and dance (musique and danse traditionnelle)
3. a ballet (which involves a group of dancers being accompanied by a traditional ensemble)
4. étoile montante, which is a performance by the “rising star” of the region
5. a play (pièce de théâtre)

In 2001 the festival’s opening ceremony was held on Avenue de l’Independence in front of an assembled crowd of dignitaries.

[Show overheads]

During the festival some of the great names of Malian music participated, with

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1 Konare 1983: 117.
performances by Badéma National, The National Instrumental Ensemble (L’Ensemble Instrumental National) and the Orchestra of the National Arts Institute (L’Orchestre INA). Contemporary groups were also recognised with performances by Bamako’s rap artists Tata Pound, in addition to concerts featuring a wide range of traditional ensembles.

The performances by the regional troupes, however, constituted the bulk of the festival, with each region given one whole day of the competition to present their performances.

A disappointing aspect of the festival was the lack of publicity, which resulted in a rather poor turnout. There was a concurrent lack of international observers, and foreign journalists were non-existent. Unfortunately many Malians seemed unaware of the festival’s resurrection. The entrance fees for most of the performances was less than $1, which is a small price by many standards, but a prohibitive sum to many Malians. This also contributed to the relatively small crowds which attended the events. Overall, however, the festival was deemed a success, with plans to hold the event every two years. The second national arts festival of the millennium is due to be held in the next few weeks and I am currently applying for further research funds.

In 2001 the closing ceremony was held in the Palais de la Culture to a packed house. Mali’s National Instrumental Ensemble (L’Ensemble Instrumental National du Mali) performed, and speeches were made by government ministers. It was interesting to note that one of these officials chastised some of the plays which the regional troupe’s had performed. He considered the plots as being located within the politics of a previous era, and criticized their pandering to outmoded political doctrines. Such statements reflect Mali’s new cultural policy which promotes independent voices and which seeks democratic representation in the arts rather than the promotion of state-sponsored artists who are closely aligned with the ruling political parties.

After the speeches the winners from each performance category were announced. The winners from each category received cash prizes of between $US250 – $US400. The overall award (“Classement General”) for best troupe was bestowed upon the region of Bamako.

Given what may be teething problems associated with a break of 13 years, the success of Mali’s national arts festival seems assured, and it will surely become a highlight in Africa’s calendar of cultural events.
Individual category awards at the 2001 Semaine National des Arts et Culture

Orchestre moderne – 1st place: Mopti. 2nd place: Ségou. 3rd place: Bamako.

Music and Danse traditionnelle – 1st place: Sikasso. 2nd place: Tombouctou. 3rd place: Bamako.

Ballet – 1st place: Kayes. 2nd place: Bamako. 3rd place: Gao.

Étoile montante – 1st place: Ségou. 2nd place: Tombouctou. 3rd place: Kayes.

Pièce de théâtre – 1st place: Bamako. 2nd place: Mopti. 3rd place: Kayes.

Objet d’Art (sculpture) – 1st place: Ségou. 2nd place: Bamako. 3rd place: Koulikoro.

A discography of recordings from Mali’s Biennales


BM 30 L 2601. Orchestre Régional de Ségou
BM 30 L 2602. Orchestre Régional de Mopti
BM 30 L 2603. Orchestre Régional de Sikasso
BM 30 L 2604. Orchestre Régional de Kayes
BM 30 L 2651/2. Troupes Artistiques. Volumes 1 & 2

(contains some recordings from the 1980 Biennale)

In addition, cassette copies of the Orchestras of Tombouctou, Koulikoro and Gao are extant in Mali, as are pirate recordings by various artists performing at many of the previous Biennales.
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